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LESS IS MORE:

PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF PARADOX IN 2 CORINTHIANS

BY DANE CALVIN ORTLUND

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF

COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF

MASTER OF THEOLOGY

APPROVAL SHEET

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ABSTRACT OF

LESS IS MORE:
PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF PARADOX IN 2 CORINTHIANS

By Dane Calvin Ortlund

This study argues that paradox is the hermeneutical key by which Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is theologically unlocked. Rooted in the social context of a Corinthian church that apparently had imbibed the surrounding *Zeitgeist* rather than influencing that *Zeitgeist* with the message of a crucified yet reigning Messiah, Paul finds himself needing to employ extreme measures lest the Corinthian church, apparently barely afloat, be permanently swamped by the waves of worldliness. To a city and church lusting after wealth, power, athletic glory, fine speech, and sexual indulgence—in a word, *excess*—the apostle's strategy is not one of renouncing the merits of, or snuffing out the desire for, such things. Paul nowhere denigrates such desires. Rather he turns the Corinthian mentality upside-down by arguing that the strength and joy for which the Corinthians are so hungry are consummated in the very weakness and suffering they so despise. To do this, Paul employs the principle of paradox throughout the epistle, whether he is addressing his own sufferings (ch. 1, 6, 11), human mortality (4, 5), the experience of Christ (5, 8:9, 13), money (8, 9), or his own apostolic legitimacy (3, 10-12).

Chapter one therefore opens by introducing the epistle as seen through the framework of paradox. This chapter also defines precisely what is meant in this study by "paradox," and corrects the possible misunderstanding that a concomitant conclusion of this study would be that suffering is itself inherently good.

Chapter two provides the socio-cultural backdrop against which the rest of the thesis will be placed. In this chapter I examine the primary literature from 200 B.C to the days of the New Testament, concluding that Corinth was universally recognized as a city of *excess*. To demonstrate this I cite examples of Corinthian excess in five specific areas: money, religion, athletics, speech, and sexuality. I then comb both canonical Corinthian letters to see if one can detect preliminarily these five topics. I conclude that all five areas of excess which were present in the city were addressed in the Corinthian correspondence. This chapter thus provides the historical context out of which the need for Paul's paradoxical argumentation emerges.

Having established *that* Paul spoke to the excess of Corinth, I then turn to *how* he addressed it. The means by which Paul exposes and deals with such excess is, in a word, paradox. Hence chapter three works its way through 2 Corinthians and examines those passages which either explicitly or implicitly employ paradox. This chapter forms the backbone of the study.

Chapter four asks if the paradox of 2 Corinthians has been acknowledged throughout history, and chapter five asks if the paradox of 2 Corinthians is evident in any other biblical or intertestamental book (to a comparable degree). I argue that whereas the Pauline paradox has been persistently neglected historically (ch. 4), it does surface throughout the Bible (ch. 5)—though nowhere outside 2 Corinthians does it provide a hermeneutical framework through which an entire biblical book can be interpreted. In this chapter we also examine paradox in the apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, and the Epistle to Diognetus.

Chapter six synthesizes and concludes the study.

. . . ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the completion of this project I owe thanks, in particular, to a few critical friends. Dr. Hans Bayer gladly agreed to supervise the work and provided the usual helpful interaction. The thoughtfulness with which he assisted me is rivaled only by the happiness with which it was colored. For Dr. Robert Peterson, too, who selflessly offered more help than originally planned, this work is but the culmination of several years of gracious guidance to a student trying to get his theological bearings. These two men have done more than anyone—and well beyond what I deserve—to make the past five years' study abundantly fruitful, sharing with me not only the gospel of God but their own selves as well. I love them.

Stacey, I cannot repay the Monday and Thursday nights and Saturday mornings you gave me to work; it is a gift. Still less repayable is your unflagging encouragement and interest. Your persistent confidence in me, in spite of my weaknesses being more conspicuously on display before you than anyone else, is quite inexplicable to me. And you and Zachary have helped me remember that abstract doctrine which does not somehow plant itself in a Tuesday evening around the family room is not theology but idolatry.

Finally, when all the words have been typed, and grades marked, and library books returned, and chapters written, and corrections made, and degrees conferred, and congratulations given, one unavoidable fact confronts me: Jesus the Christ was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God (2 Cor. 13:4), so that when we are weak, then

we are strong (12:10). The potential tragedy of the writing of this thesis would be to gain a cognitive knowledge of the paradoxical path of discipleship as laid out in 2 Corinthians without a life lived in such a way that proclaims it to be true. The ultimate purpose of this thesis is that I and anyone who reads it would live in increasing measure not by earthly wisdom, but by the grace of God (1:12). All the parsing and exegesis and research and footnotes and referencing are simply means to this counterintuitive though glorious end of having nothing, yet possessing everything (6:10). To miss this would be paradoxical indeed.

A PRAYER

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;
hemmed in by mountains of sin, I behold thy glory.
Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up,
that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
that to give is to receive,
that the valley is the place of vision.
Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells,
and the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine;
Let me find thy light in my darkness,
Thy life in my death,
Thy joy in my sorrow,
Thy grace in my sin,
Thy riches in my poverty,
Thy glory in my valley.

--*Anonymous Puritan*[1]

[1] Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 1.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible Commentary
ABR	*Australian Biblical Review*
ACC	Ancient Christian Commentary
AUSS	*Andrews University Seminary Studies*
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BARev	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BDAG	Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker (eds), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, 2000
Bib	*Biblica*
BT	*The Bible Translator*
BJRL	*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*
BurH	*Buried History*
CBQ	*The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CR	*Clergy Review*
DTIB	Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*
EQ	*The Evangelical Quarterly*
ER	*Epworth Review*
ETL	*Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*
ESV	English Standard Version
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
GTJ	*Grace Theological Journal*
HBT	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
Int	*Interpretation*
ITQ	*Irish Theological Quarterly*
JCS	*A Journal of Church and State*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JPT	*Journal of Pentecostal Theology*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup	JSNT Supplement Series
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LCL	T. E. Page (ed), Loeb Classical Library
LQ	*Lutheran Quarterly*
NASB	New American Standard Bible
Neot	*Neotestamentica*
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Text Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NKZ	*Neue kirchliche Zeitschrift*

NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NT	New Testament
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OT	Old Testament
ResQ	*Restoration Quarterly*
RevExp	*Review and Expositor*
RHR	*Revue de l'histoire des religions*
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RTR	*Reformed Theological Review*
SE	*Studia Evangelica*
SWJT	*Southwestern Journal of Theology*
Them	*Themelios*
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary
TrinJ	*Trinity Journal*
TrinS	*Trinity Studies*
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
UBS	United Bible Societies
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
ZST	*Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie*
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION TO THE PARADOX

This study seeks to demonstrate that Paul employs theological paradox throughout 2 Corinthians to upend Corinthian sensibilities more influenced by secular culture than a cross-centered gospel. This use of paradox is so pervasive, moreover, that it ought to be seen as the interpretive key to the letter. Paul's short autobiographical clip recounting his "thorn in the flesh" (12:7-10)—specifically his concluding statement, "When I am weak, then I am strong"—provides a hermeneutical mountaintop from which the whole of the epistle can be viewed and understood.[1]

It is not my contention that every New Testament epistle fits comfortably under a single unifying principle, much less that each is summed up explicitly in such a climactic statement. Recent scholarship remains divided over whether a single theme exists in (for example) Romans, with the modern consensus having swung back to finding the key to interpreting the letter in chapter 9-11 (specifically) and Jew-Gentile relations (generally). Certainly, most epistles cannot be subsumed under a single unifying rubric.

The letter of 2 Corinthians, however, provides an exception. Confronted with a singularly worldly outlook in Corinth in which Christ and his apostles are being judged according to secular standards of eloquence, natural ability, and external appearance over internal reality, Paul finds himself needing to take drastic measures to demonstrate to the Corinthians authentic Christianity. He therefore exposes their subversively anti-Christian worldview which they have applied to ministerial analysis not by offering a merely

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION. Copyright © 2001 Crossway Bibles. Used by permission of Good News Books.

different framework, nor even by denying the accusations being fired against him, but by introducing an upside-down paradigm by which the very content of Corinthian accusation of Paul becomes the platform of apostolic confirmation. That is, Paul argues not only that the strength sought by the world is other than the way of the Spirit, but that true strength comes in precisely that which the world shuns: weakness. The Corinthians are not running in the right direction, only to narrowly miss the mark; they are running in the wrong direction. In abhoring weakness, they abhor the very locus of true power they so deeply crave. In cutting themselves off from weakness, moreover, they cut themselves off from being united to Christ's weakness—and also, by necessary consequence, Christ's strength.

I am not arguing for the presence (or lack thereof) in 2 Corinthians of a unifying theological *theme* (such as reconciliation[2] or apostolic legitimacy[3]). I am suggesting that 2 Corinthians contains a unifying theological *principle*. The difference is the same as that between sadness and a frown, or rich soil and a healthy crop. The former (which is what this study seeks) is the deeper reality in the light of which the latter makes sense. It is in underlying strategy, not content, that a virtually omnipresent motif emerges. Yes, Paul addresses issues such as reconciliation of his own apostolic authority; but these themes are themselves subsumed within, and described using the language of, a more fundamental principle. *How* Paul argues and *why* he must do so, not *what* Paul argues, pervasively colors the epistle from start to finish—rooted, I will argue, in both the cross

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[2] Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); French L. Arrington, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: A Study of 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

[3] Ernst Käsemann, *Die Legitimität des Apostels: Eine Untersuchung zu II Korinther 10-13* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956); William Baird, "Letters of Recommendation: A Study of II Cor 3 1-3," *JBL* 80 (1961): 172; G. K. Beale, "The Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5-7 and Its Bearing on the Literary Problem of 2 Corinthians 6.14-7.1," *NTS* 35 (1989): 552.

of Christ and the context of Corinth. Yet because it is the manner and not the matter that is so consistent, it is not as readily conspicuous to the reader. *For instead of a single term or word group or concept cropping up repeatedly, it is different terms and word groups and concepts which are employed in the same paradoxical way* which I will suggest to be the hermeneutical key to the letter.

What, then, is this hermeneutical key? Paradox. Throughout this study, I will refer to Paul's use of paradox in 2 Corinthians, which I can define no more appropriately and clearly than *Webster's Twentieth-Century Dictionary of the English Language*, according to which a paradox is "a tenet or proposition contrary to received opinion; something seemingly absurd, yet true in fact; a statement or phenomenon apparently at variance with or in opposition to established principles yes demonstrably true."[4] Precisely this is the *how* that Paul employs in his attempt to show his beloved yet manifestly dysfunctional Corinthians that their imbibed worldview—so enthralled with the quest for *more*—is diametrically opposed to authentic Christianity, in which not comfort but the cross of Christ is the sun around which our lives are to orbit. Paul's theologically-informed rhetoric exposes the Corinthian error. This thesis thus explores the proposition that paradox, rooted in the Corinthian subculture and climaxing in 12:10, is the critical hermeneutical key to responsible interpretation of 2 Corinthians.

Let it be stated clearly that I am reading 2 Corinthians theologically. This is not because I see no value in sociological or rhetorical approaches to the letter which have become popular recently.[5] Indeed, the second chapter of this thesis is dedicated to

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[4] New York: Publisher's Guild, 1940.

[5] Among those who pursue a rhetorical analysis of 2 Corinthians are Hans D. Betz, who describes 2 Cor 10-13 as "Socratic apology" which follows an already existing rhetorical pattern of Greco-Roman *apologia* (*Der Apostle Paulus und die sokratische Tradition: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu seiner Apologie 2*

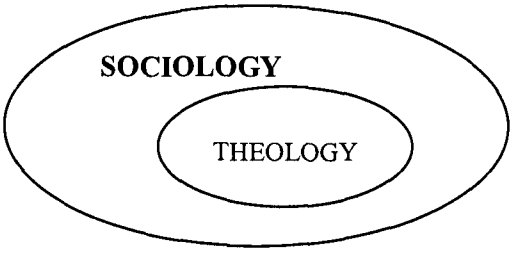
elucidating the social horizons into which the apostle wrote and how those horizons informed his writing. This study, nonetheless, moves forward in its interpretation in the conviction that the sociological/rhetorical devices employed are subsumed within a more foundational theological framework.[6] Paul undeniably employs specific rhetoric in 2 Corinthians, and he does it to speak to a certain sociological context—yet both of these are means to theological ends, and not ends themselves. If one attempts to read Paul on rhetorical grounds as an end in itself, one misunderstands the apostle on a fundamental level.

Korinther 10-13 [Mohr Siebeck, 1972]); Ben Witherington III, who reads the text against the backdrop of current Greco-Roman rhetorical conventions (*Conflict and Community in Corinth*); Jerry W. McCant, who sees the letter as a more general form of philosophic apology ("Paul's Thorn of Rejected Apostleship," *NTS* 34 [1988]: 550-572); M.-A. Chevallier, who reads 2 Cor 10-13 as the speech-act of a concerned pastor ("L'argumentation de Paul dans II Corinthiens 10 à 13," *RHR* 70 [1990]: 3-15); and Christopher Forbes, who argues that the rhetorical conventions of self-praise and comparison in Greek literature is the background to Paul's boasting in 2 Cor 10-13 ("Comparison, Self-Praise and Irony: Paul's Boasting and the Conventions of Hellenistic Rhetoric," *NTS* 32 [1986]: 1-30).

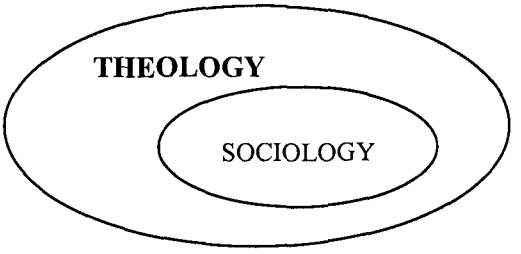
[6] I follow, then, in the spirit of the *New Testament Theology* series edited by James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge University Press), for which Jerome Murphy-O'Connor has contributed the volume on 2 Corinthians (*The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians* [1991]). "Paul's personal history," adds Ralph P. Martin of 2 Corinthians, "and chiefly his self-understanding as apostle, cannot be separated from the ongoing *theological* debate with his detractors. His self-identity—and its *theological* undergirding—was sharpened and refined precisely because he was called on to defend it in the face of his attacks" ("The Setting of 2 Corinthians," *TynBul* 37 [1986]: 4, emphasis added). I believe Martin here captures the proper emphasis between theological and socio-historical factors.

This is not to disparage or neglect the helpful work of sociological factors in adducing Paul's theology from his letters—as, for example, in the commentary of Witherington, which compares the Corinthian correspondence with Greco-Roman rhetoric *as a means of fleshing out Paul's theology*. This is much more palatable approach than that of (as an example) Scott B. Andrews, who believes a theological reading of Paul's *peristasis* catalogues (i.e., a reading which roots such lists most fundamentally in the crucified and risen Christ) to be insufficient for fleshing out Paul's strategy in 2 Cor 10-13, suggesting instead that Greco-Roman rhetoric is the key comparator ("Too Weak Not to Lead: The Form and Function of 2 Cor 11.23b-33," *NTS* 41 [1994-95]: 263-276; see esp. 274-75). Jan Lambrecht supplies, in the mind of this author, a much-needed and well-aimed rebuke of Andrews' article in "Strength in Weakness: A Reply to Scott B. Andrews' Exegesis of 2 Cor 11:23b-33," *NTS* 43 (1997): 285-290.

Inverted Pauline Framework:



Proper Pauline Framework:



My goal, then, is to demonstrate that in 2 Corinthians Paul argues for the counterintuitive (internally) and counter-cultural (externally) nature of the gospel, turning upside-down the principle of the world that *more is more* and arguing instead that, paradoxically, *less is more*. If one is to truly gain in life, says the apostle, one must reject the fleshly impulse to put oneself forward. Self-promotion, self-seeking, boasting—these things must be killed. Ironically, however—and against our instincts—it is only in so doing that one finds that which one was seeking to gain in one's initial self-seeking: joy, satisfaction, contentment, existential harmony, and so on. Less is more. It is in one's decreasing, to the increase of God and neighbor, that one finds joy and peace. Contrary to Corinthian sentiment, there is a death that is unto life. Gain comes by giving rather than by hoarding, counterintuitive though this be. Consequently, that in which the world boasts (physical strength, intellect, "wisdom," authority, stature, ability) is rejected by the authentic Christian as the pathway to identity and joy. Conversely, that which the world spurns and resists (humility, self-emptying, building up others, simplicity, and even weakness and inability) is embraced by the regenerate—not meaninglessly or aimlessly, but because it is the only path to life and happiness. And of foundational importance to Paul is that the pattern of the life of Christ himself, who "though he was rich, yet . . .

became poor," and who "was crucified in weakness, yet lives by the power of God," paves the way for this counterintuitive understanding of the Christian life (2 Cor. 8:9; 13:4).

That this kind of paradoxical approach is indeed Paul's strategy is evident in that when the super-apostles (οἱ ὑπερλίαν ἀπόστολοι, 11:5; 12:11) point to Paul's suffering as evidence of apostolic artificiality, the apostle does not respond by conceding the point and directing attention elsewhere—say, to the fruitfulness of his ministry. He does not point the finger away from his suffering. He stays on the subject, and makes the shocking assertion that *his suffering is itself a primary proof of his apostleship.* Affliction is the badge of an apostle (indeed, as we will see, of a Christian). Suffering does not call his apostolic authority into question; it is confirmative.[7] Because, then, the criticism of the super-apostles does not describe deficiency in Paul but is rather fodder for his apostolic validity, the accusation becomes the affirmation. "When Paul concedes weakness," writes Karl A. Plank, "he admits the evidence against him but sets a trap for his opponents. Once admitted, weakness testifies not against Paul, but on his behalf, as he redefines the whole notion within his paradox of the cross."[8] Sze-kar Wan similarly and perceptively writes:

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[7] Thomas R. Schreiner is unique in rightly noting the critical importance of suffering in the life and theology of the apostle (*Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001]). For a work illumining Paul's understanding of suffering specifically with reference to 2 Corinthians, see Scott J. Hafemann's revised dissertation, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul's Defense of His Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14-3:3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

[8] *Paul and the Irony of Affliction* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 16. Calvin comments on 4:7-10 that Paul "turns to his own advantage every charge that the wicked bring against him;" he later reiterates, "the very thing that the false apostles used as a pretext for despising the gospel, was so far from bringing any degree of contempt upon the gospel, that it tended even to render it glorious" (*The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 203, 204).

> Paul could not engage his opponents by arguing with them directly, for to do so would have ceded to them the grounds and terms of the argument. To match strength for strength with his detractors would have been an endorsement of their operating premise that ministry is to be authenticated by power and strength. . . . Paul resolves this dilemma by stressing that authentic Christian ministry is in fact not characterized by power and strength but by weakness and suffering, specifically the weakness and suffering of Christ.[9]

All this is *not* to say, however, that Paul sees suffering as inherently good. The apostle's message is not one of Christian masochism, as Dorothea Sölle has suggested.[10] Commenting on the affliction spoken of in 2 Corinthians 4:17, the Princetonian Charles Hodge warns of this error when he writes: "The Bible does not teach, either by precept or example, that Christians are to bear pain as though it were not pain, or bereavements as though they caused no sorrow."[11] Paul does not see difficulty as an end in itself. Rather it is a means to the end of joyful, self-denying Christ-likeness. Paul is teaching a worldview in which strength, gain, and life come *through* weakness, giving, and death, respectively—not *despite* these things.[12] My thesis, then, is that to understand 2 Corinthians in both a theologically conscientious and contextually informed way, one must acknowledge as interpretively fundamental the upside-down nature of the gospel as presented by Paul in which the hardship produced when fleshly impulses are rejected is neither piously sought (as if inherently good) nor stoically stifled (as if only bad). Rather, such difficulties are embraced as God's agents of sanctification and joy, foolish though

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[9] *Power in Weakness: Conflict and Rhetoric in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 14.

[10] *Suffering* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), 19.

[11] Charles A. Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (1891; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1959), 103.

[12] "What makes affliction beneficial," writes Murray J. Harris, "is not the actual experience of suffering, but the reaction to it" (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005]: 541; Harris also, much earlier, contributed the volume on 2 Corinthians [vol. 10] in Frank E. Gabelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976]: 299-406). See also the Appendix, in which this is emphasized.

this seem to the world. To reiterate, such is the pattern set before us by Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; 8:9; 13:4). This study, then, does not aim to provide a commentary of 2 Corinthians, for it focuses on a single principle or point of observation. Nonetheless this principle will be traced exegetically throughout the entire letter.[13]

Having presented the general purpose of this thesis in the introduction, chapter 2 will provide the historical context out of which the need for Paul's paradoxical argumentation emerges. The bulk of our study will be spent in chapter 3, exegeting the relevant passages in 2 Corinthians. Chapters 4 and 5 step back and examine the paradox fueling Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians in history and in the rest of Scripture, respectively. I will argue that the Pauline paradox has been neglected historically, yet is evident throughout the Bible—though nowhere outside 2 Corinthians does it provide a hermeneutical framework through which an entire biblical book can be more faithfully interpreted. Chapter 6 synthesizes our study.

Throughout, I aim to show that 2 Corinthians cannot be sufficiently appreciated without recognizing that in every section of the letter—whether he is defending his own apostolic authenticity (ch. 1-7), motivating financial generosity (8-9), or exposing the secular mindset of his opponents[14] (10-13)—Paul is turning the instinctively carnal

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[13] Much ink has been spilt over the question of the compositional unity of 2 Corinthians. This thesis assumes unity, and while it is not the purpose of this study to examine the evidence relevant to this issue, a successful demonstration of this thesis would lend credence to seeing all thirteen canonical chapters as part of Paul's original letter. See footnote 145 below.

[14] "Precisely who these opponents were," writes Frank Thielman, "is one of the most hotly debated questions of current New Testament scholarship" (*Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994]: 83). See his summary or that of Victor Paul Furnish (*II Corinthians*, AB [New York: Doubleday, 1984]: 49) or, more extensively, Jerry L. Sumney (*Identifying Paul's Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990]) or C. K. Barrett ("Paul's Opponents in II Corinthians," *NTS* 17 [1970-71]: 233-254). Murray Harris also offers an excellent summary (67-76). Though the exact social and religious make-up of the opponents (or "superapostles," 2 Cor 11:5; 12:11) is not directly pertinent to this study, one aspect of their identity—the appropriation of the world's standards for ministerial success—will become clear over the course of the study, particularly when in our discussion of 2 Cor 10-13. Nevertheless we should be cautious in identifying the super-

sensibilities of his readers upside-down by employing theological paradox. Comfort comes through, not in spite of, affliction. Life comes through, not by avoiding, death. Strength is found through, not in the elimination of, weakness. Less, says the apostle, is more.

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apostles; Scott Hafemann ten years ago counted 13 different attempts to reconstruct Paul's opponents in Corinth ("Review of Timothy B. Savage. Power Through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians," *JCS* 39/4 [1997]: 796-797).

CHAPTER 2

THE NEED FOR THE PARADOX: THE CITY AND CHURCH OF CORINTH

Certainly the most important element in ascertaining the meaning of a piece of literature is the document itself. Yet a decontextualized document is, in the end, worthless. A letter written to pledge funds to a beloved individual will be understood one way if addressed to the President of the United States, another way if intended for one's mother.

Before going to the text, then, this study will provide a two-step reconstruction of the background into which Paul was speaking when he penned 2 Corinthians. We first examine the city of Corinth and the unique ways in which it both embodied and went beyond broader Greco-Roman culture, and then we discuss the church of Corinth as located within that Greco-Roman city. For the former we examine secular literature (chapter five will speak to possible Jewish influence), for the latter the two surviving Corinthian letters. *I will argue that the cultural context into which 2 Corinthians is written provides critical illumination of the reason Paul employs paradox so pervasively throughout 2 Corinthians.* Paul is so flustered in this epistle because he perceives that the city (and the heart of what it stands for) is influencing the church instead of the church (and the heart of what it stands for) influencing the city.[15]

[15] I owe this sentence to Dr. Tim Keller. Bruce W. Winter (*After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001]: 31-43) helpfully illuminates one element of this tragic inversion when he describes the way in which the teacher/disciple relationship had been thoroughly secularized in Corinth (as e.g. in 1 Cor 3:3-4) in accord with the Greco-Roman pattern of over-attachment and loyalty in the pupil/teacher relationship.

Yet while we acknowledge the important role of the social context of this letter, looking first not at the letter to Corinth but the city of Corinth, the conviction of this thesis is that the final arbiter in responsible interpretation of 2 Corinthians is the letter itself and not any particular historical reconstruction upon which a certain interpretation may stand or fall. While the social climate certainly further illumines the meaning of the text, our textual interpretation does not ultimately reside in the proposed *sitz im leben*, lest our interpretation be wholly contingent upon the success of a (possibly erroneous) proposed social reconstruction. Such a methodology would never move one's interpretation beyond precarious. Our interpretation must rather be determined ultimately by careful analysis of the words the apostle wrote. As important as historical context is, then, one must not allow the contextual tail to wag the exegetical dog.

Dogs do, however, have tails. Thus the opposite error would be to ignore completely the cultural milieu from which and into which Paul wrote. This chapter seeks to expose this milieu with the purpose of illumining—not controlling—our interpretation of the text of 2 Corinthians in the next chapter.

The City of Corinth

Others have demonstrated extensively the critical elements of early Corinthian culture.[16] Rather than redundantly rehearse in this brief chapter what has already been

[16] See especially Timothy B. Savage, *Power Through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jerome Murphy O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983); Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth by Gerd Theissen*, trans. John H. Schütz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); and F. W. Walbank, *The Hellenistic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

argued and defended at length, I will provide a representative sampling of early secular voices which illumine some characteristic traits of first-century Corinth by virtue of multiple attestation. Five elements of Corinthian society are particularly striking—wealth, power, athleticism, speech, and sexuality. The purpose of this chapter is not to insinuate that these values were lacking in other Greco-Roman cities, but that Corinth came to epitomize and cherish them to a unique degree. It is a difference not of kind, in other words, but of degree.

Critical to note for our purposes is that these are all values made distinct in Corinth due to *excess*: the Corinthians, more than denizens of other Mediterranean cities, hankered after more money, more influence, more glorious physical feats, more compelling words, more wisdom, more sensual pleasures—in a word, they were after more. To state it differently, it is not that the Corinthians lived by a unique and different *modus operandi* with respect to (for example) sexuality. Rather they accepted the current Greco-Roman *modus operandi* and stretched it to the extreme. Hence they were simply after *more*. It is just here that Paul attacks the Corinthian sensibility and declares instead, from his own experience and even more deeply from that of Christ, that less is more. In this way the apostle does not attempt to deal with the visible manifestations of the Corinthian mindset by addressing in turn athleticism, power, and so on—though he does at times broach such topics explicitly. Rather, to use our previous metaphor, he digs beneath the ground to the root.

Financial Excess: Wealth

Corinth was destroyed in 146 B.C., but Julius Caesar founded the city again as a Roman colony in 44 B.C.[17] The strategically-placed port city rapidly acquired what would become its lasting reputation, one element of which was its great wealth.

Because merchants passing through were taxed on their goods, whether traveling by land or sea, Corinth grew economically quite quickly in the second half of the first century B.C., as the new Corinth regained and then outdistanced the economic status of the old.[18] This was fueled not only by location and taxing but the make-up of the citizens of the new Corinth. The city was largely settled by freedmen. In a free market in which upward mobility was the word of the day, this meant a highly competitive social drive fueled the activities of daily life in an unusually strong way when compared with other, older cities in which the social strata were more rigidly fixed. A few glances at ancient writers demonstrate this.

