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July 28th: 1 Samuel 17 & 2 Corinthians 11

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David and Goliath. Paul's foolish boasting.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

1 Samuel 17. Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle. And they were gathered at Soco which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Soco and Ezekieh in Ephes Damim.

And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered, and encamped in the valley of Elah, and drew up in line of battle against the Philistines. And the Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them. And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span.

He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. And he had bronze armour on his legs, and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron.

And his shield-bearer went before him. He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants.

But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us. And the Philistines said, I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man that we may fight together.

When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid. Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years.

The three oldest sons of Jesse had followed Saul to the battle, and the names of his three sons who went to the battle were Eliab the firstborn, and next to him Abinadab, and the third Shammah. David was the youngest. The three eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem.

For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand morning and evening. And Jesse said to David his son, Take for your brothers an ephah of this parched grain and these ten loaves, and carry them quickly to the camp to your brothers. Also take these ten cheeses to the commander of their thousand.

See if your brothers are well, and bring some token from them. Now Saul and they and all the men of Israel were in the valley of Elah fighting with the Philistines. And David rose early in the morning and left the sheep with a keeper, and took the provisions and went as Jesse had commanded him.

And he came to the encampment as the host was going out to the battle line shouting the war cry. And Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. And David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, and ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers.

As he talked with them, behold the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him. All the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were much afraid.

And the men of Israel said, Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel, and the king will enrich the man who kills him with great riches, and will give him his daughter and make his father's house free in Israel. And David said to the men who stood by him, What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that

he should defy the armies of the living God? And the people answered him in the same way, So shall it be done to the man who kills him. Now Eliab his oldest brother heard when he spoke to the men, and Eliab's anger was kindled against David.

And he said, Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle. And David said, What have I done now? Was it not but a word? And he turned away from him toward another, and spoke in the same way. And the people answered him again as before.

When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul, and he sent for him. And David said to Saul, Let no man's heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.

And Saul said to David, You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth. But David said to Saul, Your servant used to keep sheep for his father, and when there came a lion or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him.

Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God. And David said, The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine. And Saul said to David, Go, and the Lord be with you.

Then Saul clothed David with his armour, he put a helmet of bronze on his head, and clothed him with a coat of mail, and David strapped his sword over his armour, and he tried in vain to go, for he had not tested them. Then David said to Saul, I cannot go with these, for I have not tested them. So David put them off.

Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in his shepherd's pouch. His sling was in his hand, and he approached the Philistine. And the Philistine moved forward and came near to David with his shield-bearer in front of him.

And when the Philistine looked and saw David, he despised him, for he was but a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. And the Philistine said to David, Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field.

Then David said to the Philistine, You come to me with a sword, and with a spear, and

with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head.

And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves, not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand. When the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine.

And David put his hand in his bag, and took out a stone, and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him.

There was no sword in the hand of David. Then David ran and stood over the Philistine, and took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him and cut off his head with it. When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled.

And the men of Israel and Judah rose with a shout, and pursued the Philistines as far as Gath and the gates of Ekron, so that the wounded Philistines fell on the way from Shearayim as far as Gath and Ekron. And the people of Israel came back from chasing the Philistines, and they plundered their camp. And David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem, but he put his armour in his tent.

As soon as Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner the commander of the army, Abner, whose son is this youth? And Abner said, As your soul lives, O king, I do not know. And the king said, Inquire whose son the boy is. And as soon as David returned from the striking down of the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand.

And Saul said to him, Whose son are you, young man? And David answered, I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite. First Samuel chapter 17 is one of the most famous narratives in the whole Bible, one with which we are all probably familiar from childhood. It has become synonymous in the wider culture with an extreme underdog story.

Perhaps on account of this familiarity, and how accustomed we are to hearing it divorced from its context, there is much that we might miss within it. With closer study, especially in the light of what has preceded it, we may discover that there remains a great deal of insight to emerge from it yet. The account of David's defeat of Goliath is a vivid and scenic account, to a degree that is unusual for biblical narrative.

The battle is set in the territory of Judah, in David's tribal region. David begins his work in his own region, where the Philistines are encroaching. We need to read this in light of what has gone beforehand.