Strabo passed through Corinth during the period in which it was being resettled (44 B.C. and on), and he tells us that Corinth "was always great and wealthy," elsewhere referring to the city simply as "wealthy Corinth."[19] This was evidently true not only of pre-destruction Corinth but supremely of the new city founded by Julius Caesar. For example, the bronze for which Corinth was so famous was, according to Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23-79), "valued before silver and almost even before gold." He later writes that "of the bronze which was renowned in early days, the Corinthian is the most highly

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[17] *The Geography of Strabo, Vol. IV*, LCL, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 121, 203-05; Walbank, *Hellenistic World*, 238-242.
[18] Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 86.
[19] *The Geography of Strabo, Vol. IV*, 203, 185.

praised."[20] This is corroborated by Josephus, who wrote in the late first century A.D. of the Temple built by Herod the Great in Jerusalem: "Of the gates nine were completely overlaid with gold and silver, as were also their doorposts and lintels; but one, that outside the sanctuary, was of Corinthian bronze, and far exceeded in value those plated with silver and set in gold."[21] Livy likewise speaks of the widespread praise of the *ornamenta* (baubles) of Corinth.[22]

The fast ascent of some to a place of superior wealth led to a social stratification in this competitive city which exacerbated Corinthian worldliness and striving for increased cultural status.[23] While the majority of the citizens were former slaves, many of these played the appropriate societal cards to climb the first century version of the present-day corporate ladder. The city "had no continuity in its tradition," writes Gerd Theissen. "Nothing in Corinth was more than a century old, whether the constitution, buildings, families, or cults. In this period many families were socially ascendant, their grandfathers and great-grandfathers quite possibly having been slaves. Such a city is

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[20] *Pliny the Elder's Natural History: Vol. IX*, LCL, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 127, 131. We read in one of the first-century novels of Petronius the following telling portion of the narrative: "At this the slaves burst into spontaneous applause and shouted, 'God bless Gaius!' The cook too was rewarded with a drink and a silver crown, and was handed the cup on a Corinthian dish. Agamemnon began to peer at the dish rather closely, and Trimalchio said, 'I am the sole owner of genuine Corinthian plate.' I thought he would declare with his usual effrontery that he had cups imported direct from Corinth. But he went one better: 'You may perhaps inquire,' said he, 'how I came to be alone in having genuine Corinthian stuff. . .'" (*Petronius*, LCL, trans. Michael Heseltine [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913], 89). Plutarch, too, speaks of the coveted Corinthian bronze in his *Moralia* (*Plutarch's Moralia, Vol. V*, LCL, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936], 263).

[21] *Josephus, Vol. III: The Jewish War, Books IV-VII*, LCL, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 261. See also *Josephus, Vol. I: The Life*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 29.

[22] *Livy, Vol. IX*, LCL, trans. Evan T. Sage (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 421.

[23] See "Social Stratification in the Corinthian Community: A Contribution to the Sociology of Early Hellenistic Christianity" in Theissen, *Social Setting*, 69-119.

rather receptive to new endeavors."[24] Jerome Murphy-O'Connor concurs when he writes that

> only the strong and ruthless could survive the intense competitiveness of a wide-open boom town. Corinth had no hereditary patrician class to give it the stately dignity that an ancient university city such as Athens enjoyed. Its prominent citizens were all *nouveaux riches*. The only Corinthian tradition which the new colony respected was commercial success. It was every man for himself and the weak went to the wall.[25]

Religious Excess: Power

What status was to secular Corinth, power was to religious Corinth. At the heart of Greco-Roman religion was the desire for a deity to show itself strong on behalf of its followers, thereby showing its adherents to be strong. "Converts did not regard the god's power passively," writes Savage, "but wanted to experience that power for themselves. The more powerful one's god the more strength one expected to receive and manifest."[26] A biblical case in point is the reverence held for Simon the magician, of whom it was said in Acts 8:10, "This is the power of God which is called great" (οὗτός ἐστιν ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ καλουμένη μεγάλη).

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[24] Ibid., 99-100. Savage concurs; in asking "How did the Corinthians appraise fellow-humans and religion?" he goes on to answer: "Since the Corinthians were largely of servile descent they possessed, on the whole, *greater* thrust and vigour than people living where freedmen were less dominant. Consequently, they placed a higher premium on social prominence and self-display, on personal power and boasting. Likewise, they were *more* inclined to honor success and reward primacy and *more* prone to ridicule the poor and humble. When Corinthians evaluated each other they looked for the same symbols of worth which they prized for themselves – wealth, assertive speech, abusive behavior a head carried high – anything which might elevate them above their neighbors" (*Power Through Weakness*, 52, emphasis original; see also 20-21). Oscar Broneer makes a similar point regarding Corinthian religion: "the new city could be expected to be more receptive to novel religious beliefs than a place like Athens with unbroken cultural history of several thousand years" ("Corinth: Center of Paul's Missionary Work in Greece," *BA* 14 [1951]: 78).

[25] *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5. In another place Murphy-O'Connor likens the Corinth of Paul's time to San Francisco in the gold rush years ("The Corinth That Saint Paul Saw," *BA* 47 [1984]: 147).

[26] *Power Through Weakness*, 29.

Poseidon, god of the sea, was held in grave respect not because of his benevolence or generosity but his power.[27] Thus Cicero, after reflecting on the way in which some persons have been "deified" after they have "made some discovery of special utility for civilization," asks, "But what could be more ridiculous than to award divine honours to things mean and ugly, or to give the rank of gods to men now dead and gone?"[28] Similarly, Diogenes, according to Dio Chrysostom, "moved to Corinth, since he considered none of the others worth associating with," and noted the extreme gullibility of the Corinthians to any promise for physical healing and increased bodily strength.[29]

Physical Excess: Athleticism

The competitive status-seeking that drove Corinth socially carried over into the athletic world. Corinth was especially influenced on this account by the Isthmian games, held every other year beginning around 40 B.C.[30] Oscar Broneer aptly combines the economic and the athletic when he writes that "Corinth doubtless offered better business opportunities to a man in his trade than did most Greek cities because of its wealth and business activities and, in particular, because of the Isthmian games."[31]

The laud ascribed to athletic superiority at the games can hardly be overstated. Winners were carried about on shoulders, thrown ribbons, verbally praised with shouts of acclamation, and held in a superlative place of honor. Lucian startles even our modern

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[27] *Philostratus, Vol. II*, LCL, trans. F. C. Conybeare (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 139.
[28] *Cicero: De Natura Deorum Academia*, LCL, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 41.
[29] *Dio Chrysostom, Vol. I*, LCL, trans. J. W. Cohoon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 379; by "others" is meant other Greco-Roman cities. See also Furnish's extended discussion of the religious side of Corinth (*II Corinthians*, 15-22).
[30] See Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 276-286.
[31] "The Apostle Paul and the Isthmian Games," *BA* 25 (1962): 5.

Western athletic adulation when he comments that the athletes are brought out and paraded naked before the spectators, describing the attendant concerns a typical athlete possesses for his own glory.

> Their zeal for the athletic exercises will be increased if they see those who excel in them, receiving honors and having their names proclaimed before the assembled Greeks. For this reason, expecting to appear unclothed before so many people, they try to attain good physical condition so that they may not be ashamed of themselves when they are stripped, and each makes himself as fit to win as he can. Furthermore, the prizes, as I said before, are not trivial—to be praised by the spectators, to become a man of mark, and to be pointed at with the finger as the best of one's class. . . . [I]f the love of fame should be banished out of the world, what new blessing should we ever acquire, or who would want to do any glorious deed?[32]

Savage pointedly concludes, "The games thus reflected in microcosm, and more intensely, the competitive spirit of the first century." He then connects the games to Corinthian life more generally: "The actor, runner or rhetorician won adulation in the same way as the merchant, banker or tanner – by excelling his rivals. But because the city of Corinth was so immersed in the games it also reflected the competition. Indeed the drive to show oneself better than anyone's neighbor was perhaps more pronounced in Corinth than anywhere else."[33]

Verbal Excess: Speech

The value of ancient rhetoric is well-known, and Paul himself lived in the midst of a revival of the importance of classical oratorical skills. This was heightened, however, in Corinth. Yet Corinth appears to have been somewhat different from Athens in this regard, the latter of which enjoyed the refined cultivation of the finer art of rhetoric.

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[32] *Lucian, Vol. IV*, LCL, trans. A. M. Harmon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 61.
[33] *Power Through Weakness*, 45.

Corinth, rather, was home to those who sought simply to impress themselves on their audience with as much force as possible.

Dio Chrysostom provides a telling example. An eyewitness of the games, he informs us in his "Concerning Virtue" that athletic contests were not the only sphere of competitive self-promotion at the games. He records that "one could hear crowds of wretched sophists around Poseidon's temple shouting and reviling one another, and their disciples, as they were called, fighting with one another, many writers reading aloud their stupid works, many poets reciting their poems while others applauded them."[34] Savage writes that eloquence in Corinth "invited admiration, but not the display of rhetorical precision; rather, it was the ability to project one's personality powerfully on one's hearers."[35]

Sensual Excess: Sexuality

The reputation for sexual immorality earned by ancient Corinth is well-known. Murphy-O'Connor argues that it is likely blown out of proportion, specifically the assertion that the temple to the goddess of love, Aphrodite, consisted of 1,000 cult prostitutes, suggesting instead (since there are no other known instances of sacral prostitution in Greek religion) that in reality there were a large number of *statues* of such prostitutes. He concedes, however, that there may have been such prostitution—it just did not take place in a religious institution.[36]

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[34] *Dio Chrysostom, Vol. I*, LCL, trans. J. W. Cohoon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 381. The Isthmian games were dedicated to Poseidon.
[35] *Power Through Weakness*, 47.
[36] Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 128; cf. 55. See also Ralph P. Martin's discussion (*2 Corinthians* [Waco: Word, 1986], xxvii-xxix).

Whether the existence of 1,000 temple prostitutes represents an exaggeration or not, other evidence conspires to convince that Corinth was still in a class by itself with respect to sexual immorality. It is now well documented that "to corinthianize" (*korinthiazesthai*), coined by Aristophanes (c. 450-385 B.C.), meant to fornicate.[37] An extended story of indulged lust recounted by Philostratus takes place in the vicinity of Corinth, with reference to "the delights of Aphrodite," the goddess of love cherished by the Corinthians as their representative deity.[38]

It is in this category of sexuality that one might also place references to the external beauty coveted in Corinth. Pseudo-Lucian, for example, records his visit to the city of Rhodes, in which he met a certain "Charicles," whom he describes as "a young man from Corinth who is not only handsome but shows some evidence of skilful use of cosmetics, because, I imagine, he wishes to attract the women."[39]

Synthesis

Perhaps Aristides best sums up Corinthian culture when he declares in a speech delivered at the Isthmian Games that

> there is no place where one would rest as much on a mother's lap with more pleasure or enjoyment. Such is the relaxation, refuge, and safety for all who come to it. But so great is the abundance of beauty, desire, and love, which clings to it, that it chains all men with pleasure and all men are equally inflamed by it, which it possesses in itself "love, desire, friendly converse, and allurement so as to steal away the mind" even of those who are proud of themselves, and it has whatever

[37] For an investigation into the development of this, see Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 56. Winter adds that "the fourth-century-B.C. plays of Philetaerus and Poliochus carried the title 'The Whoremonger' (ὁ Κορίνθιαστῆς)" (*After Paul Left Corinth*, 87).

[38] *Philostratus, Vol. I*, LCL, trans. F. C. Conybeare (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 407. See also Paul Barnett (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 597-98) and Bruce Winter (*After Paul Left Corinth* 27, 82-109), both of whom argue for a distinctive problem of sexual immorality in Corinth.

[39] *Lucian, Vol. VIII*, LCL, trans. M. D. Macleod (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 163.

> else there is in addition to these, everything that is called the charms of the goddess, so that it is clearly the city of Aphrodite.

In short, writes Aristides, Corinth is "the pendant and necklace of all of Greece."[40]

Yet this must be balanced by the words of others lest we conjure up images of ancient Greeks sitting about in their porticos sipping wine and indulging only in what provided instant gratification. For despite the abundant hedonism of the city, it was a competitive, commercially active port. Laziness was no virtue. "For all its riches," writes Murphy-O'Connor (commenting on the writing of Alciphron), "Corinth had no welcome save for those who wanted to work."[41]

Nevertheless, the pursuit and praise of money, power, athletic ability, eloquence, and sexual satisfaction was the air Corinthians breathed. Nor ought one to limit Corinthian excess to these five categories. Nothing has been said, for example, of the lavish architecture of the city, to which Josephus draws attention on more than one occasion.[42] Nevertheless the five categories outlined here provide representative samples of the distinctiveness of Corinthian society in and around the time of Paul. "In Corinth, perhaps more than anywhere else," concludes Savage, "social ascent was the goal, boasting and self-display the means, personal power and glory the reward."[43]

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[40] *Orations*, 46:20-31; cited in Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 116.
[41] *St. Paul's Corinth*, 120.
[42] *Antiquities*, 15:414; *Jewish War*, 5:204.
[43] *Power Through Weakness*, 41.

The Church of Corinth

At this point we begin to move from culture to text, asking if we find in 1 and 2 Corinthians corroboration of our overview of these various manifestations of cultural excess. Does one find hints in the Corinthian letters themselves (here we include both canonical epistles) that Paul was picking up on these five cultural themes of excess? I maintain that in each of the five areas of excess mentioned above, one finds at least implicit confirmation in both letters to Corinth.

Financial Excess: Wealth

One smells social class distinctions—and the potential problems inherent therein—right from the start of the Corinthian correspondence. Paul reminds his readers that "not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1:26). At first this may appear to argue the opposite: that the Corinthian church was not rich but poverty-stricken. Yet this appears to suggest rather that there existed a definable "social stratification" in the church.[44] "Not many of you," writes Paul—not *none* of you—were wise, powerful, and of noble lineage. Indeed, other statements corroborate that the Corinthian church was, in fact, a fellowship of some means.

In 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, for example, Paul addresses the issue of Corinthians bringing their fellow Christians to court. He decries such action and asks, "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" (v. 7) Some Corinthians were so zealous to maintain their financial and social privilege that they were unwilling to be

[44] Theissen, *Social Setting*, 70-71.

wronged to their own monetary detriment. The issue of money comes up again in 1 Corinthians 9, in which Paul argues that though he himself has not pressed the point, he has every right as a minister of the gospel to demand financial payment—"those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (v. 14). The Corinthians were apparently reluctant to do so. At the end of the letter, too, Paul returns to the issue of money and instructs the Corinthians to store up an amount each week—the only instance in all Paul's extant letters in which he gives practical instruction as to *how* a group of Christians was to give.

Moving to 2 Corinthians, one finds in chapter 8 and 9 perhaps the most famous passage on financial generosity in the New Testament. We will address these two chapters more fully in the next chapter; for now we simply note the extensive instruction Paul feels compelled to give the Corinthians to contribute to the needs of the saints in Jerusalem, particularly in light of the lavish generosity of the much poorer Macedonians (8:1-5). It is also noteworthy that whereas in 1 Corinthians Paul finds these saints apparently reluctant to adequately support the apostle, in 2 Corinthians Paul has to defend himself for *not* taking their support (2 Cor. 11:7-8; 12:13-19). The Corinthians appear to have been reticent to give at times (1 Corinthians), yet offended if their giving be refused at other times (2 Corinthians).

These passages combine together to paint a picture of a Corinthian church quite capable of significant financial generosity: whether toward one another (1 Cor. 7), toward Paul and Barnabas (1 Cor. 9), or toward the Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 8-9). Corinth was rich, and so were many members of its church.

To this can be added the testimony of Theissen, who perceptively writes that

> some Corinthian Christians have considerable means at their disposal, for we learn that the Corinthians have evidently provided hospitality for several missionaries: Apollos, Peter (or missionaries who make their appeal in his name), the opponents of Paul who show up in 2 Corinthians, and the superlative apostles (2 Cor. 11:5). Now such generosity is imaginable even under modest circumstances if one presumes an uncommon willingness to make sacrifices. Yet those who can indulge in the luxury of reproaching other missionaries for *not* accepting hospitality, and can do so not once but repeatedly (1 Cor. 9:1ff.; 2 Cor. 10-13), must have a tidy sum to call their own.[45]

Religious Excess: Power

"The word of the cross," writes Paul, "is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power (δύναμις) of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). The supreme instrument of torture, says Paul, is the avenue to power, making Christ "the power (δύναμις) of God" (v. 24). Such statements suggest that another view of divine power had been influential among denizens of Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 Paul explicitly connects the absence of eloquence and human wisdom with the presence of God's power, and again in his discussion of spiritual gifts Paul speaks to the elusive nature of true spiritual power (13:2).

Followers of Christ do indeed have a treasure (θησαυρός)—on this point Paul's readers would eagerly nod their approval. Yet it is a treasure contained in a fragile jar of clay. Why? The reason is "to show that the surpassing power (δύναμις) belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor. 4:7). Hence even "in afflictions, hardships, calamities," and so on, there is manifested "the power (δύναμις) of God" (2 Cor. 6:4, 6). The theme of power is also heavy in 2 Corinthians 10-13, in which Paul argues that "the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power (δύναμις) to destroy strongholds" (10:4), since "the power (δύναμις) of Christ" is found where one least expects it: in "weaknesses,

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[45] Ibid., 96-97.

insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities" (2 Cor. 12:10). All this is rooted in Christ, who, despite being crucified, now "lives by the power (δύναμις) of God" (13:4).[46]

This textual evidence supports our foregoing historical evidence that religious power was an especially coveted element of personal spirituality in Corinth.[47]

Physical Excess: Athleticism

One also finds references to the athletic games in the Corinthian correspondence, most prominently in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

> Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Here Paul explicitly compares his own apostolic labors to the purposeful exercise of a Greco-Roman athlete, an image most poignant in such a city as Corinth, home of the Isthmian games.[48]

In 2 Corinthians, the reference in 4:9b to being "struck down" (καταβαλλόμενοι) may be a reference to Olympic wrestling,[49] and Paul's quote of his opponents in 10:10 as

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[46] P. J. Gräbe ("The All-Surpassing Power of God through the Holy Spirit in the Midst of Our Broken Earthly Existence: Perspectives on Paul's Use of δύναμις in 2 Corinthians," *Neot* 28/1 [1994]: 147-156) examines exegetically the three central pericopes in which Paul speaks of δύναμις in this epistle (4:7, 6:7, and 12:9).

[47] The verbal (δύναμαι), nominal (δύναμις), and adjectival (δυνατός) forms of the Greek word for *power*, along with a few other rarer forms (δυναμόω, δυνατέω), occur 49 times in 1 and 2 Corinthians, more than the combined 41 of Romans (19), Galatians (3), Ephesians (10), Philippians (2), Colossians (3), 1 Thessalonians (3), Titus (1), and Philemon (0). This is so despite having fewer chapters (29 chapters in 1-2 Corinthians, 45 in the other epistles listed).

[48] See Murphy-O'Connor, *Theology of 2 Corinthians*, 6.

[49] So C. Spicq, "L'Image sportive de 2 Corinthiens 4,7-9," *ETL* 13 (1937): 202-229; Murphy-O'Connor, *Theology of Second Corinthians*, 45.

accusing him of being weak in bodily presence (ἡ δὲ παρουσία τοῦ σώματος ἀσθενὴς), though not necessarily an athletic reference, coalesces with the kind of bodily vanity fueled by the games, as noted above, as it may refer to Paul's diminutive physical stature.

Verbal Excess: Speech

Both Corinthian letters are saturated with the question of how to identify truly divine speech. One sees it in 1 Corinthians 1:17, when Paul writes that "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and *not with words of eloquent wisdom*, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." A few sentences later one finds the issue of speech surfacing again as Paul recounts an earlier visit to Corinth.

> And I, when I came to you, brothers, *did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.* For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and *my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom*, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-5, emphasis added)

Contrary to Paul's own approach in which he consciously resisted rhetorical eloquence so that Christ might shine forth more clearly, the Corinthians were attracted by those who spoke eloquently and persuasively and, because it was self-promoting, arrogantly—"I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power" (1 Cor. 4:19). This kind of preoccupation with the winsomeness of human personality in speech may have been what led Paul to declare—in the midst of a discussion (1 Cor. 12-14) of spiritual gifts having to do largely with human speaking—

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol" (1 Cor. 13:1).

One discovers similar references to humanly wise speech versus authentically divine speech in 2 Corinthians, especially the final four chapters, in which Paul's opponents are most conspicuously in view. He goes so far as to cite the accusation of those undermining his apostolic authority in 10:10: "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." Paul freely admits that he is "unskilled in speaking" (11:6), yet he again reiterates, as he did in 1 Corinthians 1, that "it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking" (12:19).

Not only the style of Paul's speech but the content, too, was less than agreeable to the Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 10:12 the apostle writes, "Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding." The self-promoting motivation that fueled some Corinthian speaking and caused comparing among men was explicitly rejected by Paul.

Again, our aim in surveying these references to speech is not to exhaustively analyze their meaning but simply to confirm biblically what we have seen in extra-biblical material: Corinthian propensity toward excess infected the realm of speech just as it did other areas of life.

Sexual Excess: Sensuality

Excess in the realm of sexuality, too, can be detected in the Corinthian correspondence. It confronts us startlingly in 1 Corinthians 5 with Paul's instructions

regarding a man fornicating with his father's wife. The depth of perversion is evident in that Paul perceives no sadness over this among the Corinthians, but rather arrogance (v. 2). Yet this specific case is not the only place in which Paul addresses sexuality in Corinth. The "sexually immoral" top the list of "the unrighteous" in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, at the end of which Paul explicitly claims that "such were some of you" (v. 11). He returns at length to sexual purity in the second half of chapter 6 (vv. 12-20), and then commences immediately with a discussion of marriage (1 Cor. 7:1-16) which, though no longer directly addressing sexual immorality, does not entirely leave the issue behind (vv. 5, 9). Paul again warns against sexual immorality in 10:8.

This issue is not as pervasive in 2 Corinthians, though Paul may have it in mind as he instructs the Corinthians not to be "unequally yoked with unbelievers" in 6:14-7:1. The call to "cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit," while perhaps more inclusive than merely sexual defilement, certainly cannot refer to less than this.[50]

One other excess comes to light in the Corinthian letters which has not been addressed in the above discussion of social evidence—namely, excess in *eating*, which I include here since it is, as in the case of sexuality, an excess of physical pleasure. Discussing the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:21, Paul mentions disparagingly that "in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk." Even in the sacrament, Corinthian intemperance manifested itself. Moreover, Paul's quotation of Isaiah 22:13 in 1 Corinthians 15:32 ("Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die") may provide further insight into the Corinthian approach to food, particularly since he raises the issue of drunkenness in that context again later on (v. 34, despite the reference being a metaphor for the stupor of sin).

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[50] Barnett suggests that sexual sin is on Paul's mind in 2 Cor 12:20-13:4, too (606).

Synthesis

None of the passages addressed here from 1 and 2 Corinthians construct a conclusively exhaustive portrait of the Corinthian church. Yet taken together with the social picture painted by extra-biblical sources, a representative sample of which have been brought forth in the first half of this chapter, a compelling case presents itself that these five points of excess were indeed problematic in the church at Corinth.[51] These five elements, moreover, are not disparate, unrelated problems, but five inter-connected fruits of the single root of Corinthian excess. We have seen, then, that the Corinthian culture fed off excess in a variety of manifestations. And we have seen that the Corinthian correspondence is manifestly cognizant of these problems of excess. What we have not yet seen is how Paul addresses these problems. This will be the focus of the next chapter, as we delve more deeply into the text of 2 Corinthians itself to see that paradox is Paul's means of upending the Corinthian mindset.

Timothy Savage helpfully writes that Paul had discovered that not only were his converts in Corinth "drawing inspiration from the social outlook of the day but also that Paul responds by adopting a position which represents the exact antithesis of what they would have desired in a religious leader." Savage then proposes the strategy behind this position. "The reason for this fundamental disagreement between Paul and his converts would seem to boil down to a conflict between two opposing perspectives: the worldly outlook of the Corinthians and Paul's own Christ-centred viewpoint." Referring specifically to 2 Corinthians 4 and Paul's defense of his apostolic ministry, he goes on to comment that what he has said "is a critical observation, for it is precisely out of this conflict that Paul's teaching of power through weakness in 2 Corinthians seems to

[51] See Murphy-O'Connor, *Theology of 2 Corinthians*, 6-9.

emerge—that is to say, it is the radical disjunction between the secular prejudices of the Corinthians and his own conception of Christ which spawns his paradoxical description of the Christian ministry."[52]

Conclusion

The debt I owe Timothy Savage is manifest. In three distinct ways, however, I wish to go beyond his work, albeit standing gratefully on his shoulders.[53] First, I see paradox as a framework not only for 2 Corinthians 3-4 but the whole letter. Second, Savage explains his findings in 2 Corinthians 3-4 in terms of the Christian *ministry* (see the last word of the previously cited quote) and not, more generally, the Christian *life*. This second point is bound up with and the result of the first (in view in 2 Cor. 3-4 *is* Paul's apostolic ministry), and both will be addressed in the next chapter. Third, Savage investigates the Greco-Roman but not the Jewish background of Paul's use of paradox in 2 Corinthians. Yet seven strategically placed OT citations,[54] as well as a whole chapter dripping with OT allusion,[55] indicate that the identity of Corinth as a young Roman city

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[52] *Power Through Weakness*, 99.

[53] The German Pietist Philipp Jakob Spener understood his relationship with Luther in this way: "A giant remains great and a dwarf small, and there is no comparison to be made between them; but if the dwarf stands upon the shoulders of the giant, he sees yet further than the giant, since this great stature lifts him above himself. Therefore, it is no wonder that often a dwarf, who is far enough from being a great teacher like Luther, finds something in the Scripture which Luther had not found, after having the advantage of all of Luther's learning, without which he could not have found it" (Quoted in Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 95).

[54] Ps 116:10 in 4:13; Isa 49:8 in 6:2; Lev 26:12 in 6:16; Isa 52:11 in 6:17-18; Exod 16:18 in 8:15; Ps 112:9 in 9:9; and Jer 9:24 in 10:17.

[55] 2 Cor 3, alluding to Exod 32-34, Jer 31:31-34, and Ezek 36:26-27. On top of the more explicit references and allusions are structures of thought which are borne out of an OT context; Beale, for example, ("Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5-7") fleshes out the connection between 2 Cor 5:17-7:1 and the prophets, particularly Isa 40-66 (on the OT background to this portion of 2 Corinthians see also David A. DeSilva, "Recasting the Moment of Decision: 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 in Its Literary Context," *AUSS* 31 [1993]: 11-13).

did not preclude the presence of Jewish sensibilities and OT awareness among its church members. After all, Paul described in 1 Corinthians 1 his gospel of a crucified savior as not only "folly to Gentiles" but also "a stumbling block to Jews" (1:23). Savage and others have addressed the former—which provides, admittedly, the preponderant source of evidence. Yet what about the latter? Chapter five will include an examination of not only the Old Testament and the rest of the New Testament, but also the intertestamental literature, all with an eye toward the role paradox plays in these writings.

The purpose of this chapter has been to set the stage whereby we might most fruitfully grasp Paul's use of paradox in 2 Corinthians, understanding the social context into which Paul was speaking and allowing that not to control but to inform our understanding of the epistle. Specifically, we have seen that Corinth was plagued with godlessness in multiple areas of life—yet these are connected in that each is a godlessness of excess.[56] The principle underlying Corinthian culture, to put it differently, is that more is more. This thesis argues that the principle underlying and commended in Paul's second canonical letter to the church limping along in this culture is that less is more. In this way the apostle seeks not to address each manifestation of the Corinthian problem in turn (only to have a different manifestation pop up later?); rather he goes straight to the fundamental assumption driving these problems. Paul does not chop off the heads of the weeds, only to have them grow back the next week; he goes to the root, solving the problem by exposing and killing the source of the weeds' growth. And the

[56] Though he profitably compares the Greco-Roman patronage system with Pauline ministry in Corinth, Sze-kar Wan unhelpfully narrows the locus of the Corinthian problem to that of wealth (*Power in Weakness*, 16-29). I suggest that wealth was simply one area in which the deeper problem of excess, and the contrast this was to Paul's understanding of authentic Christianity, manifested itself.

solution he suggests, grounded in the life and death of Christ himself, is that—paradoxically—less is more.

To a textual examination of this proposal we now turn.

CHAPTER 3

THE EPISTLE OF PARADOX: EXEGESIS OF 2 CORINTHIANS

The stage is now set for the chapter which forms the backbone of this thesis. All that has come before has paved the way for it; all that follows will test it, from historical (ch. 4) and biblical (ch. 5) vantage points.

Here, then, we come to the heart and engine of this study, wading exegetically through the letter as a whole. Keeping in mind that this is not attempted commentary and therefore not meant to exhaustively address every passage in 2 Corinthians or even every question raised by those texts which are addressed, we will move through the epistle by looking at those passages (roughly one-third of the letter) in which paradox plays either an implicit or an explicit role. Our goal is to provide a concise yet thorough analysis of the text with respect to Paul's theology of paradox.

Comfort Through Affliction

> *For just as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us, so also through Christ our comfort abounds. If we are afflicted, it is on behalf of your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is on behalf of your comfort, which is working in the same sufferings which we also experience. And our hope on your behalf is firm, knowing that as you are sharers in our sufferings, so also you are sharers of comfort.* (1:5-7)[57]

In words appropriate to the start of an epistle which returns repeatedly to the theme of unanticipated blessings through (not despite) suffering, Paul connects the suffering and concomitant comfort of both the Corinthians and his own ministry (with

[57] All translations of the text of 2 Corinthians in this chapter are my own. I have translated from Nestle-Aland, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

Timothy). Indeed, *suffering* (θλῖψις) and *comfort* (παράκλησις) are the two terminologically dominant themes throughout chapter one.[58]

The noteworthy point for our purposes is that Paul does not simply address suffering and comfort and observe that both presently occur (whether in his own ministry or in the experience of the Corinthians). Rather, the two are inextricably linked. Christian comfort, says Paul, flows smoothest along the avenue of suffering. Though one would expect misery to abound where sufferings abound and comfort to abound where stability abounds, Paul claims just the opposite. "Just as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us," says Paul—Barrett argues for "overflow" as an appropriate synonym[59]—"so also through Christ our comfort abounds" (v. 5). Paul employs the familiar καθὼς . . . , οὕτως . . . ("Just as . . . so also . . .") to bring out the distinct yet indivisible pairing of suffering and comfort. Schlatter explains the indispensible link between the suffering and comfort of both Christ and Paul:

> In allem, was Paulus hatte, sah er die Wirkung des Christus. Sein Wort ist das des Christus, er redet in ihm, II 13, 3;[60] seine Kraft ist die des Christus; er erweist durch Paulus, daß er lebt, II 13, 4; sein Geist ist der des Christus, Röm. 8, 9. So sind auch seine Leiden die des Christus, die der Gekreuzigte auf sich nahm. Aber damit ist zugleich gegeben, daß die Tröstung mit dem Leiden verbunden ist. Denn der leidende Christus ist auch der Überwinder der Welt und des Tods. Darum hat die sich immer mehrende Häufung seines Leidens die sich immer mehrende Fülle des Trostes bei sich.[61]

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[58] Various forms of παράκλησις (comfort, exhortation, consolation) occur 10 times in 2 Cor 1:3-7; forms of θλῖψις (affliction, tribulation) and πάθημα (to suffer) occur a total of 8 times in vv. 3-11. See Scott Hafemann, "The Comfort and Power of the Gospel: The Argument of 2 Corinthians 1-3," *RevExp* 86 (1989): 327. Otfried Hofius argues that we must read Paul's use of παράκλησις in this passage in light of the OT, pointing mainly to Isaiah and the Psalms (such as Isa 40:1; Ps 23:4) ("'Der Gott allen Trostes,' *Paraklesis* und *parakalein* in 2 Kor 1,3-7," *Theologische Beiträge* 14 [1983]: 217-227).

[59] *Second Corinthians*, 61.

[60] This is Schlatter's way of referring to 2 Corinthians (II) 13:3.

[61] *Paulus, der Bote Jesus: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1934), 465. "Paul discerned a divinely ordered correspondence," writes Harris, "between the intensity of his suffering and the adequacy of God's comfort" (*Second Corinthians*, 145).

Paul then explains that this comfort is not intended solely for personal relief but is meant to spill out in human relationship, suggesting in verse six that whatever happens to him, the goal is the Corinthians spiritual welfare. He then concludes by returning to the truth first mentioned in verse five, explaining that he has solid[62] hopes for the Corinthians as a result of (εἰδότες ὅτι) their fellow participation in his sufferings-unto-comfort. Here in verse seven, however, Paul applies this paradoxical principle not to his own ministry (as in v. 5) but to the experience of the Corinthians. The Corinthians' sufferings consolidate their association with both Paul (a point they reluctantly conceded) and Christ (a point they readily conceded).

It is also important to note that right from the start both suffering and comfort are rooted in Christ: Christ is both the model and the source of both. This thought will surface again in 5:12-21, chapters 8-9, and at the closing of the epistle, where the example of Christ is again couched in terms of paradox: "he was crucified in weakness, yet lives by the power of God" (13:4). Christ himself provides the pattern for this Pauline paradox. "Paul found the pattern of the cross and resurrection—death and life, weakness and power—reflected in his own ministry and used it as the key to his own experience."[63]

In this opening section to the epistle, then, Paul both demonstrates immediately that less (suffering) is more (comfort), and sets the tone for a reading in which paradox is the hermeneutical key to unlocking the letter. Barrett rightly comments on verse four: "Not only the immediately following verses but the whole epistle brings out the fact that

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[62] βέβαιος; see Rom 4:16; Heb 2:2; 3:14; 6:19; 9:17; 2 Pet 1:10, 19.
[63] Richard Bauckham, "Weakness—Paul's and Ours," *Them* 7/3 (1982): 5.

Christian existence, manifested most plainly in the life of an apostle, consists in this paradoxical combination of affliction and comfort."[64]

Confidence Through Despair

> *We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning our affliction which occurred in Asia, because according to an excess beyond power we were burdened, so that we despaired even of life; but we ourselves had in ourselves this sentence of death, in order that we might not have confidence in ourselves but in the God who raises the dead.* (1:8-9)

Continuing on his autobiographical tour of his own sufferings along with Timothy, Paul goes so far as to say that they felt so burdened that they did not even expect to live through the trial[65]—thus they had in themselves a sentence of death (τὸ ἀπόκριμα[66] τοῦ θανάτου). Indeed, it was an "excess" (ὑπερβολή[67]) of difficulty beyond any innate human ability to cope. Yet the reason Paul brings this up is neither to solely

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[64] Barrett, *Second Corinthians,* 61. It is surprising, however, that Barrett (seconded by Hafemann, "Comfort and Power of the Gospel," 327) asserts that "It is clear that comfort means not that Paul is consoled *in* his afflictions but that he is delivered *out* of them" (60). For this is not what the Apostle states: God "comforts us *in* (ἐπὶ) all our affliction in order that we are able to comfort those *in* (ἐν) any affliction" (1:4, emphasis added). While hindsight may certainly help make sense of suffering, Paul does not leave all comfort merely to arise in the wake of suffering, but in the suffering itself (See, e.g., Harris, *Second Corinthians,* 150). Also, Sze-kar Wan insightfully points out that Paul uses in 1:3-11 a blessing—neither a prayer of commendation nor the outright virulence of Galatians 1:6ff.—as a means of addressing his opponents indirectly. "In using a blessing as opening," he writes, "Paul eschews launching a direct assault at the intransigence of his readers or trying to match wits with his opponents" (*Power in Weakness*, 31-32).

[65] Our purpose is not to conjecture what precisely this trial may have been; as with 12:7-10, Paul's point has to do not with the *content* but the *intent* of the trial. The purpose, not the identity, of the difficulty is what Paul wishes to communicate. See Barrett, *Second Corinthians,* 63-64; Hafemann, "Comfort and Power of the Gospel," 329; Harris, *Second Corinthians,* 153 (and see his discussion of Paul's θλῖψις, pp. 174-182). Barnett believes the trial of 1:8 to have been "the city-wide commotion in Ephesus" referred to in Acts 19 (*Second Corinthians,* 83-85). A. E. Harvey connects this passage with 2 Cor 4-5 and argues that it was this experience in Asia which gave Paul a strangely positive view of suffering (*Renewal Through Suffering* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996]).

[66] A *hapax legomena*. The term refers to an "official report" or "decision" (*BDAG*, 113).

[67] This is a particularly significant word in 2 Corinthians. We have already drawn attention to the fact that the Corinthians were obsessed with excess; in light of this observation we are intrigued to discover more occurrences of this noun and its cognate in 2 Corinthians than any other NT book (8 of the 13 NT occurrences: 2 Cor 1:8; 3:10; 4:7, 17 [2x]; 9:14; 11:23; 12:7). See also Barrett, *Second Corinthians,* 64.

provide information nor to curry empathy but to explain the purpose (ἵνα . . .) of it. And that express purpose is confidence in God.

This is paradoxical indeed. The Asian affliction, writes Paul, resulted in despair,[68] which in turn resulted in confidence as Paul and company were forced to look outside themselves to God.[69] From our analysis of Corinth, this appears to have been an utterly foreign mindset and view of difficulty to the Corinthians. Paul reasoned this way:

Affliction → Despair → Confidence

The implicit alternative route to confidence—the mindset of the Corinthians?—would be:

Prosperity → Self-Reliance → Confidence

Sze-kar Wan captures beautifully the dilemma in which Paul finds himself as he writes his beloved Corinthians and addresses this divergence of outlook.

> Responding to the boasting of his opponents, who by their demonstration of oratory skills and miraculous powers seduce the Corinthians away from himself, Paul could meet this challenge in one of two ways. Either he tries to match the false apostles' mighty claims, in which case even if he were to win the argument he in effect would have to concede that authentic ministry goes hand in hand with a [sic] ostentatious display of strength and might. He would thus cede the terms of the debate to his opponents. Or, Paul could try to change the terms of the debate altogether by arguing for a different basis for boasting, namely, to demonstrate one's power through weakness. This is precisely what Paul has done in the opening blessing.[70]

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[68] Ἐξαπορέομαι occurs twice in the NT, both in 2 Corinthians (4:8).

[69] This appears to be the import of ἀλλά ("But") starting off v. 9, which is lost in the ESV and NIV rendering ("Indeed"). Paul's point is "But . . . this happened *in order that* . . ." The point, then, is the larger purpose of the trial. Calvin comments, "the fleshly confidence with which we are puffed up, is so obstinate, that it cannot be overthrown in any other way than by our falling into utter despair" (*Second Corinthians*, 119).

[70] *Power in Weakness*, 35-36.

For Paul, the less of despair led to the more of confidence. Though less on the outside, the affliction of Paul was actually with a greater end in view: greater dependence upon God. "Christian discipline," writes Barrett, "means, for an apostle and for the church as a whole, a progressive weakening of man's instinctive self-confidence, and of the self-despair to which this leads, and the growth of radical confidence in God."[71] The implication is that Paul, in the long run, is better off having suffered than if God had not sent this suffering. This counterintuitive sentiment would, it seems, have caught the Corinthians quite off-guard. And again Paul roots this paradox in the experience of Christ, though implicitly, when he refers to "the God who raises the dead."

Excursus: Three Key Elements Introduced

> *For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in sincerity and godly motivation, and not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we lived in the world, and abundantly toward you.* (1:12)

There is no explicit paradox in this verse. Yet due to three significant elements it ought not to be passed over in our journey through the epistle.

First, it is at this point that Paul introduces the theme of boasting (here, the noun form καύχησις) for the first time in the epistle.[72] One of the central ways in which Paul upends Corinthian sensibilities is by (not merely admitting but) boasting in those things the Corinthians apparently despised, and (not merely ignoring but) rejecting those things in which the Corinthians boasted. Boasting, then, is at the heart of the Pauline paradox pervasive throughout 2 Corinthians.

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[71] *Second Corinthians,* 66. Chrysostom connects v. 8 with 12:9, noting the paradoxical strength-in-weakness element common to both passages (Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Vol. XII: Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 279).

[72] See Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 70; Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 94. See also footnote 216.

Second, Paul here draws attention to another key element with respect to paradox: authentic Christianity is a matter of internal (often invisible) realities, not external (visible) realities. Paul says that he acted in "sincerity" (ἁπλότης[73]) and "godly motivation" (εἰλικρινείᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ).[74] Hence he appeals not to his (externally visible) actions, but his (only internally known) συνείδησις (conscience). Paul defends his *motivation*. He also addressed the question of motivation as an internal reality in 1 Corinthians 4:5: "do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, *who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the hea*rt" (ESV, emphasis added; NIV: "will expose the motives of men's hearts"; τὰς βουλὰς τῶν καρδιῶν). The theme of internal versus external elements of faith recurs in 2 Corinthians 3:1-3; 4:3, 7, 16-18; 10:4, 18; 11:13-15; and 13:7.

Third, Paul exposes here a key error of the Corinthian church, and one that our analysis of Corinthian culture has prepared us for: he has acted "not in fleshly (ESV: 'earthly') wisdom, but in the grace of God."[75] The Corinthians prided themselves in their wisdom, prompting Paul to have to remind them that at one time few of them were wise even according to worldly standards (1 Cor. 1:26; note again the use of σάρξ). Paul explicitly denies such so-called "wisdom" in his own ministry. Rather he operated "in the grace of God." God's unmerited help was the fuel for his ministry, not human cleverness. The same could hardly be said of the Corinthian approach.

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[73] Some mss read ἁγιότης. See Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 183 for discussion. The net result in meaning is not significantly different either way.

[74] For affirmation that εἰλικρίνεια connotes Paul's *motives*, see BDAG, 282; Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 95. The word is used just two other places in the NT, both of which are found in Paul's Corinthian correspondence (1 Cor 5:8; 2 Cor 2:17).

[75] "In general," writes Harris, "the adjective σαρκικός denotes what belongs exclusively to the natural order ('human,' 'worldly'). But because σάρξ is the seat of sin (Rom. 7:17-18, 23, 25), in Paul's usage σαρκικός sometimes gains the pejorative sense of 'guided by sinful passions' (1 Cor. 3:3 twice). Here it imparts to σοφία the negative connotation of 'cunning' or 'shrewdness'" (*Second Corinthians*, 186).

These three observations each feed into Paul's use of paradox in 2 Corinthians in various ways: boasting, by illumining (contrary to Corinthian confidence) the action by which Paul exposes the folly of worldly standards of attainment; the internal, by illumining (contrary to outer appearance) the true locus of measuring spiritual significance; and God's grace, by illumining (contrary to fleshly wisdom) the true source of ministerial power.

Love Through Anguish

> *For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you through many tears, not in order that you might be grieved but in order that you might know the love which I have abundantly for you.* (2:4)

Though paradox is not as perspicuous here as elsewhere, it is noteworthy that Paul's deep anguish and tears on behalf of the Corinthians is not meant to cause pain—evidently a feasible interpretation for many of the Corinthians as to the motive of the letter—but "in order that you might know the love I have abundantly for you." In the lost letter written between our 1 and 2 Corinthians (or, perhaps, referring to 2 Corinthians 10-13), Paul had written a painful letter, one wrought with many tears. Some, it appears, did not look beyond this to see Paul's ultimate motive in writing (namely, to let the Corinthians know of his *love* for them; "love" is placed emphatically at the beginning of the clause), and saw only the pain which Paul had caused.

Pertinent for our purposes is that Paul did not see a fluffy, flattering letter as the most loving action toward the Corinthians. He realized his letter caused pain; so be it. It was necessary. Here again, then, things are not as they might appear at first glance. Rather, paradoxically, the tears were tears of love. The pain was the pain of an anguished

father.[76] C. K. Barrett puts it well: "persistent love and confidence can be salutarily (as Paul says in vii. 9) painful."[77]

Sufficiency Through Insufficiency

> *Are we beginning again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some do, letters of commendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter, having been written in our hearts, being known and read by all men, it being manifested that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, having been written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not in tablets of stone but in tablets of fleshly hearts. Such is the confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that of ourselves we are sufficient to account anything as from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit makes alive.* (3:1-6)

In chapter three Paul speaks against the backdrop of three significant Old Testament passages: Ezekiel 36:26-27, which fuels Paul's reference to "tablets of stone" and "tablets of fleshly hearts" (v. 3) and "the letter" versus "the Spirit" (v. 6); Jeremiah 31:31-34, which provides the background to the reference to a "new covenant" as well as (with Ezekiel) the internalization of the law ("I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts," Jer. 31:33); and Exodus 32-34, which sets up the discussion contrasting the ministry of Moses and the veiling of his face with the ministry of Paul.[78]

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[76] Brian K. Peterson develops this image of Paul as a father (along with that of the soldier) in 2 Cor 10-13 in "Conquest, Control, and the Cross: Paul's Self-Portrayal in 2 Corinthians 10-13," *Int* 52/3 (1998): 262-67. On Paul as father to the Corinthians see also 1 Cor 4:14-15.

[77] Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 88. After all, "problem children often evoke love" (89). Connecting this passage to ch. 7, Harris writes, "ἀγάπη and the infliction of λύπη are not incompatible" (*Second Corinthians*, 221). Barnett (*Second Corinthians*, 120) draws attention to the way in which grief (λύπη) and joy (χαρά; see v. 3) are often paired throughout 2 Corinthians, not only in 2:3 but also in 6:10 and 7:9. His explanation that the joy is eschatological and the grief present misses the fact that Paul more frequently joins the two together here and now as inexplicably present, though Barnett is right insofar as the joy which we experience now will indeed be most fully manifested in the eschaton (and grief likewise eliminated).

[78] For a discussion of the OT background to 2 Cor 3:3, along with relevant intertestamental texts which exult in the tablets of the law, see Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit*, 209-225, as well as his "Paul's Use of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians," *Int* 52/3 (1998): 246-257. For an investigation into the OT background to 1 Cor 1-3, which are the chapters of 1 Corinthians most similar to 2 Corinthians, see H. H. Drake Williams, *The Wisdom of the Wise: The Presence and Function of Scripture Within 1 Cor. 1:18-*

Significant as these allusions are, an extensive discussion of them does not contribute to this thesis, which seeks only to treat instances of paradox in 2 Corinthians.

The paradox of this passage is that, unlike the world, Paul does not build himself up as a means of defending the legitimacy of his ministerial fatherhood of the Corinthians. He is not a self-promoter. Rather, the Corinthians themselves are Paul's credentials. The absence of self-promotion is possible because of the presence of living letters. The Spirit is greater than the tablets.[79] Counterintuitively, the invisible trumps the visible. As a result, Paul says that his confidence before God finds its origin in God and God alone (v. 5).[80]

The thrust of this passage pertinent to our purposes, then, is not the biblical-theological ramifications of Paul's argument for understanding continuity and discontinuity in his endlessly discussed view of the Mosaic law. Rather we simply observe the startling combination of both insufficiency and sufficiency (ἱκανότης, three

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3:23 (Leiden: Brill, 2001). The recent contribution of Francis Watson is also noteworthy, who argues that one must not read Paul as possessing his own independent, free-floating theology which is then validated with the odd reference to Torah, but rather that this Pauline theology is itself generated by a certain hermeneutic employed by the apostle—in Watson's words, the hermeneutic of faith—made distinct by its divergence from the concurrent readings of his Jewish contemporaries (*Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* [London: T & T Clark, 2004]). He applies this to 2 Corinthians 3 on pp. 281-305.

[79] Linda L. Belleville attempts to redress the paucity of adequate investigations into the Holy Spirit in Paul's theology by looking at the Spirit in 2 Corinthians in her "Paul's Polemic and Theology of the Spirit in Second Corinthians," *CBQ* 58 (1996): 281-304. On these verses from ch. 3 in particular, see 290-91.

[80] Savage (*Power Through Weakness*, 1) argues that 2 Cor 3 is about glory through shame, but this is inaccurate. This chapter is one of the few sustained places in the epistle where Paul does not employ paradox (excepting vv. 4-6), but rather an *argumentum a fortiori*, an argument from lesser to greater—if Moses' ministry was great, which was based on an external reality (tablets of stone/letter), how much greater is the new covenant ministry, which is based on an internal reality (tablets of human hearts/Spirit). I agree therefore with the conclusion of William R. Baker, who argues that the main thrust of 2 Cor 3-4 is "to establish his ministry and Moses' as being founded on the same base, the revelation of God's glory, but his as superior, the only one offering the intimate, personal knowledge of God that all people, Jew and Greek, desire to find" ("Did the Glory of Moses' Face Fade? A Reexamination of *καταργέω* in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18," *BBR* 10/1 [2000]: 15).

times in vv. 5-6).[81] Indeed, such insufficiency is the occasion, through Christ, for confidence (πεποίθησις, v. 4[82]). Participants in the new covenant have no sufficiency in themselves, but because of this—and only when it is recognized—they participate in the very Spirit of God and the sufficiency that comes therewith. To recognize one's insufficiency is to acquire true sufficiency.

From the divine perspective, then, one can say that for Paul, to find oneself in a state of insufficiency is more desirable than that of sufficiency, since only in this admission of human ineptitude is the channel leading from God's power to human lives swept clean and opened for activity.[83] The Corinthians would probably have agreed enthusiastically with Paul's expression in verse four of confidence before God. But Paul turns the table on his readers when he continues on in verse five to explain that this confidence is rooted not in self-generated but in divinely-bestowed worth.[84] It is an imported, not an intrinsic, confidence. Hence we note the importance of the little phrase "through Christ" (τοῦ Χριστοῦ) in verse four.[85] The paradox is persistently grounded in Christ.

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[81] Harris (*Second Corinthians*, 269), Barrett (*Second Corinthians*, 111) and Martin (*Second Corinthians*, 53) all suspect that Paul's use of ἱκανότης here may allude to God himself, who is called in the LXX "the Sufficient One" (ὁ ἱκανός : Ruth 1:20-21; Job 21:15; 31:2; 40:2; Ezek 1:24).

[82] See also 2 Cor 1:15; 8:22; 10:2; also in Eph 3:12 and Phil 3:4.

[83] Harris hints at this in his comments on ἡ ἱκανότης ἡμῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ and connects it to the OT prophets: "Perhaps Paul is introducing here the prophetic motif of 'sufficiency in spite of insufficiency'" (*Second Corinthians*, 269). He does not develop the point.

[84] Martin writes, "We cannot avoid concluding that this remark is polemically slanted and addressed to Paul's adversaries who made it their boast that they were the 'well-endowed ones,' with pneumatic gifts and imposing credentials to support their claim" (*2 Corinthians*, 53). Paul's opponents, agrees Barnett, "claim that power for ministry arises from within them" (*Second Corinthians*, 231). Harris leaves the assertion that Paul is responding to Corinthian self-promotion only as a possibility (*Second Corinthians*, 331 n77). We must also leave open as possible inferences that Paul is defending himself either against Corinthian disgust that Paul refused to commend himself, or (precisely the reverse) Corinthian contempt that Paul sought to commend himself. Thrall discusses the various possibilities (I:312-13).

[85] See Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 110.

This is an important point, for it sets Paul off quite sharply from Stoic and Cynic thought current at the time. Stoicism, for example, was no stranger to the kinds of lists of hardships Paul presents in 6:3-11 and 11:22-30. What makes Paul so different from such philosophy, however, is that the locus of strength for overcoming such difficulties lies in divine sufficiency, not self-sufficiency. Stoics looked inward for the resources to calmly ignore and endure the calamities of life.[86] Paul looked outside himself. Hence from this perspective, Paul and the Stoics are operating on polar opposite frameworks when it comes to undergoing suffering. Our sufficiency, says the apostle, is from God.

Ministry Through Self-Renunciation

> *For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants on account of Jesus.* (4:5)

Paul concludes from his discussion of his ministry vis-à-vis that of Moses that, "For this reason, having this ministry just as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart" (v. 1). He then explains why people are not turning in droves to such a glorious manifestation of mercy, if his claim is true that there is such resplendent glory in his ministry (3:11, 18). His answer is the blindness (lit. veiling, from καλύπτω, in continuity with chapter three) caused by this world's god, who prevents unbelievers "from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (v. 4). Paul continues, "For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord." Paul had earlier stated emphatically that despite such a painful letter previously, he himself did not seek

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[86] See Wan, *Power in Weakness*, 120-21. For a delineation of Stoicism, specifically as it relates to the sub-structures of Pauline thought, see Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 45-79. See also the helpful references of Rudolf Bultmann, *The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 228-230.

to "lord it over" the Corinthians' faith (κυριεύομεν ὑμῶν τῆς πίστεως, 1:23). Here we see the alternative: proclaiming Jesus as Lord (κύριος).

As we saw in chapter two of this thesis, self-proclamation was the warp and woof of Isthmian culture in the decades in and around the time of Paul. Read against this background, Paul's "deliberate antitriumphalism" is granted its full flavor.[87] He and his partners in ministry were determined not only (positively) to proclaim Jesus Christ but also (negatively) *not* to proclaim themselves. The only putting forth of themselves would be as servants. Herein surfaces paradox once again: instead of elevating self and decreasing others, Paul is decreasing self (making himself a servant) and elevating another (Jesus Christ as Lord). Martin softens this paradox unnecessarily when he writes that "a suffering apostolate is freely acknowledged, and Paul finds no reason to hide it, even if his detractors scorned his frailty and ragged demeanor."[88] It is not simply that Paul sees no reason to hide his sufferings; he eagerly joins the Corinthians in drawing attention to them. Yet he draws the precise opposite conclusion: the Corinthians, who had, in Calvin's words, "contrived to themselves a Christianity without a cross," regarded his sufferings as invalidating.[89] Paul saw them as validating. "His apostolic authority," Barrett rightly notes of this verse, "could be manifested only by the renunciation of all the commonly recognized marks of authority."[90]

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[87] The phrase is Barnett's (*Second Corinthians*, 221).
[88] Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 80.
[89] *Second Corinthians*, 206. Calvin later writes that that Paul "beats down that insolence, in which [the Corinthians] in no ordinary degree erred, inasmuch as under the influence of ambition, they held a man in higher estimation, the farther he was from the cross of Christ" (211).
[90] *Second Corinthians*, 133.