From the earlier chapters of First Samuel we know that Saul is the giant of Israel. He stands head and shoulders taller than anyone else. He was also, with Jonathan, the only man with iron weapons in his possession.

If any Israelite would be expected to fight the Philistine giant with iron weaponry, it would be Saul. However, the spirit of the Lord has abandoned Saul in the previous chapter, and he was now afflicted with a harmful spirit from God. It is quite possible that the Philistines had gotten wind of the fact that all was not well in the court of Israel's king.

King Saul was apparently losing his sanity, and the Lord was no longer with him as he had once been. In fact, reports were that the prophet Samuel had not seen him for years now. These are all signs of a promising time to attack.

The two armies gather in battle lines against each other, one standing on one mountain, and the other standing on another mountain opposite. A champion, Goliath of Gath, comes out from the Philistine camp. As the champion, he represents the entire Philistine force.

He is spoken of as the Philistine, on several occasions in this chapter. He stands for all of the Philistines. His proposal is a duel between two representative champions, one of Israel and one of the Philistines, with the losers abiding by an agreement to become the slaves of the winners.

This single combat was an alternative to a bloody battle between the two sides, a battle that the Philistines would most likely win. There seemed to be no one suited to fighting against Goliath though, which led the people to despair. Goliath is an imposing warrior.

He is over nine feet tall. He has an array of armour and weaponry that make him stand out from the regular Philistine soldier and of course even more so from the Israelites who were not well equipped with weapons. Some of Goliath's armour was probably obtained from other nations.

Verses 4-7 are entirely devoted to describing Goliath and his armour and weaponry. We might here remember the story of Nahash the Ammonite. That story involved a deadly threat to Jabesh-Gilead and a requirement that they surrender entirely, unless someone came to their aid.

Their Saul, coming in from the field with the oxen, comes to Jabesh-Gilead's aid against the Ammonites. Nahash's name means serpent and he was defeated by Saul. Now there is another serpent, a giant in scale armour, a leviathan, who will end up getting his head

crushed by the champion of Israel, David, who has just come from the field with the sheep.

Just as David was sent with the signs of kingship in chapter 16 verse 20, his battle here reminds us of Saul's earlier rised kingship. David will replace and surpass Saul. Goliath the Giant should also remind us of the earlier story of spying out and conquering the land.

There it was the giants who held Israel back in fear. The defeat of Og, the giant king of Bashan, the first great victory over a giant in Israel's story, and Caleb and Artheniel's victory over the giants of Hebron in Joshua 15 were examples to which Israel should have looked. We also discover that there were some lingering giants in the land in this chapter, in 2 Samuel 21 and 1 Chronicles 20.

It is the fear of the Israelites in drawing back from the giants in the land that we are first reminded of here. In Numbers chapter 13 and 14 Israel spied out the land for 40 days and the people shrunk back from entering into the land due to their fear of the giants, even though the Judahite Caleb appealed to them not to fear. Here Goliath the Giant stands against Israel for 40 days until David the Judahite courageously stands against him.

When everyone else is shrinking back in fear, David, like Caleb, is the one who is confident in the Lord's promise and wants to attack the giants. Later, of course, Caleb was the one who received the most giant infested territory as his possession. David is sent on a mission to see how his brothers are doing on the front line and he is expected to bring back a report.

This should remind us of another character, of Joseph, who was sent by his father to check on his brothers in Genesis chapter 37. David is the youngest son, favoured over his elder brothers. He is also the eighth brother, perhaps something that we should associate with new creation.

David is going to act as a new Adam, clearing out the giants and allowing Israel to enjoy possession of the land. David is sent with food, bread from Bethlehem, the house of bread, and cheeses. In the previous chapter he was also sent with food to Saul.

And perhaps we are to see something in the fact that David is the one who brings the riches of food and the bounty of the land. David is seemingly reintroduced to us in this chapter, leading many to wonder about its consistency, connection and continuity with the previous chapter. Shimon bar Ephrat, however, observes that in the Hebrew the reintroduction of David in verse 12 gestures back to the fact that we are already aware of the character in question.

Also verse 14 provides some continuity with the preceding chapter, by telling us that

David went to and fro between Saul and his father's house. Meanwhile his three oldest brothers are members of Saul's army. He was already serving with Saul at this point then.

However we should not be surprised if there are temporal details out of sequence. It's quite a possibility. We encounter such dischronology on a number of occasions in scripture, where the concern is more to tell the story in a way that brings out the meaning than it is to relate events in the strictest of possible sequence.

Some have suggested that we encounter such dischronology at the end of this chapter, with David bringing the head of Goliath to Jerusalem. The narrator gives a lot of attention to the account of David's conversation with his brothers and the men concerning Goliath and the reward offered for his defeat. Eliab's opposition to David may recall the opposition to Joseph from his older brothers.

David's older brothers are also destined to bow to him in the future. Eliab believes that David has ideas above his station. Just as Joseph was favoured over his brothers by their father and given the firstborn status and the coat of many colours, so David was chosen over his brothers and Eliab most particularly in the preceding chapter as the appointed successor for Saul.

David speaks of taking the reproach from Israel. This might recall the reproach of the Egyptians that was removed at Gilgal in Joshua chapter 5. The Egyptians had claimed that the Lord had brought Israel out into the wilderness to destroy them. As they were brought into the promised land and circumcised, they were marked out as the Lord's own people and as those who would receive the land.

This nullified the Egyptians' taunt. Goliath had ridiculed Saul and the Israelites, suggesting that their God was powerless to save them or perhaps that he had rejected them. However he is an uncircumcised pagan and David is confident that the Lord can still deliver Israel, just as Israel had been left outside of the land for 40 years on account of the 40 days of spying out the land and their fear of the giants.

So Israel had now shrunk back from the giant Goliath for 40 days. We might think here of another Davidic champion, who after being anointed by the spirits stood against a monster after 40 days. Saul had promised that the man to defeat Goliath would receive his daughter in marriage and that his household would be made free in Israel, not having to pay any taxes.

The successful Israelite champion would be made son-in-law to Saul, adopted into the royal household and would enjoy the privileges of royalty, being a recipient of taxes, rather than one having to pay them. Saul's promises might remind us of the promises made by Caleb to Othniel for going against the city of Kiriath-sephar in Joshua chapter 15, or perhaps also of the promise of Laban to give his daughter Rachel to Jacob if Jacob

served him for seven years. Like Laban, however, Saul will renege on his promise.

David's response might also remind us of Saul's son Jonathan, who expressed the same confidence in going down alone to face the uncircumcised Philistines on the previous occasion when the Philistines and the Israelites stood on opposite hilltops, back in chapter 14. David's words reach Saul. To this point, David has not said that he will fight the Philistine.

Indeed, when challenged by his brother, he seems to deny that he was doing anything more than asking questions. It seems strange that David is summoned to Saul, until we remember that David was already known to Saul and those around him, and that he was particularly favoured by Saul. David isn't just a random Israelite kid asking about Goliath, but he is Saul's musician and armour-bearer, his beloved servant, and the one seemingly fearless and faithful man in the camp.

Saul knows that the Lord is with David from his experience, and that David isn't just a reckless young loudmouth. Without the background of chapter 16, though, it might be difficult to make sense of why Saul acts in the way that he does. When he sees Saul, David expresses his willingness to fight Goliath himself.

Saul questions David, but doesn't simply laugh him off, nor does he directly reject him. David responds with a declaration of his faith in the Lord, and his experience as a shepherd. Like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and Moses, David is a shepherd, and he can bring the skills of a shepherd to his task of fighting and leading.

He has, like Samson, killed a lion, and like Samson, the powerful champion of Israel, he is confident that, in the Lord's strength, he can defeat the Philistine too. The key fact is that Goliath has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord's honour is at stake here.

Considering how much is riding upon this, Saul accepts David's offer surprisingly readily. Again, it is very hard to believe that this is how the exchange would have gone had Saul not already been well acquainted with David. David had been Saul's armour-bearer.