Life Through Death

> *And we have this treasure in jars of clay, in order that the surpassing greatness of power might be of God and not from us; in everything being afflicted but not crushed, being perplexed but not despairing, being persecuted but not forsaken, being struck down but not destroyed, always carrying about the death of Jesus in the body, in order that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always being given over to death on account of Jesus, in order that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.* (4:7-12)

In 2 Corinthians 4:6 Paul describes the inner treasure of regeneration, in which one comes to be illumined by "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Having described this inner reality in 3:1-4:6, he now moves to the outer casing in which such reality exists: frail human bodies, particularly those whose frailty is exacerbated by suffering. "And we have this treasure (described in preceding verses) in jars of clay (ὀστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν), in order that the surpassing greatness of power might be of God and not from us" (v. 7).[91] Paul is exposing the strong disjunction between the internal glory, written on tablets of human hearts, wrought not by the letter but by the Spirit, in which the glory of God shines in our hearts, on the one hand, and the *vehicle* of such glory on the other. The Prince of Wales is paraded down the street in an old, well-worn Yugo. The outer means is not consonant with the inner matter—indeed, they are

[91] Strabo informs us of the low value of Corinthian jars in his description of the refounding of Corinth: "And when these were removing the ruins and at the same time digging open the graves, they found numbers of terra-cotta reliefs, and also many bronze vessels. . . . Now at the outset the earthenware was very highly prized, like the bronzes of Corinthian workmanship, but later they ceased to care much for them, since the supply of earthen (ὀστράκων) vessels failed and most of them were not even well executed" (*The Geography of Strabo, Vol. IV*, 203). Furnish discusses Corinthian pottery from an archaeological perspective ("Corinth in Paul's Time: What Can Archaeology Tell Us?" *BAR* 15/3 [1988]: 18).

opposites. Murray Harris thus appropriately comments, "the paradox Paul is expressing is that although the container is relatively worthless, the contents are priceless."[92]

Why? It was for the demonstration of divine (not human) power—a theme similar to the human insufficiency/divine sufficiency theme of chapter three, as well as 1:9, in which the sentence of death Paul felt was in order to manifest God as the one to be relied upon. The human impulse to assert oneself in one's own strength, which we have seen to be uniquely strong in Corinthian culture, is again flipped upside-down. As indicated by the ἵνα of verse 7, then, the positive benefit of the display of God's power is achieved by human bodily frailty.[93]

That human corporeality is the referent of "jars of clay" is evidenced by what follows in verses 10-12. In a sentence in which he repeatedly lifts up the opposites of life and death, Paul writes that we appropriate Jesus' physical death in our own "mortal flesh" for the purpose of (ἵνα) the manifestation of Jesus' life. This is critical: there is a direct causal connection between the human experience of "death"[94] and the manifestation of divine life. Paul's point, in other words, is not merely that both can coexist, but that one indeed leads to the other; they are mutually reinforcing. "[I]t was not a case of divine power . . . transcending or replacing human weakness, but of divine

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[92] *Second Corinthians*, 340. Barnett writes: "Those things that the Corinthians and their new teachers disdain in him, that is, his missionary sufferings, he now declares to be fundamental to ministry that faithfully represents the Crucified One" (229). See also Hodge, *Exposition*, 92.

[93] This is not to propound the Gnostic idea that the body is inherently deficient or to draw a deep dichotomy, as Greek thought was wont to do, between the soul and the body as the soul's receptacle. It is simply to note that human beings, "although insignificant and weak in themselves, become God's powerful instruments in communicating the treasure of the gospel" (Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 340).

[94] I place the word in quotes because the present (περιφέροντες) combined with πάντοτε indicates that it is not physical death in view in verse 10 but a sort of repeated suffering which is so severe it can be likened to death; this is how Paul speaks in 1 Cor 15:31 ("I die every day!"). This interpretation is corroborated explicitly in 2 Cor 4:11.

power being experienced in the midst of human weakness."[95] To put it most strongly, it is impossible to experience the life of Jesus without experiencing the death of Jesus. Paul seems to be saying that just as Jesus died to impart life, so there is a similar pattern in apostolic ministry: Paul too "dies" to impart (Jesus') life (cf. Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:10). J. Louis Martyn comments on these verses, "The glad tidings of Jesus' redemptive death is preached by the one who inevitably participates in that death, and whose apostolic sufferings are paradoxically the locus of God's gift of life, being the present form of Jesus' own death-life pattern."[96] Jesus experienced a death-resulting-in-life; so too does the apostle. And this he commends to the Corinthians.

Hence verse 12, which moves from Paul and Jesus to Paul and the Corinthians: "So death is at work in us, but life in you." There was a direct proportion between Paul's sufferings and the Corinthians' spiritual profit.[97] Indeed, as Barnett points out, to speak of death as at work in any way is itself an implicit paradox, for death is that which prevents productivity.[98] "For Paul," writes Richard Bauckham, "the Christian minister's weakness is not the point where he is failing, but the point where the deepest integration of his life and his message is possible."[99]

A Christian is a paradox: a treasure is active inside, even as the outer reality screams the contrary; and the latter is the means to the former. Daily death is not that

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[95] Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 345.
[96] *Galatians: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 569.
[97] Paul "apparently saw not only a causal but also a proportional relation between his 'death' and the 'life' of the Corinthian believers. The deeper his experience of the trials and sufferings of the apostolic life, the richer their experience of the joys and privileges of Christian experience (cf. Col. 1:24; 2 Tim. 2:10)" (Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 350).
[98] *Second Corinthians*, 238. James M. Scott concurs on the "paradoxical" nature of v. 12 (*2 Corinthians* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998] 105).
[99] "Weakness," 6. Cf. Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 390.

which must be avoided to gain life. It is inextricably tied up with—and even, in a strange way, the pathway to—life.[100] Less, says Paul, is more.

Renewal Through Corrosion

> *Therefore we do not lose heart, but if our outer man is wasting away, yet our inner man*[101] *is being renewed day by day. For the momentary slightness of our affliction is working out for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,*[102] *as we are paying attention not to the things that are seen but the things that are not seen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are not seen are eternal.* (4:16-18)

Right in line with 4:7-12 are Paul's comments which close out chapter four, for still in view is the startling relationship between physical suffering and spiritual blessings. The two categories of which Paul speaks are clarified in the following chart.

LESS	MORE
Outer Man (ὁ ἔξω ἄνθρωπος, v. 16)	Inner Man (ὁ ἔσω [ἄνθρωπος], v. 16)
Wasting Away (διαφθείρεται, 16)	Being Renewed (ἀνακαινοῦται, 16)
Momentary (παραυτίκα, 17)	Eternal (αἰώνιον, 17)
Slightness (ἐλαφρὸν, 17)	Weight (βάρος, 17)
Affliction (θλίψεως, 17)	Glory (δόξης, 17)
Things Visible (τὰ βλεπόμενα, 18)	Things Invisible (τὰ μὴ βλεπόμενα, 18)
Temporary (πρόσκαιρα, 18)	Eternal (αἰώνια, 18)

It is not enough, then, to describe Paul's point as being that just because one is wasting away physically does not necessarily mean we one is wasting away spiritually.

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[100] Barrett argues (*Second Corinthians*, 140) and Calvin suggests (*Second Corinthians*, 205) that Paul is speaking mainly of the future resurrection here. Yet vv. 10-11 indicate that it is not only a present death but also a present life that is manifested. It is only in 4:17-18 and into ch. 5 that Paul steps back and considers the consummate eschatological raising to life. Yet while the future resurrection is not in the foreground in vv. 10-12, neither is it wholly lost from view. For the present life believers experience, even in the midst of (and because of) the death(s) they experience, is a taste of what is to come in fullness in the eschaton. Bornkamm writes that believers "von dem leben, was sie noch nicht sind, was aber ihrer wartet" (Günther Bornkamm, *Paulus* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1969], 230).

[101] This second occurrence of ἄνθρωπος is implied, though not present, in the Greek.

[102] The phrase is virtually impossible to capture in English: lit. "according to surpassing greatness unto surpassing greatness" (καθ' ὑπερβολὴν εἰς ὑπερβολὴν). Note also the use of ὑπερβολὴ earlier in 4:7.

The former rather seems to *foster* the latter. We should, then, view these two—the corporeal and the spiritual—as two opposite ends of a see-saw. As bodily health decreases, inner well-being increases.[103] This is not to say all physical decay necessarily produces spiritual health—but, for those in Christ (note 4:6), today's affliction only serves to further enhance tomorrow's glory. "[I]n proportion as the earthly life declines," writes Calvin, "does the heavenly life advance."[104] The slight and momentary trouble believers presently undergo "is working out for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (v. 17). Not only is outer physical affliction and the accompanying emotional distress not to be despaired over, it is to be exulted in. For the result of such suffering is a glory which, because it will last forever, cannot be quenched but only fueled by bodily difficulty. To boil verse 17 down, affliction (θλῖψις) produces (κατεργάζομαι) glory (δόξα). "In the divine economy," writes Harris, "affliction actually generates glory."[105]

Here, then, we are confronted with Pauline paradox in the realm of the body and physical suffering. The afflicted outer man appears to be wasting away. So it is. But this corrosion itself fosters an invisible renewal.

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[103] "The very simultaneity of these processes of διαφθορά and ἀνακαίνωσις suggests their proportionality. It was as though the more Paul expended himself physically for the gospel's sake (cf. 12:15), the greater his resilience spiritually" (Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 359).

[104] *Second Corinthians*, 211. At numerous junctures Calvin is eager to point out that this promise of invisible growth in spite of visible decay is only for believers; unbelievers, too, decay, "but without anything to compensate for it" (Ibid).

[105] *Second Corinthians*, 362. Hodge writes similarly, "Afflictions are the cause of eternal glory. Not the meritorious cause, but still the procuring cause. God has seen fit to reveal his purpose not only to reward with exceeding joy the afflictions of his people, but to make those afflictions the means of working out that joy. . . . We are, therefore, not to seek afflictions, but when God sends them we should rejoice in them as the divinely appointed means of securing for us an eternal weight of glory" (*Exposition*, 104).

Dwelling Through Homelessness

> *For we know that if our earthly house, which is a tent,*[106] *is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens.* (5:1)

The context (4:18 and 5:6, e.g.) of this verse, which introduces a notoriously difficult passage,[107] is not that of actual buildings but the human body. Leaving aside thorny exegetical questions which would bog us down rather than enhance our elucidation of paradox in 2 Corinthians, we simply note that, as in chapter four, Paul explains that even when this is destroyed—the prospect of which is only discouraging for unbelievers—this is actually gain for the Christian, as it reminds us of and puts in focus the truth of the glorious body awaiting us in heaven. The destruction of the body only means the receiving of a more glorious body (eventually), as Paul has already explained in 1 Corinthians 15. In Philippians 1:21-23 Paul speaks similarly to a different church, affirming that this more glorious future existence is in fact a more preferable state of being, as in verse eight of 2 Corinthians 5.

In the realm of bodily existence, then, Paul again applies the truth that less is more. A chart may once more aid us in viewing the comparison implicit in Paul's mind.

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[106] A difficult Greek phrase; lit. "if our earthly house of the tent." I take the genitive (τοῦ σκήνους) to be a genitive of simple apposition (i.e., epexegetical; see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 95-98).

[107] See Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 150 for a list of discussions, and, for an extensive treatment of the history of interpretation of this passage, Lorin Crawford, "A Study of 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 in the Light of Various Interpretations of Pauline Eschatology" (Th.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1975). For shorter studies of this passage, see Ronald Berry, "Death and Life in Christ: The Meaning of 2 Corinthians 5.1-10," *SJT* 14 (1961): 60-76; Ronald Cassidy, "Paul's Attitude to Death in II Corinthians 5:1-10," *EQ* 43 (1971): 210-17; W. L. Craig, "Paul's Dilemma in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10: A 'Catch-22'?" *NTS* 34 (1998): 145-47; and Lorin Cranford, "A New Look at 2 Corinthians 5:1-10," *SWJT* 19 (1976): 95-100.

LESS	MORE
Earthly house (ἡ ἐπίγειος οἰκία)	Building from God (οἰκοδομὴν ἐκ θεοῦ)
(Incorporeal)	Not made with hands (ἀχειροποίητον)
(Temporary[108])	Eternal (αἰώνιον)
(On earth)	In the heavens (ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς)

Human intuition tells us that death is the supreme evil. Paul confronts this intuition with the counterintuitive Christian view of death. Without introducing a naïve portrait of death as somehow inherently good, Paul nevertheless describes death as a door into a state of existence that is better by far, for it brings believers to their inheritance of a building from God, not made with human hands, eternal, in the heavens. If this earthly tent is destroyed, we have a better inheritance to replace it.

Vision Through Blindness

> *We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord; for through faith we walk, not through sight.* (5:6b-7)

Paul again implies the superiority of the heavenly state of existence due to the presence of the Lord. We can have only one home at any given time; and since that home for earth-bound believers is the physical body, such believers are by necessary consequence not in the direct presence of the Lord—spiritual union with Christ notwithstanding (Rom. 6:1-23 e.g.).

The apostle then grounds this assertion (γὰρ) in the observation that believers live through faith, not sight. Though on one level this is a basic Christian truth of unmentionable obviousness, on another level it runs deeply against human instinct, exacerbated by the Corinthian mindset that the visible is the (more) real and (more)

[108] Cf. παραυτίκα, v. 17 ("momentary"), and πρόσκαιρος, v. 18 ("temporary").

dependable. Paul, however, posits that believers live by focusing on the invisible (see also 4:18). Paul again applies the paradox of Christian faith to the infected Corinthian worldview.

Confidence Through Silence

> *We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving to you an opportunity for boasting on our behalf, in order that you might have an answer for those boasting in outward appearance and not in the heart.* (5:12)[109]

After stirring his readers to awaken to the reality of the invisible world throughout chapters four and five, Paul develops one of the direct consequences of such a mindset: the mission to be carriers of reconciliation to a world which persists in walking by sight. "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men . . ." (v. 11). He is then eager to communicate to the Corinthians that he has been operating by a κανών[110] of authority which would not be familiar to them—"We are not commending ourselves to you . . ." (see also 3:1). Rather than boasting about themselves, Paul and his ministry companions are providing the *Corinthians* with reason to boast about the apostle. Paul himself will remain silent. In this way, he says, the Corinthians will "have an answer for those boasting in outward appearance and not in the heart." Again the theme of visibility comes up (as in 4:18 and 5:7), and the implicit understanding that some Corinthians are unduly

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[109] We note well Barrett's opening comments on 2 Cor 5:11-21: "Throughout the central part of the epistle (and indeed, though less clearly, throughout the epistle as a whole), Paul's thought moves paradoxically between the treasure of the Gospel and the mean earthenware vessel in which it is contained, the message and the messenger; but the same paradox extends to cover the dignity and authority of Christ's ambassador, matched with his meek acceptance of the status of slave to the self-satisfied Corinthians, and the fact that the Gospel itself, which is the power of God unto salvation, manifested in his Son, is focused on the unintelligible historical event in which God's Son is treated like a sinner and killed. These three paradoxes are all set out in the present paragraph, which is one of the most pregnant, difficult, and important in the whole of the Pauline literature" (*Second Corinthians*, 163).

[110] "(1) A means to determine the quality of something; rule, standard; (2) set of directions of formulation for an activity; assignment, formulation" (BDAG, 507-08). The word is used four times in the NT, three of which are found in 2 Corinthians (10:13, 15, 16; also Gal. 6:16). See Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 475.

enthralled with that which is seen (ἐν προσώπῳ) instead of that which is unseen (ἐν καρδίᾳ[111])—despite the fact that the latter is the true source of boasting.[112]

Life Through Death[113]

> *For the love of Christ compels us, who have judged this, that one died on behalf of all, therefore all died; and on behalf of all he died, in order that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who on their behalf died and was raised. Therefore from now on we ourselves know no one according to the flesh; even if we have known Christ according to the flesh, we know him now no longer.* (5:14b-16)

To one imbibed with thoroughly Corinthian sensibilities, acting selflessly toward another was the supreme folly. As we have seen, the advancement of self and cultivation of personal prosperity was the goal around which Corinth was united in the decades following in the wake of its rebuilding as a Roman colony in the 40's B.C. Paul disrupts and explodes this framework with the following string of statements.

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[111] Cf. 3:3.

[112] Paul is not putting himself forward, but rather is helping the Corinthians to be able to answer those who do. This boasting of outward appearance, however, is not what is most important, but what is in the heart. There is probably sarcasm at work here, for if the Corinthians were to take Paul's words at face value and apply them, they would go to the superapostles (or whoever among them Paul is reacting against in this passage) armed with the new truth that it is the heart, not outward appearance, that matters. In this way they would forcefully answer those who put themselves forward. Yet to do so would be practicing exactly that which they are condemning—putting oneself forward! They would be arguing right matter in the wrong manner. For this reason I understand Paul's statement that he is giving the Corinthians an opportunity for boasting to be sarcastic and not to be literally implemented.

[113] The reader observes that this is the same heading as that used for our comments on 4:7-12 (see above). The terminology and concepts employed in each passage encourage such a label. A difference between the two passages can be seen, however, in that while in the earlier passage Paul explains the life-through-death dynamic solely with respect to the individual (in community), in the later passage he explains the same life-through-death dynamic with respect to the resultant trajectory toward service of others. That is, the death of 2 Cor 4 ushers in life for *oneself* (we are "always carrying about the death of Jesus in the body, in order that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body"); the death of 2 Cor 5 ushers in life for *others* ("that those who live might no longer live for themselves").

Opening proposition: Christ died on behalf of all;
Therefore: all died;
Proposition repeated: on behalf of all Christ died;
So that: the living would live not for themselves but for Christ;
Therefore: we do not analyze others according to the flesh;
Qualification: even if at one time we regarded Christ in a worldly way, we do so no longer.

There is no more weighty or stark way of becoming less than by dying. And this is what Christ did. There was, however, a greater good in view: he died for all, *so that* we might live for him and not for ourselves. The less of Christ's death ushered in the more of both substitutionary punishment (he died for [ὑπὲρ] all) and rightly directed loyalty (we live for him).

Identification with and participation in the death of Christ does indeed result in death for us, yet not as the world views death; it is a death-unto-life ("that those who live might live for him"). The follower of Christ, consequently, *no longer lives for himself* (μηκέτι ἑαυτοῖς ζῶσιν). This is the most explicit contrast between the Corinthian way and the Christ-following way. There is much gold to mine in these profound verses, yet one nugget only do we wish to illumine here: the paradoxical truth that to die with Christ is to be raised to life, yet to a life for which we possessed no category before dying: a life lived for others.

This leads to the conclusion Paul draws in these verses: "we do not analyze others according to the flesh." Κατὰ σάρκα here means "from a worldly perspective"—in Barrett's words, "one's estimates are based upon purely human, and especially self-

regarding, considerations."[114] Here we come across another example of paradox. Cross-centered believers do not regard others as the world does.

Sinlessness Through Sinfulness

> *The one not knowing sin he made sin on our behalf, in order that we ourselves might become the righteousness of God in him.* (5:21)[115]

In this widely discussed and well known verse I wish to draw attention to just one element. It is simply this. One would expect (leaving aside all Christian familiarity with the atonement) that the one who did not know sin would know righteousness, and that those who do know sin would not. Sin and righteousness are, after all, mutually exclusive. To possess one is to forfeit the other. Yet here Paul reminds his readers that the means of divine-human reconciliation is by the righteous taking the place of (ὑπὲρ) the unrighteous. By "sinlessness through sinfulness," then, I mean "*our* sinlessness through *his* 'sinfulness.'" It is not my contention that the Corinthians would have denied this. Yet I do contend that Paul's explanation of the way of reconciliation is here framed in terms of paradox; indeed, the gospel message itself becomes *the* paradox. In this verse, writes Murray Harris, "we penetrate to the center of the atonement and stand in awe before one of the most profound mysteries in the universe. All the interpretations of the phrase have in common the idea of identification, the understanding that God caused Christ to be identified in some way with what was foreign to his experience, namely human sin."[116]

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[114] *Second Corinthians*, 170.
[115] I have rendered this verse a bit more literally and therefore woodenly to more clearly illuminate the emphasis of the Greek text.
[116] *Second Corinthians*, 451.

Blessing Through Suffering

> *We are giving no one an occasion for stumbling in anything, in order that the ministry might not be faulted, but in everything commending ourselves as ministers of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in constraints, in difficulties, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness,*[117] *in fastings, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; through the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left, through glory and dishonor, through evil report and good report; as deceitful and truthful, as being unknown and well known, as dying and behold we are living, as punished and not put to death, as being grieved yet always rejoicing, as poor yet enriching many, as having nothing and possessing all things.* (6:3-10)

Here we come to the first of two lists of difficulties, the second coming in chapter 11, and both comprising two of the clearest statements of paradox in this epistle.[118] For both lists manifest the paradox Paul aims to plant in the hearts of the Corinthians that the self-satisfaction they seek is found in the very thing they despise: self-emptying.

The list here in chapter six consists of three groups of nine. The first third lists experiences the Corinthians would have eschewed; the second, conversely, lists traits the Corinthians would have embraced; the third does the unthinkable and (paradoxically) combines these together, ending on the starkest note of paradox with the final triad of verse 10.

After introducing the list with the heading that "in everything" Paul and his co-laborers are "commending ourselves as ministers of God," Paul then proceeds to

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[117] Cf. 11:27. On this term (ἀγρυπνίαις) see Eric F. F. Bishop, "The 'Why' of Sleepless Nights," *EQ* 37 (1965): 29-31.

[118] Cf. 1 Cor 4:9-13, which includes paradoxical pairings similar to 2 Cor 6: "We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. . . . When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat" (ESV). Schlatter draws attention to this passage in 1 Corinthians when describing Paul's trials as outlined in 2 Cor 4:7ff (*Paulus, Der Bote Jesu*, 530-31). For a study of the lists of hardships suffered by Paul as outlined in 1 and 2 Corinthians, see John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988). For an analysis of all the lists in the (agreed upon) Pauline writings, see Michael L. Barré's helpful appendix in "Paul as 'Eschatological Person': A New Look at 2 Cor 11:29," *CBQ* 37 (1975): 519-526.

"commend" (συνίστημι) himself with the very things which denigrate and call into question apostolic authenticity:

- endurance (ὑπομονῇ)
- afflictions (θλίψεσιν)
- constraints (ἀνάγκαις)
- difficulties (στενοχωρίαις)
- beatings (πληγαῖς)
- imprisonments (φυλακαῖς)
- tumults (ἀκαταστασίαις)
- labors (κόποις)
- sleeplessness (ἀγρυπνίαις)

At this point Paul's litany of sources of commendation takes a strange twist. To this point he has spoken of the difficulties which commend his ministry, which the Corinthians were evidently quite reticent to associate with an apostolic leader of theirs; [119] now (moving from verse five to verse six) he speaks of those ministerial characteristics with which the Corinthians would, it appears, very much agree as the signs of a true worker for Christ. The smoothness with which Paul moves from hardships to traits more amenable to the Corinthian vision for ministry underlines the seamlessness between the two in Paul's (not the Corinthians') mind. The sufferings and the virtues go hand in hand, because the former supplies the soil in which the latter flourishes.[120] The Corinthians seem desirous to extract the virtue while leaving behind the suffering.

Paul continues (ἐν . . .):

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[119] While the first item, endurance, would be a virtue in the minds of both Paul and the Corinthians, the kind of situation *calling for* such endurance, like the next eight items in the list, would indeed grate against the Corinthians ideal of an apostle.

[120] A similar conjunction of virtues with sufferings, again in the form of a list, can be seen in 2 Tim 3:10-11.

- fastings (νηστείαις)
- purity (ἁγνότητι)
- knowledge (γνώσει)
- patience (μακροθυμίᾳ)
- kindness (χρηστότητι)
- the Holy Spirit (πνεύματι ἁγίῳ)
- genuine love (ἀγάπῃ ἀνυποκρίτῳ)
- the word of truth (λόγῳ ἀληθείας)
- the power of God (δυνάμει θεοῦ)

After this middle third, Paul takes another unanticipated turn, listing puzzling couplets which serve as means (διὰ) of Paul's apostolic ministry, bringing together in startling companionship anti-Corinthian with pro-Corinthian sentiment: "through glory and dishonor, through evil report and good report,"—he continues, and finishes, with the preposition ὡς—"as deceitful and true, as being unknown and well known, as dying and behold we are living, as punished and not killed."[121] Paul mixes together the extremes of those things to which the Corinthians quickly latched on (glory, good report, truth, being well known, living, not being killed) with those things they fled (dishonor, evil report, deceit, being unknown, dying, punished). One imagines the jaw-dropping impact and blank stares of the self-respecting Corinthians upon the reading of the letter in the public assembly.

The reason why Paul can combine such opposites and seemingly mutually exclusive realities—and here we come to the critical point of this passage for our purposes—is found in verse 10, in which Paul continues with three more puzzling pairs. Yet here he makes explicit the paradoxical less-*through*-more (not merely less-*and*-more) of Pauline Christianity: "as being grieved yet always rejoicing, as poor yet enriching

[121] Wan suggests four sub-headings: hardships, virtues, experiences, and paradoxes. What Wan labels "experiences" seem to this author to fall more naturally under his heading "paradoxes" (*Power in Weakness*, 93-96).

many."[122] Unlike the preceding six pairs of verses eight and nine, the first two pairs of verse 10 employ δέ as the connecting conjunction, which ought to be taken as an adversative ("but") both because it stands in stark contrast to the preceding καί's and because that which is being connected in verse 10 are, on the surface, opposites. Then comes the climactic pair which serves as an umbrella to all that has come before and elucidates Paul's paradox most clearly—"as having nothing and possessing all things."[123] With his reversion back to καί as the connecting conjunction, as well as the strongest possible pair of opposites—within which all that has come before in this list can be subsumed—Paul brings the paradoxical nature of his apostolic leadership most clearly into the light. A true apostle of Christ, he says, can, at bottom, be described in two ways. First, he has nothing. *And* (καί), second, he possesses all things. Paul could hardly have sunk his teeth more deeply into the Corinthian worldview.

Frank Thielman believes the apostle "seems to echo his opponents' emphasis on outward commendation when he ironically commends himself to the Corinthians by listing the various hardships he has endured as he has carried out his commission to preach the gospel."[124] Paul has squeezed out any possible remaining room for his readers to misunderstand him. He has driven his point home with increasing and finally climactic force: the way up is down. Less is more. The way to possess is to be dispossessed; the way to enrich many is to be poor; the way to joy is through grief.[125] (Real) joy, (true)

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[122] The conjunction of poverty and riches in Paul's life anticipates the same conjunction in the life of his Lord two chapters later (8:9). Cf. 1 Cor 4:8—"already you have become rich!"

[123] Hodge explains, concerning v. 10, that "This again may mean, 'Looked upon as sorrowful, yet in fact always rejoicing;' or, 'Although overwhelmed with sorrow, yet full of joy.' The latter interpretation is to be preferred" (*Exposition*, 164). It is an actual sorrow, not a perceived one. See also Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 188 on the "paradoxical character" of these pairs.

[124] *Paul and the Law*, 95.

[125] Is it for this reason that James instructs his readers, "Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will

riches, and (meaningful) possessions come *through* grief, poverty, and lack, respectively—not *in avoidance of* these things. The Corinthians had it exactly wrong.