However, now Saul acts as armour-bearer to David. He clothes David in his armour. Like the signs of the kingdom that were sent with David in the previous chapter, this is some powerful foreshadowing of the fact that David will replace Saul.

However, David rejects the armour of Saul. He will not approach Goliath as a warrior in the mould of Saul, but as the young shepherd taken from the flock. Likewise, when he takes the place as king, he will not rule just as one of the kings of the nations, as Saul had attempted to do.

Saul's giving his armour to David also anticipates Jonathan, his son, giving his armour to David in the next chapter. In both cases, they are powerful symbols of the place that David will occupy as the replacement to both of them. David takes his staff.

He goes down into the valley. He chooses five smooth stones from the brook, puts them in his shepherd's pouch, has his sling in his hand and approaches the Philistine. There are a lot of details here and we should rightly wonder why they have been included.

David is like a shepherd. He has a staff, a shepherd's pouch and a shepherd's sling. He chooses five stones.

Perhaps we are to think of the association between the Philistines and the number five. The Philistines had five chief cities and five lords. When they sent the golden tumours and golden mice back with the ark in chapter 6, they sent five of each for this reason.

Perhaps David chose a stone for each of the Philistine cities then. Goliath is of Gath, but there is a stone remaining for Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza. Later in 2 Samuel chapter 21 we discover that there were giants and relatives of Goliath associated with others of these cities.

Perhaps there is a further allusion to the story of Jacob here. Jacob was the shepherd who was associated with the staff, with the setting up of stones, five of them in his story, and with smoothness. He also had one on one combat with the angel.

David is a Jacob-like character and his Jacob-like traits will become more pronounced as the story progresses. However they may be emerging already here. David also has a number of the characteristics of Esau, both of them being described as ruddy.

Much as Jacob matured into some of the traits of his brother, so David has these traits at this point in his story. David is a man of action, he's a man of the field, he's a man of competence, he's a man whose hands are skilled with sling, with sword or with lyre. He's a valiant man, a hunter, a person who can kill wild beasts.

There is a completeness and roundedness to David's character that brings together traits of both Jacob and Esau and we'll see more of these as the story progresses. The Philistine champion curses David by his gods, while David declares that he comes in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom Goliath has defied. Behind the two champions then is conflict between the Lord and the false gods of the Philistines.

David expresses his confidence that the Lord saves, not by human strength, much as Jonathan did in chapter 14. David slung a stone at the Philistine, which hit him in the forehead. The serpent's head was crushed and Goliath fell flat on his face.

David chopped off Goliath's head with his own sword. Here we should recall the story of Dagon from chapter 5. Dagon fell flat on his face before the ark and then later fell again and was decapitated. The Israelites then pursue the Philistines and plunder their camp.

David takes the head of the Philistine and brings it to Jerusalem. This may be a reference

to a later time or perhaps he brings it to somewhere in the region of Jerusalem, beyond the part currently controlled by the Jebusites. Saul now asks about David's identity.

This is a detail that has led many to believe that this story is in conflict with the story that precedes it. In that story David is already clearly known to Saul. Why then would he ask about his identity here? We've already seen earlier in the story some hints of continuity with what proceeds and some parts that make sense most when they are read against the background of what has gone beforehand.

What then should we do with this? I think the most obvious explanation is that although Saul knew David well, he did not know David's family well. As David had been employed by Saul to this point, it didn't really matter that much. Some of his servants had alerted him to David's existence and to his skills and then he had been sent for from Jesse.

It isn't entirely clear that Saul had first-hand acquaintance with Jesse. However now David's family matters. It matters because David is going to be brought into the king's house in a new way, not just as his servant but as his son-in-law.

Also David's family is going to be freed from the burden of taxation and so Saul needs to discover which family is going to receive the reward. David's family background then is relevant information at this point in a way that it was not before. This also forms the climax of the story as David declares himself as the son of Jesse the Bethlehemite and as the future king declares his identity, the stage is set for the rest of the story.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the events of this chapter set up David as the worthy and fitting replacement for Saul as king? 2nd Corinthians chapter 11. I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me for I feel a divine jealousy for you since I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

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. 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. Indeed I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super apostles.