Joy Through Affliction

> *I have been filled with comfort, I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction. For even after coming into Macedonia our flesh had no rest but in everything we were afflicted; fighting without, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us with the presence of Titus, and not only with his presence but also with the comfort with which he was comforted by you, announcing to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal on my behalf so that I rejoiced even more.* (7:4b-7)

"I am overflowing with joy *in*"—not despite—"all our affliction," writes the apostle, using ἐπὶ plus the dative (πάσῃ τῇ θλίψει ἡμῶν).[126] Here again the paradox surfaces, terminologically echoing 1:3-11 as Paul again combines θλῖψις with παράκλησις, though this time in the context of vindicating the genuineness of his love for the Corinthians.[127] The reason Paul gives for this strange conjunction of hard circumstances with newly ignited cheer[128] is his being reunited with Titus, who not only himself comforted Paul but who blessed Paul with the overflowing blessing Titus had received from the Corinthians, despite being the probable carrier of Paul's earlier severe letter (2:1-4).[129]

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exalt you" (4:9-10)? Cf. also Matt 5:4; Luke 6:25; 1 Cor 5:2; 7:30. On 2 Cor 6:3-10 see also the remarkable parallels in *Epistle to Diognetus*, discussed below in chapter 5.

[126] An even stronger and possible rendering of ἐπὶ would be "on the basis of," but this may be reading too much into the text. See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 376. See also Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 309-310.

[127] We also find in this passage the same combination of joy/rejoicing (χαίρω) and affliction (θλῖψις) as in 2:3-4 (see above). "This verse," Barnett aptly notes, "proves to be an intersection for significant vocabulary ('confidence' . . . 'pride' . . . 'encouragement' . . . 'joy') found in other parts of the letter" (*Second Corinthians*, 363).

[128] So BDAG, 765.

[129] For a sustained exploration into Titus vis-à-vis 2 Corinthians, see Dick Kantzer, "Titus and Corinth," *TrinS* 2 (1972): 84-97.

The apostle, then, is joyful in the midst of affliction. "Joy dominates this section," writes Paul Barnett. He goes on to suggest of 7:4-16 that "joy is the dominant element—joy at the arrival and reports of Titus (vv. 5-7), joy that the Corinthians have repented (vv. 8-13a), and joy at Titus' joy (vv. 13b-15)."[130]

And Paul writes that this joy has come as one who is afflicted because God comforts the downcast (τοὺς ταπεινοὺς). Though the cognate refers generally to humility in the sense of the Christian virtue opposite pride, here it has the sense of "humiliatedness."[131] As in 2 Corinthians 1, then, there is a profound comfort that comes only through affliction, not in the avoidance of it. Hence Paul can declare, "I am overflowing[132] with joy in all our affliction." Though he had not earlier drawn out the paradox of 6:10, C. K. Barrett writes of 7:4 that "Paul's confidence and joy, the comfort that he experiences, are experienced not after but in all our affliction. . . . the life of Jesus, which is manifested in consolation and joy, is life in and through death."[133]

Salvation Through Grief

> *For even if I grieved in the letter, I do not regret it; even if I was regretting it, for I see that that letter grieved you only for a short time, now I rejoice, not because you were grieved but because you were grieved unto repentance; for you were grieved according to God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything from us. For grief according to God produces repentance unto salvation; but the grief of the world produces death.* (7:8-10)

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[130] Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 366. On joy in 2 Corinthians placed in the context of the whole New Testament and its socio-religious background, see the revised doctoral thesis of William G. Morrice, *Joy in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), esp. pp. 118-121.

[131] Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 207. For corroboration of this usage by Paul see Rom 12:16 and Phil 3:21.

[132] Υπερπερισσεύομαι. The only other NT occurrence is Rom 5:20 ("grace *abounded all the more*").

[133] Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 204. Martin softens this paradox by arguing that Paul's joy, though in the midst of his affliction, is in no way occasioned by it. Yet the startling consistency with which joy or comfort meshes with affliction or suffering in this epistle suggests Martin has not allowed Paul's worldview to fully saturate his exegesis (*2 Corinthians*, 222). While Harris resists making ἐν in any way causal (contra NAB: "because of all our affliction"), he does believe that παρακλήσις ἐν θλίψει is "the principal theme of chs. 1-7," and therefore "v. 4 forms a fitting climax to Paul's extended description of his apostolic ministry (2:14-7:4)" (*Second Corinthians*, 521).

Paul is pushing the Corinthians to reflect more deeply on the process of the grief they have experienced at the hands of an apostle whose claims to love them have been rendered dubious in the face of such literary harshness from afar. The Corinthians seem to have considered grief to be a detraction from the desired life. This would certainly be consonant with the surrounding Achaian culture. Paul, however, suggests that *two* kinds of grief exist—godly grief and worldly grief—one of which is indeed to be avoided, yet the other of which holds redemptive value. Verse 10 spells out both.

v. 10a: ἡ	κατὰ θεὸν	λύπη	μετάνοιαν εἰς σωτηρίαν ἀμεταμέλητον	ἐργάζεται
v. 10b: ἡ	τοῦ κόσμου	λύπη	θάνατον	κατεργάζεται

Godly grief (10a) was what Paul had ignited among them, and this is not a grief to be shunned: it has been a means of salvation. Indeed, the Corinthians did "not suffer loss in anything" as a result of this grief. The pattern of thought, rather, is *grief* unto *repentance* unto *salvation*. The pain of grief is a means to the joy (vv. 4, 16) of salvation. Again, then, what appears to be the case on the surface is in fact just the opposite of the truth when probed more deeply.

Abundance Through Poverty

> *And we make known to you, brothers, the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, because in a severe test of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty have abounded unto the wealth of their generosity.* (8:1-2)

Moving into a two-chapter section intended to generate financial generosity on behalf of the needy church at Jerusalem, we see Paul apply his disruptive, counterintuitive framework so needed by the Corinthians to the realm of money.

Beginning with the example of the Macedonians—perhaps one detects an implicit appeal to Corinthian vanity not to be outdone by the poverty-stricken Macedonians—Paul points out that the generous Macedonians experienced an "abundance of joy" (ἡ περισσεία τῆς χαρᾶς) in the midst of "a severe test of affliction" (ἐν πολλῇ δοκιμῇ θλίψεως). Verse two is loaded with the language of stark contrast: affliction (θλῖψις) and joy (χαρά), poverty (πτωχεία) and wealth (πλοῦτος). Here again we find the coveted state of joy not despite θλῖψις but in its midst (ἐν). Yet instead of describing the positive result as παράκλησις (as in 1:3-11 and 7:4-11), Paul speaks of the Macedonians' χαρά, *joy*. We include this passage in our trek through 2 Corinthians, then, because Paul speaks of a joy welling up amidst affliction. The clause ἐν πολλῇ δοκιμῇ θλίψεως, fronted in verse two, is not at all necessary if Paul simply wants to set forth the exemplary generosity of the Macedonians. All that is necessary to speak of the Macedonians' generosity is their giving in spite of their poverty, but Paul goes beyond merely describing the Macedonian financial situation. He also points to the affliction they were experiencing, whether this was a connected with their poverty or independent of it. That is, Paul draws attention to the fact that the Macedonians not only experienced a wealth of generosity in the midst of poverty, but also an abundance of joy in the midst of affliction.[134] "Affliction and

[134] This Macedonian affliction may be that of the Philippians (1:29) or Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:4-10) or another church to whom no surviving letter was written.

poverty, however caused, have not suppressed but rather quickened the Macedonians' generosity."[135]

This observation, viewed in light of Corinthian sensibilities as well as the rest of this epistle, leads us to the conclusion that here too Paul is not only encouraging the Corinthians to obey (here, with their finances) but portraying the truth that radical, self-denying obedience contains within it a paradoxical blessing that far outweighs the loss incurred.

Riches Through Poverty

> *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that on your account he became poor, being rich, in order that you yourselves by his poverty might become rich. And in this I give an opinion: for this is profitable to you . . .* (8:9-10a)

Paul moves from the example of the Macedonians to that of Christ himself, again demonstrating that there is a kind of riches that is fueled, paradoxically, by poverty.[136] Both 8:2 and 8:9 speak of πλοῦτος flowering in πτωχεία. Contrary to the earlier example, however, in which the same ones who experience less experience more (the Macedonians), here *Christ* experienced less so that *the Corinthians* might experience more. In Barrett's words, "it was precisely by Christ's *giving up* heavenly riches that the Corinthians *became* rich."[137] Spiritual wealth comes through, not despite, poverty—Christ's poverty. The apostle is then immediately clear that the result of this bankruptcy on the part of Christ is Corinthian benefit: "this is profitable to you" (τοῦτο ὑμῖν

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[135] Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 219. Harris notes that 8:2 "presents us with two stunning paradoxes – joy in the midst of testing and affliction, and generosity in spite of affliction and poverty (*Second Corinthians*, 564).

[136] Fred B. Craddock goes too far in stating of verse 9 that "it is apparent that this verse is self-contained and is in no way dependent upon the context of its thought" ("The Poverty of Christ: An Investigation of II Corinthians 8:9," *Int* 22 [1968]: 159). This overstatement notwithstanding, Craddock gives a helpful exposition of the nature of Christ's "riches" and subsequent incarnational "poverty" in this verse.

[137] Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 223. Emphasis original.

συμφέρει). The humiliation Jesus Christ underwent carried with it the very thing the Corinthians sought in more impressive ecclesial leaders: personal benefit. The same verb (συμφέρω) is used to render Jesus' words in Matthew 5:29-30: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better (συμφέρει) that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better (συμφέρει) that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."

The paradox of this passage, then, is that Jesus did not win riches for his followers by becoming rich and then sharing that wealth. He won riches for his disciples by becoming poor. Jesus' incarnational poverty, moreover, was not an ontological necessity or something he could not avoid—on the contrary, "being rich" (πλούσιος ὤν) Jesus *became* poor (ἐπτώχευσεν). Christ, writes Murray Harris, "surrendered all the insignia of divine majesty and assumed all the frailty and vicissitudes of the human condition." He later concludes:

> In this verse, then, Paul is reminding the Corinthians how gracious the Lord Jesus Christ was, for although (ὤν) he was rich beyond telling in the glory of his preexistent life in heaven, he became desperately poor in comparison with that richness, by assuming the relative poverty of his whole life on earth, a poverty that paradoxically brought believers spiritual enrichment.[138]

This is the upside-down gospel that was so foreign to the right-side up Corinthians. And once again, Christ provides the paradoxical paradigm *par excellence*.

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[138] *Second Corinthians*, 579, 580. Barnett writes of 8:9 that "this great text on the incarnation, life, and death of Jesus Christ is in line with Paul's view of ministry as nontriumphalist and "slave" like, which is a major strand running through the entire letter. Christ's sacrificial other-centeredness, as expressed in this verse, tells the story of Christianity itself, a story that was under assault in Corinth at that time through the self-centeredness of the 'superlative' apostles" (*Second Corinthians*, 409).

Plenty Through Little

> *[Y]our abundance at the present time is unto their lack, in order that also their abundance might be unto your lack, so that there might be equality. As it is written, "He who had much did not abound, and he who had little had do lack.* (8:14-15)

Having brought to mind the Macedonians example and Christ's example, Paul reaches back into the Old Testament for an Israelite example. The passage from which he cites in 2 Corinthians 8:15 is that of Yahweh's provision of manna from heaven following immediately in the wake of the exodus from Egypt, along with instructions to exercise faith by not hoarding but only gathering enough for one day: "the LORD said to Moses, 'Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not'" (Exod. 16:4). After the people awake to find the manna covering the ground like frost, Moses explains to the people what Yahweh has commanded:

> "Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent." And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, *whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.* Each of them gathered as much as he could eat. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over till the morning." But they did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them. (16:16-20, emphasis added)

Paul seizes upon the paradox in this passage, in which some Israelites obediently gathered just enough for one day, and consequently had no lack, while others disobediently hoarded, making the extra bread rot and stink and having "nothing left over." Calvin writes:

> [A]s in the case of one hoarding the manna, either from excessive greed or from distrust, what was laid up immediately putrified, so we need not doubt that the riches, that are heaped up at the expense of our brethren, are accursed, and will soon perish, and that too, in connection with the ruin of the owner; so that we are not to think that it is the way to increase, if, consulting our own advantage for a long while to come, we defraud our poor brethren of the beneficence that we owe them.[139]

It was to the Israelites' own disadvantage to hoard; it is to the Corinthians' own disadvantage to hoard. Generosity, as Paul put it earlier quite plainly, "is profitable to you" (8:10). The choice is not between generosity and therefore a necessary concomitant misery, on the one hand, and self-focused collecting and therefore a necessary concomitant advantage, on the other. Generosity, though it would appear to be the exact opposite, *is* advantageous. The Corinthians' quite normal desires for satisfaction would be met in the very thing (financial munificence) they are resisting.[140]

Reaping Through Giving

> *And this is the point, he who sows sparingly, sparingly will he also reap, and he who sows in blessings, in blessings will he also reap. Let each one do just as he has decided in his own heart, not out of grief or from necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound unto you, in order that in everything at all times having all sufficiency you might abound in every good work, just as it is written, "He scattered, he gave to the poor, his righteousness abides forever." And he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed and will increase the harvest of your righteousness. Being enriched in everything in all generosity. . .* (9:6-11)

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[139] *Second Corinthians*, 297. See also Chrysostom, *Homilies on Corinthians*, 361. Barrett (*Second Corinthians*, 226-27) and Barnett (*Second Corinthians*, 415-16), rightly noting the connecting principle of equality at work in both Exodus 16 and 2 Corinthians 8, overlook the principle of paradox also at work in both passages in Paul's purpose of motivating the Corinthians toward financial liberality.

[140] Harris likewise explains: "Each time manna was collected and then measured, the person who had gathered more than was necessary or permitted found that he had nothing over the one omer limit, while the person who had gathered only a small amount discovered that he did not fall short of the limit" (*Second Corinthians*, 594).

Paul continues in his sustained exhortation to monetary openhandedness by moving in chapter nine into an agricultural analogy, using the paradox of farming as a motivation for generosity. The more one sows, Paul reminds his readers, the more one reaps. At first glance, of course, this is deeply counterintuitive. Presented with 10 sacks of grain, it hardly makes sense to let such a bountiful harvest slip through one's fingers by planting it all back in the ground. Yet this is precisely how farming works; the more one is willing to part with, the more (weather allowing!) one will harvest later on.

Paul appeals, then, to the very premise by which the Corinthians are reticent to part with their funds: the desire to reap much. The way to have much, says Paul, is to give much. Again, then, the apostle uses paradox to strike right at the heart of the Corinthian way of thinking, thereby not only exposing their error but wooing them onto the path of sacrificial discipleship whereby real abundance is discovered. "It was not simply that in practice and in doctrine they committed errors," Barrett reminds us. "Their criteria for distinguishing between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil, were twisted."[141]

It is critical to grasp Paul's pattern of thought here. He does not concede that the Corinthians will indeed find greater abundance if they hold on to their money, fleeing instead to the motivation of grace received (Rom. 12:1-2) or even new identity (Rom. 6:1-23). Instead he defeats them at their own game: hoarding will only result in destitution. Instead, sow much to reap much. The bottom line, after all, is that "God is able to make all grace abound unto you, in order that in everything at all times having all sufficiency you might abound in every good work." Here Paul piles on superlatives as nowhere else in the New Testament, using five forms of πᾶς, including three

[141] Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, vii.

consecutively at one point: δυνατεῖ δὲ ὁ θεὸς πᾶσαν χάριν περισσεῦσαι εἰς ὑμᾶς, ἵνα ἐν παντὶ πάντοτε πᾶσαν αὐτάρκειαν ἔχοντες περισσεύητε εἰς πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθόν. The result of monetary largesse is, in a word, gain. Paul stretches literary repetition to its limits in his zeal to commend the benefits to be won in sacrificial giving.[142]

Paul hammers the point home by citing Psalm 112:9, "He scattered, he gave to the poor, his righteousness abides forever." The pronoun "he" in the context of Psalm 112 is not God, as it may initially appear, but "the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in his commandments!" (v. 1) Generosity with one's money is also part of such God-fearing, yet it is no grim Stoic ethic of self-denial as an end in itself. Rather the Corinthians will experience a richer blessing than money could ever have supplied, "being enriched in everything (παντὶ) in all (πᾶσαν) generosity" (v. 11).[143]

Again, says Paul, generosity leads to enriching. Less is more. Savage provides an appropriate crystallization of Paul's upside-down message in 2 Corinthians 8-9: "the only way in which to enrich his converts is to encourage them to share in his poverty."[144]

Divine Power Through Corporeal Impotence

> *For while walking in the flesh, we do not wage war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are*[145] *not fleshly but powerful by God for the destruction of fortresses, destroying reasonings and every lofty height which raises itself against the wisdom of God* . . . (10:3-5)

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[142] Barrett elucidates the difference between Paul's ethic here in 9:8 and the Stoic ethic; the critical disjunction is that Paul speaks of a sufficiency (αὐτάρκεια) as from God, whereas the Stoic looked to his own capability for such an assessment (*Second Corinthians*, 237). See also Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 638. Note comments on 2 Cor 3:1-6 above.

[143] ESV: "You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity."

[144] *Power Through Weakness*, 99.

[145] The verb must be supplied in translation. Paul is known to do this occasionally (Rom. 8:1 e.g.).

Having brought to a close his exhortation concerning money, Paul moves in the final four chapters of the epistle into a scathing analysis of the Corinthians and the super-apostles who have won their allegiance by enforcing their culturally-infected standards of true pastoral power.[146] David E. Garland writes of chapters 10-13, "Paul now finds himself having to defend his apostolic calling against annoying allegations and innuendoes; and he pulls out all the stops, using irony, sarcasm, mock humility, and contrast to dissuade the Corinthians from being bullied or beguiled into submitting any further to his opponents."[147]

Using military imagery in the opening sentences of this section of the letter,[148] Paul writes that despite a bodily existence, the most important war being fought by believers is not a corporeal one. Paul must argue this way about the forceful battle he is

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[146] This presupposes that ch. 10-13 do in fact follow 1-9. This study does not have space to pursue this argument, important though it be. I do believe that a successful demonstration of the pervasiveness of paradox throughout 2 Corinthians provides support for epistolary unity, yet even this does not necessitate that our first nine canonical chapters originally preceded 10-13—moreover, overlap in the use of paradox could still exist in two independent letters to Corinth (as it does indeed exist in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians). Nevertheless the exact placement of ch. 10-13 is not a pillar by which this thesis stands or falls; while not insignificant, neither is it integral. For arguments supporting epistolary unity, see Harris, Barnett, and Calvin. Note also J. D. H. Amador ("Revisiting 2 Corinthians: Rhetoric and the Case for Unity," *NTS* 46 [2000]: 92-111). Furnish, Barrett, and Martin hold that ch. 10-13 are separate from 1-9 but written only shortly thereafter. For a sustained defense of the latter position see Lindsey P. Pherigo, "Paul and the Corinthian Church," *JBL* 68 (1949): 341-350. Francis Watson has argued for the view popular before the second world war that 2 Cor 10-13 is the painful letter described in 2 Cor 2 and 7 ("2 Cor. X-XIII and Paul's Painful Visit to the Corinthians," *JTS* 35 [1984]: 324-346). Sze-Kar Wan argues that our canonical 2 Corinthians is in fact four different letters redacted to form a single document (*Power in Weakness*, 1-10). Seventy years ago John Knox made the argument that 1 and 2 Corinthians (as well as 1 and 2 Thessalonians) were originally one epistle ("A Conjecture As to the Original Status of II Corinthians and II Thessalonians in the Pauline Corpus," *JBL* 55 [1936]: 145-153). Richard Batey traces the history of the argument from the time of Semler's inaugural argument against epistolary unity in 1776 ("Paul's Interaction With the Corinthians," *JBL* 84 [1966]: 139-146).

[147] "Paul's Apostolic Authority: The Power of Christ Sustaining Weakness (2 Corinthians 10-13)," *RevExp* 86 (1989): 371. After elucidating first century Greco-Roman rhetorical strategy, Mark Harding argues that in 2 Corinthians 10-12 "the reader finds Paul vigorously opposing and parodying the rhetorical encomiastic conventions of self-display employed by his adversaries at Corinth" ("The Classical Rhetoric of Praise and The New Testament," *RTR* 45 [1986]: 79). Aida Besancon Spencer ("The Wise Fool (and the Foolish Wise): A Study of Irony in Paul," *NovT* 23/4 [1981]: 349-360) argues that Paul employs irony in 2 Cor 6:16-12:13 as a way of indirectly yet penetratingly addressing Corinthian immaturity.

[148] Harris suggests 11 possible military allusions in vv. 3-6 (*Second Corinthians*, 676) and summarizes various viewpoints on the precise background to this passage (676-77).

engaged in because of the accusation lodged against him—that while he is bold when absent, he is disgustingly timid when present (10:2, 10). Hence his appeal "through the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (10:1) ought not to be seen, writes Paul, as an indication of apostolic weakness or inferiority. There exists rather a paradoxical conjunction of meekness and strength, gentleness and ferocity, humility and courageous exhortation.

Yet to Paul's mind this strange admixture of meekness and boldness is curiously appropriate for an apostle of the crucified Christ. This is because "while walking in the flesh (ἐν σαρκὶ), we do not wage war according to the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα)." By a play on the semantic range of σάρξ Paul transitions in this verse from using σάρξ to denote "life 'in the world'"[149] to using it to denote worldliness (this is corroborated by the switch in prepositions), the latter of which continues on into verse 6: "for the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly but powerful by God . . ." Paul affirms the Corinthians' recognition that a war is raging all around us—but, says Paul, not *that* kind of war. To deny Paul apostolic authority due to outward meekness is to reject a basketball recruit due to his tall height; the criterion of rejection is not only entirely consonant with the status denied, it is in fact confirmative of it. The Corinthians are adjudicating Paul's apostolic legitimacy on the entirely wrong set of standards.[150] In this way the weapons of Paul's warfare, though outwardly pathetic and manifestly lacking in demonstrative strength, are actually "powerful by God" to destroy the "reasonings" (λογισμοὺς) of the Corinthians.

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[149] So Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 251. Harris (*Second Corinthians*, 675) and Calvin (*Second Corinthians*, 321) concur.

[150] On this interpretation of κατὰ σάρκα in this context see Beale, "Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5-7," 552.

Again, then, we are confronted with the paradox of Christianity, here specifically having to do with Christian *warfare*. Our weapons, says Paul, are not what one would expect. Barrett affirms the paradox in this passage when he notes the *theologia crucis* in these verses, "which 2 Corinthians more clearly than any other letter proclaims; Paul knows no kind of Christian existence that is not a matter of 'dying, yet see—we are alive' (vi. 9)."[151] Barnett's words on verse three are even more apropos: "Here once more is an expression of the power-in-weakness paradox of apostolic ministry." He explains, connecting this verse to others in which we have noted a similar paradox:

> Like all other people who "live in the flesh," Paul is a mere "jar of clay" (4:7), who "outwardly" is "wasting away" (4:16), a "thorn"-afflicted man (12:7). Yet he is in the midst of such weakness an effective bearer of the word of God (2:17; 3:2-3; 4:1-6; 5:11-12; 11:2; 12:19; 13:3-4). But because he is "in the flesh," it can only be the gospel-word, the "treasure" itself (4:7), not its frail, ever debilitating, human bearer, that is powerful in achieving God's purposes. Paul's . . . power, that is, *Christ's* power, for both living and serving, is perfected in weakness (12:9).[152]

Understanding Through Self-Denial

> *For we do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who are commending themselves, but they in measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves with themselves, are not understanding.* (10:12)

The Corinthians would have been last among those who would confess to lacking understanding. Yet this is precisely Paul's verdict, rooted in their comparisons of themselves with one another. The very basis by which the Corinthians thought themselves (the reflexive pronoun ἑαυτούς appears five times in this single verse) of superior understanding proved, ironically, their lack of understanding. For Paul, real

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[151] *Second Corinthians*, 250; cf. 304.
[152] *Second Corinthians*, 463. Calvin, too, draws a connection between 10:3 and 4:7 (*Second Corinthians*, 321).

understanding flows along the channel of self-forgetfulness (cf. 1 Cor. 4:4), not self-commendation.

Thus after reciting his own quite appropriate and consciously reined-in boasting in verses 13-16, Paul paraphrases Jeremiah 9:24 ("Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord,"[153]; cf. 1 Cor. 1:31) before concluding, "For the one who commends himself, that one is not approved, but him whom the Lord commends" (10:18). While it would be too much to label such a thought "commendation through denigration," the lack of personal self-promotion is clearly rejected by Paul as he continues to foil the Corinthian more-is-more mindset. Comparative self-measurement belies foolishness.

It might be objected here that Paul blindly misses his own hypocrisy. He is, after all, denouncing these comparers and yet he is himself comparing himself with them. He denounces self-commendation *with* self-commendation! Yet as the epistle continues to unfold, one discovers that while Paul does indeed commend himself—he makes no mistake about it in 11:21: "I also dare to boast." His boasting, his self-commendation, is a boasting in weakness, a self-commendation from inherent lack. This will become clearer in the analyses that follow. "Although Paul says he will not 'classify and compare [himself],'" writes Barnett, "he does precisely that, but in a radically different and surprising manner (11:21-12:13). He points to his superiority in ministry through a display of *weaknesses*."[154]

Exaltation Through Humbling

Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted? (11:7)

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[153] LXX: ἀλλ' ἢ ἐν τούτῳ καυχάσθω ὁ καυχώμενος συνίειν καὶ γινώσκειν ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι κύριος ("But let the one who boasts boast in this, to understand and to know that I am the Lord . . .").
[154] *Second Corinthians*, 483. Cf. Calvin, *Second Corinthians*, 332.

The irony in Paul's discourse comes through as strongly here as anywhere in the Pauline corpus as he continues to allude to and address the Corinthian accusation that "the presence of the body is weak and the word has been contemptible" (10:10).[155] He even admits that he is "unskilled in speaking" (11:6). This time he does not refer to his own weakness as being a strength to himself, but his weakness as benefiting the Corinthians.[156]

While the object has shifted, however, the principle remains intact. Paul's humbling was for the purpose of Corinthian exaltation. The church had unfortunately misunderstood this sacrifice. They thought in categories of humbling-unto-humbling and exaltation-unto-exaltation, but not humbling-unto-exaltation. This was a new framework for them. Paul continues his quest to expose the worldliness of the Corinthian way of thinking by asserting again that less is more. He recognizes, however, that this will be quite a shock to his readers, and so he attempts to gain a hearing by asking them to "endure with me a little something of foolishness" (11:1). It is a foolishness the apostle is in the midst of revealing to be a wisdom *in cognito*.

Confidence Through Hardship

> *In whatever someone dares, in foolishness I say it, I also dare. 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 speak as one irrational, I am more; in more abundant labors, in more abundant imprisonments, in immeasurably more beatings, often in death. By the Jews I received five times the forty less one, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have been on the sea; often on journeys, in dangers of rivers, in dangers of robbers, in dangers from kindred, in dangers from Gentiles, in dangers in the city, in dangers in the desert, in dangers in the sea, in dangers*

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[155] Harris wreite "[T]his verse represents the most acute form of his stinging irony" (Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 754).

[156] Harris notes a connection between this verse and 6:10 and 8:9, all of which involve a lessening unto the increasing of others (*Second Corinthians*, 755-56).

> *among false brothers, in labor and hardship, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst,*[157] *in fastings often, in cold and exposure; apart from such external things, the pressure on me every day, the concern for all the churches. Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not inflamed? If it is necessary to boast, I will boast of the things of 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 Aretas 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.* (11:21-33)

"A theology of glory trades in the power and success of its culture," writes H. Stephen Shoemaker. "It borrows the ascendant cultural symbols and with them covers up the cross."[158] This thesis is arguing that this "theology of glory" is precisely the problem Paul exposes in 2 Corinthians, and as we come to Paul's lengthy list of hardships in chapter 11—the second in the epistle, along with 6:4-10—we are confronted with one of the strongest instances of Paul's strategy of exposing Corinthian worldliness by affirming his own apostolic integrity *by virtue of his suffering.*

The point to which I wish to draw attention here, then, is that Paul begins his list by referring to it as a list of boasting (11:16, 18), and ends his list the very same way (11:30; 12:1). Yet such a label appears on first glance to be startlingly inappropriate since, bracketed out by itself, verses 22 through 29 hardly contain items worthy of parading before others. Indeed, while the list initially sounds simply like the pouting of a somber misanthrope, nothing more, when one realizes that this is not a concession of unfortunate events so much as a resumé recounting reasons for self-confidence, they sound more like the ravings of a deranged masochist.[159]

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[157] Eric F. F. Bishop argues for a rendering of "famine and drought" ("In Famine and Drought," *EQ* 38 [1966]: 169-171).

[158] "2 Corinthians 11:1-21," *RevExp* 86 (1989): 409.

[159] Commenting on 12:9-10, James M. Scott writes that "This almost sounds masochistic, as if Paul likes to be abused. Certainly it opened the door to later Christian ideas of asceticism and martyrdom. Yet the

The apostle begins his list with a few items for which the Corinthians would have contentedly nodded their approval—he is a Hebrew, an Israelite, the offspring of Abraham, a servant of Christ.[160] Cheers all around. Yet at this point Paul's litany of qualifications makes a 180 degree turn as Paul defines just *how* he is a servant of Christ. He speaks of the extreme difficulties he has undergone, leaving no sphere of circumstance untouched—human persecution, natural disaster, exposure to the elements, and emotional storms are all included.

What purpose, then, does such a list serve? Why does Paul promote the very things which appear to detract, rather than affirm, his apostolic authenticity? The key is verse 30: "If it is necessary to boast"—Paul is reluctant to do so (cf. 12:1)—"I will boast of the things of my weakness." Paul plays to the Corinthian method while subverting the substance of that method. That is, Paul does not scold the Corinthians' silly boasting as the immature self-absorption of children, calling them instead to a more mature humility. To do so may have actually exacerbated the delicate error he was trying to untangle by instead giving the Corinthians (had they succeeded in leaving behind such childish pridefulness) one more thing in which to boast. They might have persisted, in other words, in comparing themselves with one another (10:12)—this time with reference to their relative modesty.

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apostle has come to his understanding of suffering after realizing that the power of Christ manifests itself most fully and obviously when he is at his weakest. Paradoxically, when I am weak, then am I strong" (*2 Corinthians*, 231). "Instead of quarreling with the content of his opponents' claims about themselves," adds Frank Thielman, "Paul persistently makes the same claims for himself, ironically imitating the way his antagonists boast of their credentials" (*Paul and the Law*, 85).

[160] A few years after the composition of 2 Corinthians (probably), Paul would describe to the church at Philippi the Jewish credentials he once took pride in: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless" (Phil. 3:5-6). He would go on to delineate his own analysis of the value of these things, however: "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (3:7).

Rather Paul beats them at their own game—"paradoxically he parades the very evidence his opponents would ridicule."[161] Yet while employing the same method (boasting), Paul penetrates to the root of the Corinthian mindset by exposing the essence of their mistake. He subverts the content of one's boasting. Paul boasts all right—*of his weakness*. To a church clamoring for superiority among themselves, this not only cut off the weeds visible above the surface but exposed the root underground. To change the metaphor, instead of levying his weight against the Corinthians and pushing back as they apply pressure, Paul steps back and allows the Corinthians to fall to the floor. He is not playing by their rules. Paul flips the principles of Corinth on their head. If one boasts, one should only boast of one's weakness. Therein lies one's strength. For "by these things is the Gospel woven."[162] Alexandra R. Brown has captured well Paul's strategy in 2 Corinthians in her description of his understanding of power (δύναμις) in this epistle:

> Paul can scarcely respond to those who think him weak by appeal to familiar arguments on the nature of power. He does not envision a grand cosmic switch-over from bad powers to good powers as conventionally conceived but a new configuration of what power is, *whose* it is, and how it works to recreate the world. The power he means is power radically redefined by the apocalyptic event of the cross. It is power manifested in apostolic weakness, demonstrated in afflictions suffered for the sake of the gospel.[163]

I thus disagree with Scott Andrews' argument that 2 Corinthians 11:21-33 is best understood not theologically but socio-culturally, against the backdrop of ancient Greco-Roman rhetoric, and that his weaknesses ought to allow him to claim leadership over the

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[161] Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 383; see Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 319; R. V. G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1958), 166-67. Käsemann reflects on the paradoxical admixture of suffering and glory in both Christ and Paul, and of Paul's consequent apostolic legitimacy, in *Die Legitimität des Apostels*. See also Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1951), 1:242-43.

[162] Chrysostom, *Homilies on Corinthians*, 396.

[163] "The Gospel Takes Place: Paul's Theology of Power-in-Weakness in 2 Corinthians," *Int* 52/3 (1998): 279. Emphasis original.

Corinthians. "[T]he catalogue of hardship in 2 Cor 11.23b-29," he writes, "functions to place him in the role of populist leader or demagogue. Paul willingly accepts this position of dishonour to express his empathy with the weak ones and his hope that the Corinthians will decide to follow him."[164] Andrews has sacrificed the theological on the altar of the sociological, and the result is a fuzzying, not a clarifying, of Paul's meaning in this passage. Andrews is actually unwittingly playing along on the superapostles' terms. Verse 30, when read alongside and in light of 12:1-10 (especially verse 10) and 13:3-4, shows that Paul lays his weaknesses before the Corinthians not as a final rhetorical ploy to win back his authority but to show that the power of God is manifested not in innate human ability but in weakness. Paul's description of his weaknesses is not a last-ditch effort to elicit "empathy." It is rather pointing out to the worldly-minded Corinthians the true locus of spiritual power. Paul's strategy is more radical than Andrews has realized. The response Jan Lambrecht offered to Andrews' work vindicates the apostle: "How then does the catalogue function in 2 Cor 10-13? Paul is convinced that in the midst of his weakness and while suffering afflictions and tribulations God's extraordinary power and the life of Jesus are made visible in him." Consequently, "in his attitude toward the difficulties Paul is in no way following a populist model or using demagogic tactics."[165]

As a final autobiographical detail to cap his own strength through weakness, Paul speaks of his being lowered in a basket through a window in order to escape the watching eye of the governor while in Damascus (11:32-33). Though at first this detail seems anticlimactic at best and a redactic interpolation at worst, it is in fact the pinnacle of Paul's litany of weaknesses, "a crowning illustration of the weakness and humiliation of

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[164] "Too Weak Not to Lead," 276.
[165] "Reply to Andrews," 290.

which Paul speaks and boasts."[166] This is all the clearer when seen against the pervasive epistolary backdrop of paradox which this thesis has been seeking to demonstrate. For while in these two verses Paul speaks of how he was *lowered*, in the next several verses (12:1-6) he describes how he was *raised* (to "the third heaven"). As the imposed literary break between chapter 11 and chapter 12 melts away, then, one sees once more the paradox so thoroughly informing Paul's theological rhetoric in 2 Corinthians.[167]

Paul himself had learned in a poignantly painful experience that a disciple of Christ should never, as he put it elsewhere, "boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). To that experience we now turn.

Strength Through Weakness

> *It is necessary to boast, not indeed being advantageous, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago, whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows, such a one was taken away to the third heaven. And I know such a man, whether in the body or without the body I do not know, God knows, that he was taken away into paradise and he heard inexpressible words which a man may not speak.*[168] *On behalf of such a man I will boast, but on behalf of myself I will not boast except in my weaknesses. For if I wanted to boast, I would not be foolish, for I would be speaking truth; but I refrain, lest someone consider of me above what he sees of me or what he hears from me and the surpassing greatness of the revelation. For this reason, in order that I might not be overly puffed up, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, in order that he might strike me, in order that I might not be overly puffed up. On behalf of this three times I urged the Lord, in order that it might depart from me. And he said to me: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power*[169] *is made perfect in weakness."*

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[166] Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 303. So also Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 820; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 383.

[167] I owe this insight to the unique observation of Barnett (*Second Corinthians*, 553). Scott Andrews insufficiently appreciates the use Paul is making of this escape when he describes Paul's basket-journey as that of "an ignoble coward"—that is, "a coward who neither faces troubles nor endures the difficult circumstances" ("Too Weak Not to Lead," 276, 272).

[168] Lit. "inexpressible words which do not depart to a man to speak" (ἄρρητα ῥήματα ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι). ESV: "which man may not utter."

[169] Marva J. Dawn suggests simply "power," noting that there is no explicitly antecedent pronoun connected to δύναμις here (*Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 37-39). Yet the presence of μου in the immediately preceding and parallel clause—"My grace is

> *Therefore all the more gladly I will boast in my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ might dwell upon me. For this reason I am pleased*[170] *in weaknesses, in insults, in persecutions and calamities, on behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.* (12:1-10)

To the readers of 2 Corinthians, the opening verses of chapter 12 may sound as if Paul has finally gotten his head screwed on straight. At last, after a litany of hardships in which the apostle finds some strange satisfaction, he relates a *truly* boast-worthy experience.[171] Paul himself was evidently caught up into the heavenly world and given a glimpse of divine resplendence about which no known words can adequately describe (vv. 1-6). This he now relates to the glory-hungry Corinthians. Apostolic sobriety has returned!

Yet as soon as these hopes for a more sensible measurement of apostolic legitimacy are raised, they are dashed. For Paul relays this inexpressible experience only as prolegomenon to an attendant difficulty: a "thorn in the flesh."[172] It will be helpful for our purposes to slow down a bit as we reflect on this critical passage (vv. 7-10) by noting four elements concerning this thorn in the flesh: the reason for it, the request concerning it, the Lord's answer regarding it, and the fruit of it.

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sufficient for you," followed by the connecting γάρ, suggest that it is still the Lord's power of which Paul is speaking.

[170] The ESV rendering of εὐδοκῶ as "I am content with" weakens the meaning (so Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 422-23).

[171] Against the great majority of exegetes, Michael D. Goulder argues that the one caught up to heaven is not Paul himself but a friend of Paul ("Visions and Revelations of the Lord (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)," in Trevor J. Burke and J. Keith Elliott, eds., *Paul and the Corinthians: Studies on a Community in Conflict* [Leiden: Brill, 2003]: 303-312). "More likely," writes William Baird more sanely, "he uses the third person to distance his true self – his apostolic identity – from the self in which he has been forced to boast" ("Visions, Revelation, and Ministry: Reflections on 2 Cor 12:1-5 and Gal 1:11-17," *JBL* 104 [1985]: 654).

[172] Σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί, taking τῇ σαρκι as a dative of sphere.

The Reason for the Thorn (v. 7)

Much ink has been spilt on the exact nature of Paul's thorn. One suggestion is a medical condition of some kind,[173] some even daring to pronounce the particular kind of infirmity, claiming the thorn to have been an eye disease.[174] Other suggestions include human opposition to Paul's ministry,[175] sexual temptation, or a speech defect.[176] While it is certainly intriguing to imagine precisely what troubled Paul so fervidly, the pursuit of such a question is outside the scope of this study. Indeed, the passage itself is replete with ambiguity, perhaps a purposeful strategy by Paul as he sought to draw attention not to the *content* of the thorn but its *intent.*[177] The purpose, not the identity, was Paul's concern.

That purpose, writes the apostle, was his personal humility. Twice in verse seven—once at the beginning and again at the end—Paul says that the thorn is "in order that I might not be overly puffed up" (ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι). The heavenly revelations led to the potential for pride, which in turn led to Paul being "tormented" (κολαφίζῃ) by being given a thorn in the flesh. Several scholars note the use of the divine passive here: the thorn "was given to me" (ἐδόθη μοι).[178] *God* gave the thorn. But does this not contradict the explicit statement that it was a "messenger of Satan" (ἄγγελος σατανᾶ) who

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[173] A. Thacker, "Paul's Thorn in the Flesh," *ER* 18/1 (1991): 67-69; Hafemann, *Application Commentary* 462; Baker, *2 Corinthians*, 430-32; Neil Gregor Smith, "The Thorn That Stayed: An Exposition of II Corinthians 12:7-9," *Int* 13 (1959): 409-416.

[174] T. J. Leary, "'A Thorn in the Flesh'—2 Corinthians 12:7," *JTS* 43/2 (1992): 520-22.

[175] L. Woods, "Opposition to a Man and His Message: Paul's 'Thorn in the Flesh,'" *ABR* 39 (1991): 44-53; Michael L. Barré in "Qumran and the 'Weakness' of Paul," *CBQ* 42 (1980): 216-227; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 413.

[176] Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 177. Calvin calls the idea "ridiculous," asserting that the thorn was a temptation of some kind; yet lust, to his mind, was out of the question (*Second Corinthians*, 373). Ronald Russell ("Redemptive Suffering and Paul's Thorn in the Flesh," *JETS* 39/4 [1996]: 559-570) explores Paul's thorn in the flesh from an ethical/medical point of view.

[177] Concerning the identity of the thorn, writes Paul J. Sampley, "Truth be told, we do not have a clue. Nor can we. Nor need we" ("The Second Letter to the Corinthians," in L. E. Keck, et al., eds., *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2000]: 11:165).

[178] Carson, *Triumphalism to Maturity*, 145; Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, 462; Baker, *College Press*, 430.

was tormenting Paul? Here we remember the purpose of the thorn: Paul's humility. Satan is not in the humility-manufacturing business.[179] In the end, then, while we must acknowledge Satan's explicit instrumentality in Paul's thorn, God must ultimately be seen as orchestrating this trial.[180]

The Request Concerning the Thorn (v. 8)

Paul's response to the thorn is exactly what one would expect. He prays, asking God "that it might depart from me." In fact, Paul pleaded (παρεκάλεσα[181]) with the Lord. Specifically, Paul asks this of the Lord three times, which may be taken simply to signify "frequent repetition."[182]

The Lord's Answer Concerning the Thorn (v. 9)

It is in verse nine that the paradox of Christian discipleship is made explicit. Nothing to this point has been particularly startling. Yet there are two stunning statements made in verse nine—one by the Lord and one by Paul.

We first note the Lord's response to Paul's plea. Does he answer Paul's request? Yes, but not the way Paul expects. God does not remove the thorn. Rather, God gives

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[179] "The thorn was given to assist Paul in his struggle against pride, a fight for which Satan would have offered Paul no aid. Therefore, it is best to understand the thorn as something which came from God for Paul's own good" (John Christopher Thomas, "'An Angel From Satan': Paul's Thorn in the Flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)," *JPT* 9 [1996]: 42-43). Neil Gregor Smith fails to see this, arguing that due to the extremely difficult nature of Paul's experience, it could hardly be God's will ("Thorn That Stayed," 411-12). Smith appears to be importing meaning into the text (eisegesis) rather than exporting meaning out of it (exegesis).

[180] The same principle is seen in Job's suffering (Job 1:1-2:10). Several scholars note this parallel between Paul and Job: e.g., Sampley, "Second Corinthians," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 165-66; Carson, *Triumphalism to Maturity*, 144. In the situation of both Paul and Job there is great mystery in attempting to reconcile the antinomy of God's sovereignty with human responsibility.

[181] From παρακαλέω, "to make a strong request for something, request, implore, entreat" (BDAG, 765).

[182] Calvin, *Second Corinthians*, 376. Dan G. McCartney notes the parallel between Paul's threefold request to have the thorn removed and Jesus' similar threefold request in Gethsemane ("No Grace Without Weakness," *WTJ* 61 [1999]: 12).

Paul the grace to cope with it. "My grace is sufficient for you."[183] There are three possibilities in how the Lord might have answered Paul's request. First, he could leave the thorn and provide no grace. Second, he could remove the thorn (thereby eradicating the need for grace). Third, he could leave the thorn and provide the grace to deal with it. Paul does not want to face the first option; thus the second option is his prayer. Yet he has seemingly not considered the third option: the presence of both the thorn *and* the grace to deal with it, instead of the absence of both these things, the latter of which Paul may have been considering the best possibility.

But why is the presence of both the trial and grace to cope the best option? Why not simply remove the thorn and do away with the problem? The answer is given in the second half of the Lord's response. The thorn remains, along with God's grace, because ("for," γὰρ) "power is made perfect in weakness." Though perhaps a bit overly formulaic, Windisch legitimately comments, "je mehr Leiden, desto mehr Kraft."[184] The presence of difficulties corresponds directly to the degree of receptivity to divine power. The verb here translated "made perfect" is τελέω, "to bring to an end, finish, complete;" in this verse, "power reaches its consummation or reaches perfection" in weakness.[185] This is not moral perfection on the part of the human, but perfection of divine power.[186] God's power is consummately fulfilled in man's weakness.

The ultimate goal, then, of Paul's thorn in the flesh is not the absence of difficulty but the presence of the power of God. This is consonant with, and leads us to, the second startling statement of verse nine, that made by Paul: "Therefore I will boast all the more

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[183] The present tense of ἀρκεῖ probably suggests ongoing sufficiency of grace for Paul.
[184] Hans Windisch, *Der zweite Korintherbrief* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1924), 392.
[185] BDAG, 997.
[186] So Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 420; Thomas, "Angel From Satan," 50; Gerald G. O'Collins, "Power Made Perfect in Weakness: 2 Cor 12:9-10," *CBQ* 33 (1971): 534.

gladly in my weaknesses"! The pattern of recounting a hardship only to boast in such manifest weakness echoes what we saw in 2 Corinthians 11:21-30. Once God has revealed to Paul that the way to divine power (δύναμις) is through human weakness (ἀσθένεια) rather than strength, Paul's mind embraces the very thing he was resisting and his eagerness to live painlessly is exchanged for an eagerness to exult instead in his weakness and experience the concomitant divine power.[187] Paul always wanted to experience the power of God; yet only now does he realize the startling *means* by which that power is appropriated. Therefore the reason the apostle boasts in his weakness is "in order that the power (δύναμις) of Christ may dwell upon (ἐπισκηνόω, 'set up a tent upon'[188]) me."

The Fruit of the Thorn (v. 10)

This brings us to the fruit of the thorn. Even that phrase, however, seems contradictory. How does that which is sharp and painful produce that which is edifying and valuable? Are we contradicting what another teacher at another time had said—namely, "each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush" (Lk. 6:44)? How does a thorn produce fruit?

The answer has already been seen: God's power is made perfect or fulfilled in human weakness. Human weakness and suffering are never ends in themselves[189]—it

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[187] Contra Jan Lambrecht, who argues that even in 12:9 Paul's "boasting of weaknesses is still foolish boasting" ("The Fool's Speech and Its Context: Paul's Particular Way of Arguing in 2 Cor 10-13," *Bib* 82 [2001]: 307). Rather Paul has shown that there is a wisdom in that which the world judges to be folly; cf. 1 Cor 3:18, "If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise." In 2 Cor 12:9, Paul has taken his own advice.

[188] Cf. Heb. שָׁכַן, "abide, dwell."

[189] H. H. Drake Williams unfortunately falls into this trap, understanding Paul to be saying in 12:9 that weakness is inherently good (*The Wisdom of the Wise*, 153-54).

exists neither in the first two nor in the last two chapters of the Bible, neither in Eden nor in the New Eden—yet it is the primary channel of God's power in between these two stages of glory. That is, "the grace and power of God interlock with human lives at the point of mortal weakness."[190] As Schlatter observes, this would have been absurd to the Corinthians; Paul has done what only a silly fool would do: "Nun beschließt Paulus die Rede, von der er sagt, daß sie keinen Verstand habe.[191] Er schämt sich ihrer; nun hat er in der Tat getan, was nur ein törichter Mensch tun kann."[192] Yet such strength in weakness is precisely the apostle's point. The root δύναμ- (power/strength) appears twice in verse nine and once here in verse 10; the same is true for the root ἀσθεν- (weak). Paul is emphasizing the contrast.

In verse nine Paul boasts in his weaknesses. He now goes even farther than that to say he "delights" (εὐδοκῶ) in weakness, as well as "in insults, in hardships, in persecutions and difficulties."[193] One may boast and yet still not delight, for the former can be merely intellectual; only the latter engages the heart. Yet Paul not only boasts but *delights*. Why? Because "whenever I am weak, then I am strong." As a result of the fact that "power is made perfect in weakness," one can see the "strength" to which Paul here refers at the end of verse 10 as parallel to the power of God of verse nine (moreover, δύναμις is used in both instances). Paul's weakness is not an end in itself, but a vehicle through which the power of God is manifest.[194] In this way the brambly brings forth the

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[190] Barnett, *Message of 2 Corinthians*, 179.
[191] Schlatter is referring to 11:21 (ἐν ἀφροσύνῃ λέγω).
[192] *Paulus, Der Bote Jesu*, 669.
[193] Sampley suggests "an ever more severe gradation" in this list of troubles ("Second Corinthians," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 167).
[194] Contra J. A. Loubser, who promisingly labels verse 10 "paradoxical irony" yet by this refers to the Greco-Roman rhetoric of power relations, rendering the meaning of the verse, "All power/authority I have, is my powerlessness" ("A New Look at Paradox and Irony in 2 Corinthians 10-13," *Neot* 26/2 [1992]: 511).

bountiful. Paul has been brought to understand human frailty in exactly the opposite way as did the slanderous false teachers at Corinth. One scholar describes the natural human understanding of δύναμις as being "power-in-power," whereas Paul has learned that the δύναμις of God is a "power-in-weakness."[195] This truth he commends to the Corinthians.

Epistolary Climax

The purpose of this more detailed exegesis of 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 is to suggest that these four verses, and supremely verse 10, represent the climax of the epistle.[196] While it would be foolish to force a solitary passage out in front of the rest if the text itself does not invite such a singling out, verse 10—"When I am weak, then I am strong"—crystallizes the principle which is fleshed out in sundry ways throughout the letter. This is the antidote to Corinthian worldliness. Nowhere does Paul put it more clearly or emphatically. When one grasps the foundationally paradigmatic principle that strength comes *through* weakness, not *in spite of* it, much of the rest of 2 Corinthians is simultaneously illuminated. 12:10 is the root from which much of the rest of the epistle

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Rather, Paul's powerlessness opens the way for *Christ's* power; this is argued rightly by Barré ("Qumran and 'Weakness'"; see esp. 220).

[195] Ibid., 178-79. James M. Scott rightly comments on v. 9 that "The idea of strength in weakness must seem counterintuitive, especially to the opponents, who 'take pride in what is seen' (2 Cor. 5:12)" (*2 Corinthians* 230). O'Collins unnecessarily restricts Paul's statement of strength in weakness to Paul himself, arguing (against the majority of German scholarship) that it ought not to be seen as a more general principle ("Power Made Perfect in Weakness," 533-35). This appears to this author to be both a false dichotomy and the introduction of a question the text does not mean to answer (i.e., is the principle of 12:10 for Paul only or for all Christians?).

[196] Contra, e.g., J. T. Dean, who argues that "The key to the understanding of the Epistle as a whole is to be found in 7:6-12, where we are told that Paul was raised from the depths of dejection and anxiety to the heights of joy" ("The Great Digression," *ExpTim* 50 [1938-39]: 86). Wan is similarly weak (and surprisingly so in light of the title of his study) on the role of 12:7-10, and especially verse 10, in 2 Corinthians (*Power in Weakness*, 147).

sprouts—"In a sense, it is the underlying lesson [Paul] has been trying to them all through."[197]

Paul Barnett concurringly comments on 12:9:

> The power of Christ is . . . power-in-weakness, for his grace is apprehended only in the awareness of our weakness. This is not, we emphasize, merely a warm 'devotional thought.' It is at the very heart of the gospel and the argument of this letter. Paul related how in Asia he had been 'beyond power,' 'crushed,' (1:8). He had acknowledged himself to be an expendable 'jar of clay' who can cope with adversity only by the 'all-surpassing power of God' (4:7). Paul's ministry, which was marked by such pain, was possible only through the 'power of God' (6:7). The grace and power of God interlock with human lives at the point of mortal weakness.[198]

Sampley similarly concludes, "The notion of God's power being perfected or brought to its fullness in weakness . . . is a fundamental Pauline conviction, though nowhere else said so poignantly or forcefully."[199] Geoffrey B. Wilson agrees that in 2 Corinthians 12:9 Paul "reaches the climax of the entire epistle in this revelation of the secret of his power, a secret whose meaning was far beyond the misunderstanding of his boastful rivals."[200] And P. E. Hughes similarly describes this verse as "the summit of the epistle." He suggests that "From this vantage-point, the entire range of Paul's apostleship is seen focus."[201]

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[197] Wright, *2 Corinthians*, 133.
[198] *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, 179.
[199] "Second Corinthians," 166-67.
[200] *2 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 160.
[201] *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 451. So also Hans Dieter Betz, "Eine Christus-Aretalogie bei Paulus (2 Kor 12,7-10)," *ZTK* 66 (1969): 288-305. Jan Lambrecht appears to place 12:9-10 as the center of at least ch. 10-13 when he writes of these four chapters, "In a lengthy discourse, surrounded by an equally extensive context, Paul shows how the power of Christ is made perfect in his human weakness. Paul depicts his so-called weaknesses but also, in them, his God-given human strength: whenever Paul is weak, then he is strong (cf. 12,9-10)" ("The Fool's Speech," 324). So also Loubser, "Paradox and Irony," 514-16.

Though Paul takes a few more chapters to come down the other side of the mountain, this is the pinnacle of the letter, bringing into sharpest focus the paradigmatic principle by which all thirteen chapters of 2 Corinthians seek to expose the Corinthian error. That principle is that less is more.

Superiority Through Inferiority

> *I have been a fool, you yourselves forced me. For I myself ought to be commended by you; for in nothing was I inferior to the super-apostles, even though I am nothing.* (12:11)

There is only one major explicit instance of paradox in Paul's descent down the final 25 verses of 2 Corinthians (13:4). Yet one finds less robust statements of paradox sprinkled elsewhere, such as here in 12:11, as Paul continues to expose the folly of the super-apostles. He labels himself a fool (ἄφρων; cf. v. 6), since he has just spent considerable time reviewing his own undeniably commendable spiritual resumé, including a visit to heaven itself and the sight of things not able to be captured in human language. Yet the antics of the Corinthians themselves have fueled such folly. "Paul hopes by the material in the Fool's Discourse to bring about a transvaluation of the Corinthians' values and of their criteria for apostles," writes Ben Witherington. "This required him to use irony, invective, and paradox to make clear to his converts this message: *Things are not as they seem!*"[202]

Paul then states that he was not inferior (lit. "lacking," ὑστέρησα) to his detractors while also admitting that he is nothing. Such a claim initially makes no sense at all; if one is nothing, one is certainly not superior. Yet this is precisely the point. Paul is using such an alarmingly ironic assessment to expose the foolishness of inter-apostolic comparing.

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[202] Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 464.

There is a clear connection between this verse and 11:5, the only other verse in which Paul explicitly mentions the "super-apostles":

11:5	12:11
Λογίζομαι γὰρ μηδὲν ὑστερηκέναι τῶν ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων.	οὐδὲν γὰρ ὑστέρησα τῶν ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων εἰ καὶ οὐδέν εἰμι.