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. 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? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you, and when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need.

So I have refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do.

And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claims of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. 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. What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.

For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves. 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. 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. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one.

I am talking like a madman, with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 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, 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, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure, and, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Who is weak? And I am not weak. Who is made to fall? And I am not indignant. If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus the governor under King Aratus was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 Paul presents himself as if the jealous father of a young betrothed woman, concerned that she not be seduced away from her espoused partner.

The Corinthian church is betrothed to Christ the Bridegroom. The theme of Christ as the Bridegroom of the church is one found at many points in the New Testament. It's something we see especially in Ephesians chapter 5 verses 22 to 32.

Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. We also see Christ as the bridegroom in the book of John and the book of Revelation.

The image of the wedding feast found in the gospels is also important here too. Paul begins with an allusion to the story of Adam and Eve and the temptation of Eve by the serpent. There Adam was charged with guarding the garden and he should have protected his wife, but he failed to do so.

And the guile of the serpent is particularly focused upon here. The serpent deceived Eve with his cunning. Their thoughts ought to be devoted to Christ, but they might easily be misled by Satan's schemes.

The task of Paul as an apostle is to act as a guardian for the bride. There is a vision of Christian ministry here as well. The Christian minister is a servant of the bridegroom to the bride.

He represents the bridegroom to her, protecting her from assault or any satanic wiles that might estrange her affections from the one to whom she is betrothed. Unfortunately, the Corinthians seem far too ready to turn from their bridegroom to another. You can imagine Paul's distress at this.

He is the one who is their father in the faith, and he has directed their love to Christ and bound them to him in the covenant bonds of betrothal. They have been washed as a bride in the waters of baptism, and he has declared the wonders of their bridegroom to them. But now it seems as if they can be led astray from Christ with great ease and little protest on their part.

Presented with a counterfeit form of Jesus, a counterfeit form of the Spirit, and a counterfeit form of the Gospel, they seem to be unable to discern the difference. He started off by telling them to bear with him in a little foolishness. They bear with a counterfeit Jesus, Spirit and Gospel readily enough, so he is hardly making any great demand of them.

Paul characterizes his opponents as super-apostles. They believe that they are superior to him. These super-apostles were almost certainly not members of the Twelve.

Sometimes the term apostle is used for the wider company of those who saw the risen Christ. Paul also sometimes uses it for persons sent on a mission. Paul grants that he may not be the most skilled orator.

Paul has already spoken of the plainness of his speech with which he proclaimed the Gospel to the Corinthians back in 1 Corinthians 2, verses 1-5. While Paul was not the most compelling speaker, Acts 20 tells the story of a young man named Eutychus who sank into a deep sleep when Paul spoke a considerable length, fell out of a window and died, Paul was nonetheless not without wisdom in the truth of Christ. That much should have been made very apparent to the Corinthians by this point, and even more so as the wisdom shone ever more brightly in contrast to the roughness of the speech in which it was couched.

The question of the source of Paul's support while he taught the Corinthians is raised here again, as it was back in 1 Corinthians 9. Why had Paul acted seemingly inequitably in this manner? Why had he accepted money from the Macedonians but not from the Corinthians? Was it because he didn't love the Corinthians and didn't want to accept their support? Was their money not good enough for him? Quite the opposite. If anything, Paul robbed the Macedonians so that he could give a special treatment to the Corinthians. The other churches in the region would be able to back him up in this matter too, as would God himself.

Paul is going to continue to act in the same way. His consistency undermines the accusations of his opponents and their exalted claims that their own work operates in the same way as Paul's does. Paul previously mockingly called them super-apostles and then he spoke about the way that they present a counterfeit Jesus, counterfeit gospel and counterfeit spirit.

Now he declares that they are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. Indeed, beneath the mask they are actually servants of Satan, who like their true master are able to disguise themselves as their opposites. They preach a counterfeit gospel, spirit and counterfeit Jesus as those who are skilled in the deceptions of their father, who first deceived Eve in the garden.