Instructive for our purposes is to note the context in which 11:5 occurs. "For I consider myself to lack nothing of the super-apostles. But even if I am unskilled in word, I am not so in knowledge . . ." (11:5-6) On one level, then, Paul *was* inferior to the super-apostles: in natural speaking ability (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-5). This is what we learn from 11:5. Yet on a deeper level, missed by the Corinthians, Paul was not inferior—indeed, "the signs of an apostle were worked out among you in all endurance, signs and wonders and also powers" (12:12). By the world's standards of eloquence and rhetorical persuasion, Paul was an utter failure. Yet therein lay the apostle's strength, a paradoxical truth that had not yet sunk in at the church in Corinth. For Paul's rhetorical plainness paved the way for truly divine influence. And so Paul argues that though he was weak in speech (11:5), he was powerful in a deeper and more profound way (12:11-12). Such a confluence of weakness and strength—and even, one might argue, such weakness leading to strength—was simply not on the Corinthians' radar of legitimate apostolicity. "*I have become a fool* because I have joined in the activity I have condemned in others," paraphrases Barrett—"arguing myself to be a better Jew, a more devoted servant of Christ, than they, then driven to the paradox of boasting in weakness."[203]

[203] *Second Corinthians*, 319. Emphasis original.

Gladness Through Exhaustion

I myself will most gladly[204] *spend and be spent on behalf of your souls.* (12:15)

The Corinthians smirked at, and were probably offended by, Paul's utter lack of burdening the church (12:13, 16). For Paul's strategy was to spend himself freely on behalf of his disciples rather than encourage a tit-for-tat system of relational leverage by which Paul offered service to the church only as the church reciprocally cared for him.

Such free service the Corinthians found contemptible. For they had failed to grasp Paul's apostolic approach of spending himself for the sake of others, as 12:15 explains. The Corinthians thought that the way to be blessed by Paul was by furnishing him with the usual accoutrements due a real apostle. But for Paul, to be spent (a lessening) is in fact purposeful and gainful: it is for the souls of the Corinthians. "Such sufferings, indeed," writes Barnett, "validate his ministry as a ministry of Christ, as opposed to that of the triumphalist 'superlative' apostles."[205]

Upbuilding Through Defenselessness

> *All this time you think that we are defending ourselves to you. In the sight of God we are speaking; and all things, beloved, on behalf of your upbuilding.* (12:19)

Paul continues to assure his readers that he is not interested in laud as the world gives but as God gives. The apostle's ministry and letters have not been intended as a self-defense, for Paul is judged by God, not the Corinthians ("It is the Lord who judges

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[204] "Ηδιστα, as in 12:9.
[205] Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 586.

me," 1 Cor. 4:5).[206] And this is not for the sake of Paul but them—"on behalf of your (ὑπὲρ . . . ὑμῶν) souls" (12:15), "on behalf of your (ὑπὲρ . . . ὑμῶν) upbuilding" (12:19). Paul's motivation in refusing to burden the Corinthians was not to remain at a safe distance relationally, sheltered from the strain of truly incarnational service. Rather it was out of love. The Corinthians must stop judging as the world judges. Paul and Titus (12:18) are acting out of grace, not out of relational compulsion due to a debt owed. The preposition ὑπὲρ used throughout this passage is critical here. Paul is acting on behalf of the Corinthians.

Such a paradigm, however, of (positively) building others up while (negatively) refusing to defend oneself, seems to have jarred with Corinthian sensibilities. "At first hearing," writes Harris, "it might have appeared that Paul's 'apology' was motivated by an egotistic and selfish desire for vindication and the protection of his reputation, but in reality (δὲ) this 'apology' and all that he said and did (τὰ πάντα) was aimed at building up the Corinthians."[207] Barnett helpfully connects this verse with the theme of paradox throughout the letter when he speaks of

> Paul's emphasis throughout the letter on the power of God impinging on his "weaknesses" (i.e., sufferings-in-ministry). Here the motif of the death and resurrection of Jesus is not only central to the gospel message; death and resurrection also carry over into his own experience, and beyond him to other believers. . . . The God who raises the dead rescued Paul, as he testifies throughout this letter, from peril in Asia (1:8-10), from persecutions in general (4:7-14; 6:4-7), from the powerlessness of the unremoved thorn (12:7-9), and in his discipline of them (13:3-4). But Paul has written about himself not to defend himself so much as to edify his readers.[208]

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[206] For Paul, it is God "in whose presence he lives (4:2; 8:21; cf. 7:12), before whom he speaks in ministry (2:17; 12:19) and whose potential future witness against him he faces (1:23; 5:10-11)" (Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 95).

[207] *Second Corinthians*, 895-96. Barnett perceptively suggests that this verse (12:19) sums up the entire letter so far (*Second Corinthians*, 591).

[208] Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 593.

Power Through Weakness

> *[Christ] is not weak unto you but is powerful among you. For even though he was crucified out of weakness, yet he lives out of the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but we will live with him out of the power of God unto you.* (13:3b-4)

Here at the close of the letter, Paul brings the Corinthians back to the foundation from which all paradoxical language describing Christianity has sprung: the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.[209] "The understanding of the crucifixion as the event in which Christ proved radically 'weak,'" writes Gerald O'Collins of Paul's admissions of weakness in chapters 4, 6, 11, and 12, "forms the background to Paul's whole discussion."[210] Thus in one of the clearest expressions of paradox in the epistle, Paul explains that Christ is not, as he appeared outwardly to those who killed him, weak.[211] He is powerful.

The logic is as follows:

1. Christ was weak at one time; indeed, he was crucified
2. Yet he is now powerful, due to living by the power of God
3. Similarly, we are weak through our union with him[212]
4. Yet this same weakness which unites us to his weakness unites us also to his power

With Christ, the paradigm-setter, power came through weakness—not in the avoidance of it. So it is with his followers. "Paul is weak in Christ, granted," writes J. Paul Sampley, "but that shared weakness unambiguously attests to Paul's own status in Christ and gives Paul the grounds to warn any opponents at Corinth that he, and those who stand with him,

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[209] See Loubser, "Paradox and Irony," 516. The only other extended and explicit connection between the paradox of strength-in-weakness and the experience of Christ is 5:11-21, though 8:9 is a powerful (despite its brevity) reminder of the paradigm-setting and paradoxical death of Christ.

[210] "Power Made Perfect in Weakness," 532.

[211] ESV: "he is not weak *in dealing with you*" (εἰς ὑμᾶς οὐκ ἀσθενεῖ); the same phrase is rendered likewise in verse 4.

[212] On union with Christ in this passage, see Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 916-17.

currently share proleptically in '*God's power,*' which has already been expressed authoritatively in Christ's resurrection."[213]

Approval Through Apparent Disapproval

> *We pray to God that you might not do anything evil, not in order that we ourselves might appear approved (δόκιμοι), but in order that you yourselves might do good, even if we ourselves appear to be unapproved (ἀδόκιμοι).* (13:7)

The root α/δόκιμο- appears four times in 13:5-7. Paul's point here in verse seven is that his aim is not the Corinthians' approval of him but their obedience—"that you yourselves might do good." Corinthian sanctification trumps Paul's status in the Corinthians' eyes when these two are at loggerheads. This is a remarkable statement in light of Paul's sustained apostolic defense in chapters 10-13. And so, says Paul, even if it appears (φαίνω) that he himself has failed, Paul is content.[214] Again, then, outward appearances—what seems to be true—is not equivalent with what is actually true. Barnett therefore rightly connects the power-through-weakness motif of 12:10 with this verse.[215] Paul's ministerial victory is gauged not by the Corinthians' acceptance of him but by their faithfulness to the teaching handed down to them, even if such faithfulness involves a rejection of Paul's continuing ministry among them. By the world's standards, Paul has manifestly failed in light of the meager results in the Corinthian opinion polls. But by an

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[213] "Second Corinthians," 176. Emphasis original. Cf. Calvin, *Second Corinthians*, 395. David Alan Black writes that 2 Corinthians will not make sense "apart from a recognition of the close connection in his thought between Christ and weakness. The christological orientation of Paul's weakness language is clearer here than in any other of his writings" ("*Paulus Infirmus*: The Pauline Concept of Weakness," *GTJ* [1984]: 87).

[214] ESV: "though we may seem to have failed."

[215] *Second Corinthians*, 610.

unseen standard, Paul has succeeded—as long as the Corinthians do good as a result of his ministry.[216]

Strength Through Weakness

> *For we rejoice whenever we ourselves are weak, and you yourselves are strong.* (13:9)

Even more similar to 2 Corinthians 12:10 than 13:7 is this verse.

		WEAKNESS	(UNTO)	STRENGTH
12:10		ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ,		τότε δυνατός εἰμι.
13:9	χαίρομεν	γὰρ ὅταν ἡμεῖς ἀσθενῶμεν,		ὑμεῖς δὲ δυνατοὶ ἦτε·

Whereas in the earlier passage, however, Paul's weakness is a means of strength for *himself*, here Paul's weakness is a means to strength for *the Corinthians*. Paul's weakness is on behalf of the Corinthians' strength. And this weakness on the part of Paul is not pointless, but is a gain for the Corinthians ("you are strong"). Yet Paul's own benefit is not thereby excluded: rather the Corinthians' well-being is cause for rejoicing (χαίρομεν)! Thus Paul wins too.

In our final passage of analysis, then, we see once again the theme running all through 2 Corinthians. There is a death that is unto life. Strength comes through weakness. Less is more.

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[216] Barrett notes the similarity here between Paul's and Jesus' denigration for the sake of his disciples (*Second Corinthians*, 339).

Conclusion and Synthetic Reading

There are 257 verses in 2 Corinthians. Examined in this chapter as containing some element of paradox are 90 of them (38 percent). In this analysis, then, well more than one-third of 2 Corinthians clearly speaks to Paul's apostolic paradox that less is more. It is not the contention of this thesis either that in all 90 verses the paradox is in the foreground of Paul's mind as he writes or that in the remaining 167 verses there is not a trace of paradox whatsoever. Rather, this study argues that in at least one-third of the letter Paul either implicitly or explicitly addresses the Corinthian church and its errors of excess by employing paradox, that this is indicative of a fundamental underlying principle of paradox running through the whole letter, that this is rooted in the problem(s) of excess in Corinth, and that this paradox is supremely crystallized in 12:10.

Lest we lose sight of the forest for the trees, let us close this chapter by bringing some cohesion to these disparately analyzed passages. To do so we will offer a synthetic, flowing reading of 2 Corinthians, done through the eyes of paradox. This will provide a summaric conclusion to this chapter.

In chapter one Paul begins by reflecting on the comfort of God to those who are afflicted, arguing that comfort does not come once one passes through suffering, but *in* that suffering (1:5). Indeed, to the degree one experiences the sufferings of Christ, to that degree one experiences his comfort (1:7). Paul relates this truth to his own life, in which he was brought to the point of utter and absolute despair in order that he might rely on the resurrection-wielding God, a new start for Paul which he would presumably not have

realized apart from such a difficult experience (1:8-9). The apostle roots all this in the truth that he is operating not by the world's principles but by God's grace (1:12).

In the next chapter Paul refers to his painful letter to the Corinthians by saying that it was necessary for him to write such hard things in order to (counterintuitively) commend to them his great love for them (2:4). Paul goes to the Old Testament in chapter three and (in what appears to be quite un-Corinthian!) refuses to commend himself to them. They themselves provide the only commendation he needs (3:1-3), and the significant competence Paul does claim is wholly from God, not his own apostolic *curriculum vitae* (3:4-6).

In chapter four the principle of paradox intensifies as Paul reiterates that he refuses self-promotion (4:5) before addressing human mortality and the christologically-fueled reality that the life of Christ is manifested in human death (4:7-18). For this reason one need not despair if this earthly body decays, for Christians possess an eternal home in heaven (5:1-10). This leads into a more pointed discussion of Paul's apostolic ministry, reinforcing yet again, contrary to Corinthian sentiment, that he refuses to commend himself as do those who "boast in outward appearance" (5:12). Here Paul again roots his ministry and the paradoxical nature of the Christian life in Christ himself (5:15-21). We have seen this christological grounding to be the note on which Paul began (1:5) and on which he will close the letter (13:4). Moreover, in the midst of this discussion of Christ and the reconciliation he provides (5:12-21), Paul concludes that "therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh" (v. 16)—the very thing the Corinthians appear to have been doing.

In chapter six we are confronted with the first of two lengthy lists of commendatory sufferings in the life of the apostle—yes, sufferings, not successes. Paul continues to hammer home the point that sufferings are not to be despised but embraced, since in and through suffering one experiences the abundance of Christ-saturated life (poignantly crystallized in 6:10). For this reason, moving into chapter seven, Paul's affliction is in fact a nexus of joy for the apostle (7:4). Again the theme of comfort in the midst of affliction comes through (7:5-8). Here also Paul refers to the painful letter earlier addressed in chapter two, and yet again he speaks of it in paradoxical terms: he rejoices that it grieved the Corinthians, since it led to repentance (7:8-10). Such a category of joy seems not to have existed in the Corinthian mindset.

Chapters eight and nine introduce a new topic *thematically* while retaining, I have argued, the undergirding of paradox *principially*. That new topic is financial generosity on behalf of the church in Jerusalem. The principle, as before, is paradox. Paul writes, for instance, of the Macedonians, whose poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity and whose affliction overflowed in joy, both pairs of which contain a clear paradox (8:2). In 8:9 Paul returns to the foundational paradox—the experience of the incarnate Christ—but interprets it this time in terms of money. Exodus 16 is cited as an Old Testament example of paradox as it describes the abundance enjoyed by those who trusted God instead of hoarding. And in verses six and following of chapter nine Paul argues that to the degree one gives (sows), one receives (reaps). The apostle's use of this agricultural metaphor is thoroughly appropriate and helpfully illumining here, for while the Corinthians were certainly interested in reaping, they were blind to the fact that such reaping only comes by sowing—giving, against one's instincts, actually results in blessing, for one's gift will

bear (spiritual) fruit at a later time. In sum, "you will be enriched in every way for all your generosity" (9:11).

In chapters ten to thirteen Paul launches into his well-documented lambaste against the superapostles. Throughout these chapters he continues to employ paradox to this end, culminating in the climax of the epistle, 12:10. In 10:3-5 Paul explains that he is fighting a different kind of war than the Corinthians realize, and that therefore he does not compare himself with other leaders (10:12), as the superapostles were wont to do. Striking again the theme of commendation, Paul reiterates that it is God who commends one's ministry, rather than worldly self-commendation. Contrary to Corinthian approach, Paul humbles himself in order that they might be exalted (11:7). The theme of *boasting* picks up steam at this point, as Paul continues to paradoxically boast in that which the world despises and reject that in which the world boasts.[217] Here we discover the second lengthy (and paradoxical!) list of afflictions (11:22-29), which Paul ends with the upside-down statement which we have seen to be so typical of, and central to, this letter: "If it is necessary to boast, I will boast of the things of my weakness" (11:30).

Paul then speaks in chapter 12 of an experience that would give him the supreme platform for superapostle-like boasting, as he was caught up to the third heaven (12:1-6).

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[217] The verb καυχάομαι occurs 37 times in the New Testament, over half of which—20 occurrences—are found in 2 Corinthians (and 17 of those 20 are found in 2 Cor 10-12). Of the 11 occurrences of καύχησις, 6 crop up in 2 Corinthians, and in the 11 instances of καύχημα, 2 Corinthians owns 3. From a strictly statistical standpoint, then, boasting appears to hold unique significance in this epistle. Yet it is apparent even aside from statistics. In both Corinthian epistles, Paul is compelled to cite a conflation of Jeremiah 9:23-24—"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17). This OT citation captures both the heart of the Corinthian problem and Paul's response to it. For more on boasting in 2 Corinthians, see especially the 1999 dissertation of George Brown Davis, which makes a thorough examination of boasting in 2 Corinthians (*True and False Boasting in 2 Cor. 10-13* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999]). See also P. Genths, "Der Begriff des *kauchema* bei Paulus," *NKZ* 38 (1927): 501-521; Jam Lambrecht, "Dangerous Boasting," and "Paul's Boasting About the Corinthians: A Study of 2 Corinthians 8:24-9:5," *NovT* 40 (1998): 352-368; Christopher Forbes, "Comparison, Self-Praise, and Irony: Paul's Boasting and the Conventions of Hellenistic Rhetoric," *NTS* 32 (1986): 1-30; and Morrice, *Joy in the New Testament*, 49-55, 116-121. Note also the comments of Barnett (*Second Corinthians*, 94) and Barrett (*Second Corinthians*, 165-66).

Yet God prevented pride subsequent to that experience by giving to Paul a thorn in the flesh, the purpose of which was to bring Paul to rest in and boast of his weaknesses, since God's power is made perfect in such weakness (12:9). In this way, Paul says, when he is weak, then he is strong. This crystallization in 12:10 of the paradox in of the Christian life gives expression to the backbone running all through the epistle. Remaining instances of paradox include Paul's willingness to be utterly spent on behalf of someone else (namely, the Corinthians; 12:15), his claim to be speaking only in the sight of God, not men (12:19), and the paradoxical power-in-weakness of Christ himself (13:3-4), a note on which the epistle of paradox draws to a close. This is also what gives Paul peace about appearing to have failed (13:7-9).

We are confronted with compelling evidence, then, that paradox provides the key to the entire epistle of 2 Corinthians. We have looked as passages from all thirteen chapters of the letter and discovered the counterintuitive nature of Paul's apostolic message. This study therefore goes beyond Savage's work, which claims that it is in chapters two through seven, and especially chapter four, "which evokes [Paul's] paradoxical teaching of power through weakness."[218] This epistle, I suggest, is thoroughly soaked with paradox as Paul embattles the worldly mindset at Corinth. To the various points of excess evident in Corinth, Paul replies throughout the letter with a decisive undercut by exposing the fact that the power and glory the Corinthians are after are found in the very things they are rejecting.

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[218] *Power Through Weakness*, 103.

CHAPTER 4

TRADITION AND THE PARADOX: 2 CORINTHIANS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Two questions remain before we can conclude our study. First, is the paradox that is so prevalent in 2 Corinthians, according to the thesis of this paper, acknowledged in *history* as a hermeneutical key to the book? Second, is this paradox evident elsewhere in the Christian *Scripture*? Over the course of the next two chapters I will suggest that the answer to the first question is no, and the second question, yes. No, there is no one in the history of exegesis who has seen paradox as having an interpretively controlling place in the proper understanding of the letter; and yes, the paradox is seen elsewhere in the Bible. Nowhere outside 2 Corinthians, however, is it a pervasive theme throughout the book.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to place the argument of this thesis in historical context. While the text must have the last word, it is foolish to ignore the insights of past scholarship. Indeed, we would do well to be suspicious of novel interpretations of Scripture that find no historical corroboration. Nonetheless I will suggest in this chapter that few prominent biblical interpreters have exegetically worked through the epistle with a view toward comprehensive epistolary synthesis (John Chrysostom, John Calvin, and Charles Hodge being the notable exceptions). More to the point of this thesis, no interpreter (these three included) expound 2 Corinthians in such a way that paradox provides a hermeneutical key by which a unifying rubric to the letter emerges.

We will divide the past two thousand years of church history into four epochs: the patristic period, the medieval period, the time of the Reformation, and the post-Reformation period. In each epoch we will summarize the interpretation of 2 Corinthians. In each period we will begin with a brief orientation to the interpretation of 2 Corinthians in that epoch before moving on to ascertain the degree to which paradox was viewed as a latent motif throughout the book and therefore exegetically illuminative.

The Patristic Period (A.D. 100-500)

The first thing to be said of 2 Corinthians in this period is that few patristic commentators worked extensively in this epistle. The only surviving commentaries of Origen, for example, "the greatest biblical scholar of antiquity,"[219] are those on Song of Songs, Matthew, John, and Romans. Augustine, amidst his voluminous theological output, also wrote commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount, the Gospels, Romans, and Galatians, but not on the Corinthian correspondence.[220] In a collection of first and second century writings including those of Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Papias, not a single direct citation from 2 Corinthians is to be found.[221] Ερμηνεία (*hermeneia*)—"a term used in the Greek-speaking world for the detailed, systematic exposition of a

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[219] Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 83.

[220] Ibid., 92-93. Edith M. Humphrey notes, however, that "Augustine devoted an entire book of his *Literal Meaning of Genesis* (12.28, 34) to the intricacies of 2 Cor. 12:1-9" ("Book of 2 Corinthians," in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, gen. ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 138).

[221] *The Fathers of the Church, Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M.-F. Marique, and Gerald G. Walsh (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press: 1947).

scriptural work"[222]— comes few and far between in the early centuries after Christ concerning Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth.

What then about isolated references to portions of 2 Corinthians? Here we find a bit more to work with than when dealing with systematic exposition, but this epistle still takes a noticeable back seat to Paul's first canonical letter sent to Corinth. In a tally of references to each of these two epistles as cited by the early church fathers up to Nicea, 1 Corinthians is referenced more than three times as often as 2 Corinthians.[223]

Exceptions can be found, however. As early as Ignatius we find clear echoes of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians, though not direct citations.[224] Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* possibly alludes to 2 Corinthians twice: 2 Corinthians 3:13 in chapter eight, and 2 Corinthians 4:18 in chapter 22.[225] Tertullian certainly curried support from 2 Corinthians in his treatise "On Purity," in which he notes points of contrast between 1 and 2 Corinthians.[226] In the same work he also utilizes 2 Corinthians 4:1-7:1 at length in justifying Paul's rejection of quick forgiveness for one who commits incest.[227]

Yet while these utilizations of 2 Corinthians are decidedly rare, a few phrases from 2 Corinthians proved to be of decisive importance to the fathers. To two of these we now turn.

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[222] William R. Schoedel, *A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadephia: Fortress, 1985), ix.
[223] 1 Corinthians: 1,275 references; 2 Corinthians: 376 references (A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume IX: Bibliographical Synopsis and General Index* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986], 254-259).
[224] Cf. Ignatius' letter to the Trallians, 3:3, and 2 Cor 12:6; Eph 17:1 and 2 Cor 2:14; Rom 5:1-3 and 2 Cor 11:23-27; Philadelphians 6:3 and 2 Cor 11:9; 12:16. The first reference in each pair refers to letters of Ignatius and can be found in William R. Schoedel, *A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadephia: Fortress, 1985).
[225] *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, Volume 55: St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against the Heresies*, translated by Dominic J. Unger (New York: Paulist, 1992), 42, 80, respectively.
[226] *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, Volume 28: Tertullian: Treatises on Penance*, translated by William P. Le Saint (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1959), 90-95.
[227] In distinction from one who has merely been prideful (Ibid., 95-98).

"All the promises of God"

Richard N. Longenecker writes of the apostolic age that

> the first Christian preachers seem to have made no sharp distinction between literalist treatments of the text, Midrash exegesis, Pesher interpretation, and the application of accepted predictive prophecies. All of these were employed, and at times there appears a blending and interweaving of methods. What they were conscious of, however, was interpreting the Scriptures from a Christocentric perspective, in conformity with the exegetical teaching and example of Jesus, and along Christological lines.[228]

For this reason, 2 Corinthians 1:20 was an important text in the earliest preaching in the Christian church: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]." Before the division arose between the allegorically-oriented Alexandrians and their more literally-inclined Antiochene cousins,[229] the controlling interpretive framework in the early decades of the church was that which placed Christ at the center of all of Scripture, not only of the teaching of the apostles but also the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. It is therefore not surprising that a verse such as 2 Corinthians 1:20 would bubble to the surface as having particular interpretational significance.[230] The "event of Jesus Christ," writes C. K. Barrett, "itself the fulfillment of the Old Testament as a whole (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20), is for [the New Testament writers] so final and radical that after it no pattern could be simply reproduced."[231]

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[228] *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 103.

[229] The main hermeneutical distinctive of the Patristic period of the church is that between East and West, the West writing in Latin and known for its legal categories and emphasis on grace imputed, the East writing in Greek and known for its mystical categories and grace infused. The East was further divided, moreover, between the Alexandrian school, which interpreted largely allegorically, and the Antiochene school, which interpreted more literally, historically and contextually.

[230] See, e.g., Cyprian's comments on this verse in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume V: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 560. See also Ackroyd and Evans, *Beginnings to Jerome*, 400-401, 411. Herein it is suggested that this christocentric focus in interpretation be called the "typological" pattern.

[231] Ackroyd and Evans, *Cambridge History of the Bible, Beginnings to Jerome*, 411.

Letter and Spirit

Another passage is cited even more frequently by the fathers despite the paucity of methodical exegesis of 2 Corinthians: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (3:6). In the Alexandrian school, "the scriptural passages used for doctrinal ends were normally taken out of their original context and considered in isolation, producing results sometimes quite foreign to the sense which they would have had if interpreted within their proper context."[232] Thus this verse was repeatedly used in support of the Alexandrian allegorical method of interpretation (that of "the Spirit") instead of the Antiochene literalistic method (that of "the letter").[233] The result was that "the letter" in this verse was taken to mean the literal certain method of interpretation, while "the Spirit" denoted the spiritual (allegorical) method of interpretation. Origen especially popularized such an interpretation of this verse.

Thus a hermeneutical discussion (how to deduce the meaning of a text) is read into this verse, while context of the passage—which indicates that "the letter" and "the Spirit" refer rather to epochs in salvation history[234]—is wholly neglected. As a result, the Alexandrians misinterpret the Apostle as referring to methods of interpretation. Says Origen: "Here undoubtedly the letter means what is material and the spirit what is intellectual, which we also call spiritual. . . . For so long as a man does not attend to the spiritual meaning 'a veil lies upon his heart.'"[235] A modern scholar comments that for Origen, the "literal interpretation of the Law is the way of death. To follow it is to act not

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[232] Simonetti, *Patristic Exegesis*, 122.
[233] See Simonetti, *Patristic Exegesis*, 66; Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 97-98; Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 195; Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 70; Hauser and Watson, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 382-383; Ackroyd and Evans, *Beginnings to Jerome*, 473; Lampe, *Fathers to the Reformation*, 89. Note also the instructive comments in Moises Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 58-63.
[234] Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 271-275; Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 176-178.
[235] *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 8.

as a Christian but as a Jew."[236] A contexutal analysis of 2 Corinthians 3, however, demonstrates that this chapter has to do with a contrast between the Mosaic "ministry of death (v. 4) and the Pauline "ministry of life" (v. 5). The former is what Paul refers to by "letter," and the latter what he refers to by "Spirit."

Here we find, then, that literary context does not adequately control interpretation. Yet not only is context not taken into account of exegesis of this verse, it in fact appears to be the enemy; the Scripture is thought to carry timeless, transcendent truths which must not be limited to the (out-moded) historical and original meaning.[237]

Origen allegorized not only 2 Corinthians 3:6 in an ahistorical way but also 4:7—"we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." According to this verse, the Bible is an example of a treasure in a jar of clay, the treasure being God's sublime revelation and the clay jar the actual words in which it is transferred to humanity. And this is "to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." Again, literary context—which makes clear that the "jars of clay" in Paul's mind are "our bodies" (v. 10), "our mortal flesh" (v. 11), "our outer nature" (v. 16)—is relegated to an almost irrelevant role. Origen executes isogesis (reading his hermeneutical framework *into* the text) rather than exegesis (forming his hermeneutical framework *from* the text).[238]

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[236] Ackroyd and Evans, *Cambridge History of the Bible, Beginnings to Jerome*, 473.

[237] A notable exception to this line of thinking was, strangely, one later known mainly for his heretical beliefs, Pelagius, who comments on 3:6 thus: "There are some people who say that the literal sense of Scripture is the thing which kills, but this is to forget that not all Scripture is meant to be taken literally, nor can allegory be pressed into service in every passage. For just as some things are said in an allegorical way, so other things, like the commandments, will lose all their meaning if they are taken allegorically and become destructive. The spiritual meaning of Scripture is not found in allegory but in letting the meaning of the text explain the essence of truth" (J.-P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina [Paris: Migne, 1844-1864], 30:779, quoted in Gerald Bray, ed., *1-2 Corinthians*, ACC, Volume VII [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999], 217).