However, as is the case with such persons, they will ultimately be revealed by their fruits

as their works yield a bitter harvest. Paul adopts a fool's persona for the sake of argument. He is speaking not in the proper way that he should as a Christian and apostle of Christ, but with a persona for rhetorical purposes.

He is playing the game of the super-apostles for the sake of argument for a period of time, while steadily subverting it as he proceeds. His mode of speech is ironic and at the outset he wants them to be very clear of that fact. Once again he plays on the fact that, since they gladly bear with fools and their counterfeit gospels, they should bear with him when he devotes a few sentences to playing the part of the fool.

He develops the theme of the Corinthians bearing with the spiritual mistreatment that they have received. In bearing with a counterfeit Jesus, spirit and gospel, they have borne the worst sort of mistreatment. Paul uses hyperbole to drive the point home.

They will bear with being made slaves, being devoured, taken advantage of, with people taking heirs with them, or being struck in the face. If Paul is being accused of weakness, in his foolish boasting he declares his shame that he and his apostles simply weren't strong enough to abuse the Corinthians in the way that the super-apostles had. The super-apostles' strength really showed up Paul's weakness on that point.

Paul has condemned the way of those who constantly compare themselves with each other earlier in the letter, but now he does so himself, yet in a way designed to nullify such competitive comparisons, not to play the same game. His ironic detachment in his foolish speech is really important here. The super-apostles may be capitalising upon their Jewish identity.

Paul could readily do that too, should he want to. Elsewhere in Philippians 3-3-11, he contrasts putting confidence in the flesh, and the way that, although he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, he has jettisoned such confidence for knowing Christ. As to the law, a Pharisee.

As to zeal, a persecutor of the Church. As to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss, because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. If the super-apostles want to play that Jewish status game, Paul can easily beat them at it.

But he has abandoned that in order to gain Christ, yet nullifying the super-apostles

requires temporarily adopting an in-the-flesh persona to close them down. If they claim to be servants of Christ, Paul is that much better. At this juncture he has to make especially clear that he is speaking in the persona of a fool, as a self-exalting boast in his apostolic service is precisely the sort of thing that the Gospel rules out.

He boasts of his far greater toil or labours for Christ. His list of hardships, one of a number in this letter, is a list of ways in which Paul has accounted his life and comfort of little value relative to the message that he bears and the master that he serves. Of course, part of what he has accounted to be of little value is his status, which means that this list has an increasingly paradoxical character.

His endurance through so many trials is proof of his faithfulness to his commission. It is a list of hardships, not of great demonstrations of power or prominence, but of dogged demonstration of faithfulness. The irony of the list will become clearer as we read through it.

The sort of things Paul included would be considered shameful by many. Who boasts of being imprisoned often, of being stoned, or of being beaten at the hands of the Jews? They might boast of being Jews. Being beaten at the hands of the Jews? Not so much.

This is definitely not the list of someone who wants to make a good showing in the flesh. However, someone who wishes to be found in Christ, to know the fellowship of his sufferings, might well see that fellowship most in the hardships he endured for Christ, and perhaps especially in those hardships that reveal the world's rejection of him, as it rejected his master before him. The point of all this is to foreground Paul's weakness.

Who is weak? And I am not weak. This is where Paul chiefly finds his boast, in his weakness. This focus of Paul's identity also leads to his special concern for the weak who are caused to fall, a point that Jesus emphasised in his own teaching on a few occasions.

The strong wish to set themselves apart from the weak as much as possible. However, Paul, in foregrounding his weakness, can take a special concern for the weakest and most vulnerable of Christ's sheep. Paul concludes the chapter with one final boast, of being let down through a window in the wall of Damascus, to deliver him from the king who sought to capture him.

That story is not even a story of some great endurance on Paul's part, but of his rejection by the world and the Lord's gracious deliverance of him. Paul's powerlessness in that situation was the occasion for the Lord's salvation. The subversion of the status-seeking games of the super-apostles then is well underway, but Paul will deliver the finishing blows to it in the next chapter.

A question to consider, how might Paul's teaching, through his ironic boasting in this

chapter, challenge the way that we regard ourselves and our status?