[238] Ackroyd and Evans, *Beginnings to Jerome*, 465.

Clement of Alexandria performs similar hermeneutical gymnastics regarding 2 Corinthians 4:18—"we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." Clement uses this verse as concluding support of modesty in the way we dress. After a query as to why animals feel perfectly content in the natural beauty God has given them ("the horse on his mane," for example), Clement quotes this verse in his concluding exhortation to women to do the same instead of beautifying themselves with all manner of make-up and "artificial beauty" which is simply "that they may ensnare men dazzled by appearances like senseless children."[239] Again, context indicates that the apostle is referring not to physical beauty by "the things that are seen" but physical suffering in which "our outer nature wasting away" (4:16). The appropriate exhortation is not that we resist beautifying ourselves, but that we resist seeing a direct correspondence between physical trials and spiritual progress (4:16-17).

The Polemical Need: Putting Out Fires

This was all largely due to the fact that the first several centuries of the church were devoted to (defensively) putting out theological fires with whatever extinguishing verse might be handy instead of (offensively) building a system of doctrine out of Scripture as a whole. Hence Simonetti writes that in the early church, "the apostolic message, which gradually crystallized into the writings of the New Testament, and even more the Old Testament, presented not an organic system of doctrine, but scattered claims, often linked to a particular occasion and not infrequently difficult to

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[239] *The Fathers of the Church, Volume 23: Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator*, translated by Simon P. Wood (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 207-208.

harmonise."[240] Put differently, "when the doctrines held by the opposing parties in a theological debate are duly supported by the authority of at least some scriptural passage, their overall orientation is often determined by more general presuppositions which decisively governed the interpretation of individual passages of Scripture."[241] He elsewhere further explains the defensive nature of Scriptural interpretation: "literal and allegorical interpretations of Scripture (whether of Old or New Testament) can alternate without being governed by any precise rules, following instead the needs which the author was required to meet, in situations which were polemical rather than exegetical."[242]

This is highly significant in making sense of the conspicuous omission of 2 Corinthians in the early church. To be sure, 2 Corinthians is not wholly absent from the writings of the early fathers, as noted above. Yet this epistle is not employed nearly as often in Patristic writings as other Pauline letters, and a contributing factor appears to have been the focus in 2 Corinthians on practical pastoral issues such as reconciliation among Christians and financial giving (notwithstanding theologically rich passages such as 5:21). While a letter such as Romans depicted Paul the professor and provided much anti-heresy ammunition, 2 Corinthians depicted Paul the pastor and provided less. Other parts of the canon were more often the source of theological appeal.[243] The fourth Gospel, for example, according to Simonetti, "given its highly speculative character, was used

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[240] Simonetti, *Patristic Exegesis*, 121.
[241] Ibid., 124.
[242] Ibid., 24-25.
[243] Furnish makes a valid point but perhaps carries it to too far when he says that "1 and 2 Corinthians yield an even better view of Paul's 'theology' than Romans, for in these letters we encounter the apostle thinking through the truth of the gospel in the context of the hard realities of life in the Greco-Roman world" ("Paul and the Corinthians: The Letters, the Challenges of Ministry, the Gospel," *Int* 52/3 [1998]: 229).

proportionally more than any other book of Scripture in the trinitarian and christological controversies."[244]

John Chrysostom

A notable exception to the conspicuous void in the Fathers of methodical exposition of 2 Corinthians is the "golden-mouthed" preacher who worked through Matthew and every New Testament book from John to Hebrews. While John Chrysostom's ultimate aim was not exposition but edification, his material coming to us not as theological treatises but as homilies, these sermons on 2 Corinthians are highly expositional. Chrysostom preaches straight through the text, taking ten or so verses with each homily.[245] The close attention paid by Chrysostom to the text is strikingly evident at times as he draws attention to the slightest of textual or linguistic details in drawing out the meaning of a verse.[246] Each sermon then concludes, after spending the first half or two-thirds in verse-by-verse exposition, with a few sustained points of application.

A typical extract of his homiletic exegesis of a verse is that of 2 Corinthians 12:10, found in Homily XXVI on 12:1:

> Ver. 10. "Wherefore I take pleasure in many weaknesses." Of what sort? Tell me. "In injuries, in persecutions, in necessities, in distresses."
>
> Seest thou how he has now revealed it in the clearest manner? For in mentioning the species of the infirmities he spake not of fevers, nor any return of that sort, nor any other bodily ailment, but of "injuries, persecutions, distresses."[247] Seest thou a

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[244] Simonetti, *Patristic Exegesis*, 128.
[245] Schaff, ed., *Homilies on Corinthians*, 271-420.
[246] In Homily XXVI, Chrysostom notes that the verb in 12:7 is not the aorist κολαφίσῃ but the present κολαφίζῃ, concluding it is significant that Paul speaks of a messenger of Satan "harassing" him even into the present and not only at some time in the past (Ibid., 400).
[247] The preacher is referring to his earlier suggestion that Paul's thorn was not a physical ailment but human opposition to his preaching, such as Alexander the coppersmith or Hymenaeus and Philetus (Ibid). This is

> single-minded soul? He longs to be delivered from those dangers; but when he heard God's answer that this benefitteth not, he was not only not sorry that he was disappointed of his prayer, but was even glad. Wherefore he said, "I take pleasure," 'I rejoice, I long, to be injured, persecuted, distressed for Christ's sake.' And he said these things both to check those, and to raise the spirits of these that they might not be ashamed at Paul's sufferings. For that ground was enough to make them shine brighter than all men.[248]

Here we see sermonic exposition that seeks to root the meaning of the text in the historical circumstances of the writer and his audience, while also laying a foundation for the bridges of application he is to build at the conclusion of his sermon.

Particularly illumining, in light of our discussion above of the typically allegorical interpretation of this verse, is Chrysostom's exposition of 2 Corinthians 3:6 in Homily VI. After quoting the last phrase of the verse—"For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life"—he explains:

> Yet these things he saith not absolutely; but in allusion to those who prided themselves upon the things of Judaism. And by "letter" here he meaneth the Law which punisheth them that transgress; but by "spirit" the grace which through Baptism giveth life to them who by sins were made dead. . . . What then is the meaning of "the letter killeth?" He had said tables of stone and hearts of flesh: so far he seemed to mention no great difference. He added that the former [covenant] was written with letters or ink, but this with the Spirit. . . . In the Law, he that hath sin is punished; here, he that hath sins cometh and is baptized and is made righteous, and being made righteous, he liveth, being delivered from the death of sin. The Law, if it lay hold on a murderer, putteth him to death; the Gospel, if it lay hold on a murderer, enlighteneth, and giveth him life.[249]

Chrysostom understands 2 Corinthians 3:6 as referring not to two divergent hermeneutical methods but to redemptive history: the letter is the Mosaic Law, the Spirit is the new life inaugurated in baptism and lived under the grace of the gospel.

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contrary to the common early view that the thorn was a bodily ailment, such as, according to Tertullian, "ear or head ache" (From "On Purity," Le Saint, *Tertullian*, 88-89).

[248] Schaff, ed., *Homilies on Corinthians*, 401.

[249] Ibid., 307.

Patristic Paradox in 2 Corinthians?

All this funnels into the following question: did the early church see paradox as central to understanding the message of 2 Corinthians? In light of much of the preceding discussion it is clear that, with the exception of Chrysostom, none of the fathers worked systematically through the epistle either homiletically or exegetically. While Chrysostom does not trace the theme of paradox systematically through the epistle, he does at pertinent points stop to consider the counterintuitive nature of Christianity, in which sufferings lead to comfort and weakness to strength. For example, concerning 2 Corinthians 12:10 ("When I am weak, then I am strong"), he comments:

> Where affliction is, there is also consolation; where consolation, there is grace also. For instance when [Paul] was thrown into the prison, then it was he wrought those marvellous things; when he was shipwrecked and cast away on that barbarous country, then more than ever was he glorified. When he went bound into the judgment-hall, then he overcame even the judge. And so it was too in the Old Testament; by their trials the righteous flourished. So it was with the three children, so with Daniel, with Moses, and Joseph; thence did they all shine and were counted worthy of great crowns. For then the soul is purified, when it is afflicted for God's sake: it then enjoys greater assistance as needing more help and worthy of more grace.[250]

He had earlier commented on 2 Corinthians 6:10 thus: "And let us therefore, when we suffer aught for Christ's sake, not merely bear it nobly but also rejoice. If we fast, let us leap for joy as if enjoying luxury; if we be insulted, let us dance as if praised; if we spend, let us feel as if gaining; if we bestow on the poor, let us count ourselves to receive."[251] Yet while Chrysostom clearly sees paradox as fundamental to true biblical religion, he does not expressly name it as a controlling theme of this epistle.

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[250] Ibid.
[251] Ibid., 340.

Though none of the early church leaders appear to have systematically traced it through 2 Corinthians, nevertheless at times the paradox pervasive in 2 Corinthians is undeniably present in the fathers. Ambrose provides a particularly conspicuous example, combining elements of 2 Corinthians 6 and Hebrews 11 as he writes of the banishment of Eusebius and Dionysius upon the Council of Milan, A.D. 355:

> They did not need a grave in their own country; a heavenly mansion was prepared for them. They wandered over the world as having nothing, and possessing all things. Wherever they were sent, it was to them a paradise. Abounding in the riches of faith, they could lack nothing. Poor in money, but rich in grace, they made others rich. They were tempted, but not slain; in fastings, in labours, in imprisonments, in watchings. Out of weakness they were made strong. They looked for no tempting delicacies; hunger filled them to the full. The summer heat did not parch them; they were refreshed with the hope of eternal grace. The frosts of icy regions did not crush them; their own devotion brought them the warm breath of spring. They feared no human chains; Jesus had set them free. They did not ask to be rescued from death; they took for granted that Christ would raise them from the dead.[252]

Ambrose is hitting upon the apostle's use of paradox in 2 Corinthians 6, specifically as seen in verses 8b-10: "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything."

Jerome perhaps comes closest to seeing paradox throughout 2 Corinthians as a unifying theme in his early fifth-century letter of consolation to Eustochium, whose mother, Paula, has recently died:

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[252] S. L. Greenslade, ed. and trans., *The Library of Christian Classics, Volume V: Early Latin Theology: Selections from Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose and Jerome* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 277. From "The Episcopal Election at Vercellae." Ambrose quotes 2 Cor 12:10 also in his account of the "Battle of the Basilicas" written to his older sister, Marcellina (Ibid., 215).

> In her frequent sickness and infirmities she used to say: "When I am weak, then I am strong;" "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" until "this corruptible shall have put on incorruption and this mortal shall have put on immortality," and again: "as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ;" and then "as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation."[253]

This is not, however, developed any further in the letter, despite the fact that all but one of these quotes is from 2 Corinthians (2 Cor. 12:10; 4:7; 1 Cor. 15:53; 2 Cor. 1:5, 7, respectively). The most we can say, then, is that while the early fathers understood the paradoxical nature of Christianity, they did not see this as particularly fundamental to a proper interpretation of 2 Corinthians.

In his refutations of Pelagius, Augustine repeatedly appeals to the most perspicuously paradoxical segment in the epistle: 12:9-10.[254] Yet his purpose in utilizing this passage is to demonstrate that even the most mature of Christians, such as Paul, are not perfectly righteous, as demonstrated in the fact that Paul needed to be given an affliction in order that he might be humbled.

In sum, while the fathers at times undeniably depict the reality of the counterintuitive nature of Christian faith, in which difficulties contain hidden depths of blessing, nowhere is this the result of exegesis of 2 Corinthians.

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[253] Ibid., 367.

[254] *The Works of Saint Augustine, Vol. 23: Answer to the Pelagians*, trans. Roland J. Teske, ed. John E. Rotelle (New York: New City, 1997), 97 (in "The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones"), 197 (in "The Spirit and the Letter"), and 240 (in "Nature and Grace").

The Medieval Period (A.D. 500-1500)

The Middle Ages do not provide the same degree of advance in our understanding of Scripture generally or of 2 Corinthians specifically that (say) the Reformation period does. This epoch is marked by Scholasticism's and monasticism's mutual preoccupation with one another. Moreover, despite their differences, both studied the Bible in a historical vacuum, comparing it with the early fathers but neither standing on the shoulders of these fathers to make their own contribution, nor approaching the Bible in the *heilsgeschichtliche* method championed later by the reformers. Indeed, the allegorical method of exegesis retained prevalence in the Patristic age, rather than being checked and matured by responsible historical-contextual interpretation.

Continued Corinthian Drought

The letter of 2 Corinthians in particular fared little better—if not worse—after the Patristic age than during it. Especially during the first half of the Medieval period, one is struck with the centrality of the Old Testament, and particularly the Wisdom literature, in biblical commentators. This was perhaps due to the gradual rise of the monastery, in which the Psalms figured in prominently as a source for liturgy and prayers.[255] Bonaventure is known, for example, for his work in Ecclesiastes.[256] Even more prominent was the focus on Song of Songs, as evidenced by the works of Bruno of Asti (in Italy), Honorius Augustodunus (in Germany), and Rupert of Deutz (in the

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[255] Jean Leclercq, "The Exegesis and Exposition of Scripture: From Gregory the Great to Saint Bernard," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. 2: The West from the Fathers to the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 189-190.
[256] Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 142.

Rhineland).[257] Though Bernard of Clairvaux did not produce a single commentary, he preached a series of eighty-six sermons on this piece of literature,[258] and it was Song of Songs which was expounded on the dying lips of Thomas Aquinas.[259]

Yet there seems to have been a reticence to expend a like amount of energy on the New Testament, and especially the epistles.[260] According to Smalley, "To treat [the role of pagan philosophies] in the context of a lecture on Scripture, even on one of the Pauline epistles, so rich in theology, proved too cumbersome and haphazard."[261]

Where did this leave 2 Corinthians? In a word, neglected. Bede, known predominantly for his *Ecclesiastical History*, also wrote several exegetical works on the New Testament, but none on the Corinthian correspondence.[262] A notable exception to this trend is Claudius of Turin (d. circa 827), who penned commentaries not only on 1 and 2 Corinthians but also on Matthew, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon, as well as several Old Testament historical books.[263]

Allegorical Interpretation

Some of the explanation for this void in the study of Paul is the continued influence of the allegorical method of biblical interpretation, earlier exemplified in the writing of Philo, Clement, and especially Origen. Robert Grant explains that in the

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[257] Leclercq, "Gregory the Great to Saint Bernard," 190-191. See also Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 137-138.
[258] Bray writes: "No book of the Bible received more attention during the Middle Ages than the Song of Songs. From the time of Hippolytus (*c.* A D 200) to that of Luther, there were at least sixty-four commentaries on the book, of which forty-five date from after 800. Virtually every major biblical expositor, and any number of minor ones, had something to say about this work, which remained a classic from one generation to the next" (*Biblical Interpretation*, 159).
[259] Grant, *Short History*, 91.
[260] Some work was done on the Gospels, such as the harmony produced by Zachary of Besancon (Leclercq, "Gregory the Great to Saint Bernard," 191; Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 138).
[261] "The Bible in the Medieval Schools," 198.
[262] Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 135.
[263] Ibid.

Medieval period, "The most important and characteristic method of biblical interpretation . . . was not literal but allegorical. In the late patristic period and in the Middle Ages, a system of allegorization was developed according to which four meanings were to be sought in every text." These four meanings, here illustrated by the mention of "Jerusalem" in Galatians 4:25, were:

1) *Literal*, which refers to the plain sense of the words (Jerusalem = the main city of the Jews)
2) *Allegorical*, which refers to the hidden or figurative sense of the words, particularly in seeing New Testament realities in Old Testament shadows (Jerusalem = the church universal in the period after Christ)
3) *Moral*, which refers to the implied connection with ethics (Jerusalem = the human soul)
4) *Anagogical*, which refers to the next life (Jerusalem = the heavenly city of which all Christian are heirs)[264]

Thus the Origenic understanding of 2 Corinthians 3:6 as describing not two eras in redemptive history but two ways of interpreting the Bible (as an example) continued to hold sway.[265]

Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux, bookends to the first phase of the Medieval period, were both heavily influenced by Origen's allegorical method. Leclercq summarizes the 1100s: the "monastic writers of the twelfth century assembled the elements of a true compendium of monastic theology whose inspiration, ideas and expression came from the Bible and the patristic commentaries on it, especially those of Origen." The result is that "medieval exegesis, like that of the early church, consisted in

[264] *Short History*, 85-86. See also Michael W. Rota, "Thomas Aquinas," in Vanhoozer, *Interpretation of the Bible*, 800. See also Klein, et al., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 38.
[265] See Leclercq, "Gregory the Great to Saint Bernard," 183-184.

passing on from the literal to the spiritual sense of the Old Testament."[266] Bede speaks of the first half of the medieval period in this way:

> If we seek to follow the letter of Scripture only, in the Jewish way, what shall we find to correct our sins, to console or instruct us, when we open the book of the blessed Samuel and read that Elkanah had two wives; especially we who are celibate churchmen, if we do not know how to draw out the allegorical meaning of sayings like these, which revives us inwardly, correcting, teaching, consoling?[267]

It would be easy to overstate the situation, however, for toward the end of the Middle Ages, in the writings of men such as St. Andrew the Victorene and Thomas Aquinas, the literal meaning was resurrected in biblical interpretation, though without a total discarding of allegory. Dividing Scripture into two general senses, the literal and the spiritual, Smalley describes Aquinas' method of interpretation as one in which "God is the principal author of Holy Scripture. Human writers express their meaning by words; but God can also express his meaning by 'things'—that is, by historical happenings. The literal sense of Scripture, therefore, is what the human author expressed by his words." Yet on the other hand, "the spiritual senses are what the divine author expressed by the events which the human author related. Since the Bible is the only book what has both a divine and human authorship, only the Bible can have both a literal and a spiritual sense."[268] Thus when commenting on 2 Corinthians 3:6, Aquinas understands the "letter" to refer to what he calls the "Old Law"—that is, the Mosaic Law as given in the Old Testament. Wrestling with how the Law kills, when set alongside Psalm 119:93 ("I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life"), Aquinas cites

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[266] Ibid., 192, 195.
[267] Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 146.
[268] Smalley, *The Bible in the Middle Ages*, 300.

Augustine and suggests that while the Law is inherently good, it cannot in itself impart the help needed to discharge the obligation commanded: "it prescribes what is good, without furnishing the aid of grace for its fulfillment."[269] Thus Aquinas resists the allegorizing of Origen and his followers.

Paradox is not integral to 2 Corinthians in the Medieval age, and for this simple reason: 2 Corinthians was itself largely neglected. We conclude our analysis of paradox in the Medieval age by a closer examination of Aquinas on 2 Corinthians.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Perhaps no other name comes more readily to mind when scanning the theological horizon of the millennium stretching from A.D. 500 to 1500 than St. Thomas Aquinas. He is known as the champion of medieval scholasticism as well as a progenitor, along with Augustine, of the Roman Catholic church—Pope Leo XIII declared his teaching official Catholic doctrine in the late nineteenth century.[270] Wresting Aristotelian categories of thinking from the grave, Aquinas was convinced that theology is more than exegesis—especially allegorically-fueled exegesis—and can and must be systematized into a coherent whole.[271] His life work, *Summa Theologica*, sought to meet just such a need. Two significant trends, then, find their genesis in the work of Aquinas' more rationally-driven method: first, the increasingly preeminent role given to reason vis-à-vis revelation in the theological task; and second, the shift in the late medieval age away from allegory to a more literal interpretation. "The Bible was still the ultimate source

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[269] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947-48), I:1033. See also I:1050; II:1998.
[270] N. L. Geisler, "Thomas Aquinas," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1197.
[271] See Klein, et al., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 39.

book, of course," writes Bray, "but now it was read with philosophical rather than mystical eyes."[272] In the past, there appears to have been the conviction that to let go of allegory was to let go of inspiration; Aquinas retained the latter while largely shedding the former.[273]

Having looked at an overview of biblical interpretation in the medieval period, then, we turn our eyes to St. Thomas to see if and how he approached Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Besides his theological works, Aquinas wrote commentaries on Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Job, Matthew, John, and all Paul's epistles (the thirteen traditionally associated with his name plus Hebrews, which he believed Paul to have written).

Aquinas employed 2 Corinthians substantially less than others; in one representative collection of Thomistic material,[274] Aquinas cites 2 Corinthians a total of 11 times, compared with 42 citations of 1 Corinthians. Ephesians, half the length of 2 Corinthians, gets more than twice the airtime (23 citations). Moreover, an overview of how he uses 2 Corinthians in his theological work, particularly his *Summa Theologica*, is not especially profitable. He cites passages from time to time, but these play the role

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[272] Bray, *Biblical Interpretation,* 153. This is not to confuse the scholasticism of Aquinas, in which Scripture remained inspired and often mysterious, with that of the slightly later William of Ockham (1285-1347), who took such rationalism to the extreme, demanding precise proof for all doctrine (154). Norman Geisler writes that for Aquinas reason "is never the basis for faith in God. Demanding reasons for belief in God actually lessens the merits of one's faith" ("Thomas Aquinas," in Elwell, *Evangelical Theology*, 1197). Nevertheless Aquinas does (in hindsight) appear to have provided a bridge between the very different worlds of early medieval mysticism and thoroughgoing rationalists such as William.

[273] Though Aquinas did indeed retain much of the allegorical method of earlier generations, Farrar emphasizes this to the exclusion of Aquinas' movement toward literal interpretation. For example, Farrar concludes, concerning "one salient instance" of the way in which Aquinas "deduces systems extremely ingenious but utterly without a foundation," that: "It would be difficult to conceive anything more ingeniously misleading, more historically groundless, more essentially partial, inadequate, and mistaken, than this celebrated scheme of the Epistles in which every critical and historical consideration, as well as every human element in the origin of the Epistles is fatally ignored in order that they may be symmetrically arranged into an artificial diagram of abstract doctrines" (*History of Interpretation*, 271).

[274] A. M. Fairweather, ed. and trans., *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954).

mainly of supporting a rational defense of an assertion rather than the Scripture driving the work itself.[275]

Did Aquinas make much of paradox in 2 Corinthians? Unfortunately, at key passages which speak to the paradox inherent in Paul's theology, Aquinas misinterprets. Quoting 2 Corinthians 12:9, for example, Aquinas equates virtue with the power (δύναμις) of which Paul speaks here concerning his thorn in the flesh: "Reason is shown to be so much the more perfect, according as it is able to overcome or endure more easily the weakness of the body and of the lower powers. And therefore human virtue, which is attributed to reason, is said to be *made perfect in infirmity*, not of the reason indeed, but of the body and of the lower powers."[276] Similarly, in a discussion of Christ's resurrection, he cites 13:4 as follows: "And this is precisely what is written (2 Cor. xiii.4): *For although He was crucified through our weakness, yet He liveth by the power of God.*"[277] Here Aquinas attributes Christ's death to *human* failure, when the meaning is rather that Christ was killed in his own weakness.[278] Regarding other passages in which the paradox of Christianity surfaces clearly in the epistle (1:5; 4:7ff.; 6:4-10), Aquinas does not draw out this element at all.

It is difficult, then, to synthesize Aquinas' understanding of 2 Corinthians in particular. One writer sums up Aquinas on this epistle by saying quite generally that "Aquinas used 2 Corinthians to argue that, in their final beatific vision, the faithful will behold 'the divine essence' and in his discussion of reason and grace."[279] Aquinas neither

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[275] It does seem to me, however, that Aquinas has at times been unfairly pinned down as a Scripture-neglecting rationalist. While his philosophical framework is often foundational for his argumentation in *Summa Theologica*, Scripture is constantly used in this great work.
[276] *Summa Theologica*, I:821. Emphasis original.
[277] Ibid., II:2312. Emphasis original.
[278] See Harris, *Second Corinthians*, 904-917; Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 602-607.
[279] Humphrey, "Book of 2 Corinthians," in Vanhoozer, *Interpretation of the Bible*, 138.

neglects the epistle nor sees it as of special importance; nor does he provide any unique interpretation of the epistle, whether paradoxical or otherwise. We can place Aquinas' interpretation of 2 Corinthians within the larger rubric of his biblical interpretation as a whole: scholastically-bent and philosophically-framed. While the Bible *informed* his theology, it did not manifestly *fuel* it.

The Reformation (A.D. 1500-1600)

The ringing accomplishment of the Reformation was the replacement of the Pope as preeminent authority in interpretation with the Bible. Yet this did not automatically usher in hermeneutical tranquility, for a theology driven by *sola scriptura*—though guided by the Spirit—requires reflective, sane, and reasonable interpretation. The seeds of *Heilsgeschichte* can be found in Luther and especially Calvin, both of whom sought a meaning intended by the original author and tied to actual historical events, while at the same time stepping back to see how a passage fits into the story of God's redemption in Christ. Thus the reformers largely rejected the allegorical method of bygone generations and sought the spiritual meaning of the text *in* the literal meaning rather than *behind* it. Also integral to the Reformation was the conviction that Scripture suffices to interpret itself, as well as the motivation to get the Bible into the hands of the people: this conviction drove the lives not only of Luther and Calvin but also Jan Hus and John Wycliffe before them.

Martin Luther

Gerald Bray lists the biblical texts through which Luther preached and lectured:

1513-15	Psalms	1526	Ecclesiastes
1515-16	Romans	1527	1 John
1517-18	Hebrews	1527-28	1 Timothy
1521	Luke 1	1527	Titus
1522	1 Peter	1527	Philemon
1523	2 Peter	1528	Isaiah
1523	Jude	1530-31	Song of Songs
1523	1 Corinthians 7	1531	Galatians
1523-25	Deuteronomy	1531-45	select Psalms
1524	Hosea	1532	Matthew 5-7
1524	Joel	1534	1 Corinthians 15
1525	Amos	1535-45	Genesis
1526	Obadiah-Malachi	1543	1 Samuel 23[280]

Notably missing, of course, is 2 Corinthians, on which Luther apparently taught neither from the pulpit nor the lectern. The best one is able to do is find scattered references to 2 Corinthians in other works. In his commentary on Romans, for example, Luther understands the phrases "from faith to faith" in 1:17 as referring to the way in which faith becomes increasingly manifest in the life of the Christian—"there appear constant growth and constant greater clarity." He then brings in for support 2 Corinthians 3:18 and the phrase "from glory to glory."[281]

Philip Melanchthon, known as the systematizer of Luther's theology, did publish a commentary on 2 Corinthians. Once again one is disappointed in turning to it, though, for he only works through the first three chapters of the epistle.

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[280] *Biblical Interpretation*, 172.
[281] Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 25.

John Calvin

Calvin, "the father of modern biblical scholarship," did not pass over 2 Corinthians as did Luther and others. In 1547 he produced his commentary on the epistle and ten years later preached through it. Indeed, his dedication to his cherished Greek instructor, Melchior Wolmar, occurs in his commentary on 2 Corinthians.[282]

We have mentioned above the way Calvin refuted allegorical interpretation of Scripture in the *Institutes* and in his comments on Galatians 4:21-31. His words on 2 Corinthians 3:6 provide him another opportunity to refute this hermeneutic. He writes that there is

> no doubt, that by the term *letter*, he means the Old Testament, as by the term *spirit* he means the gospel; for, after having called himself *a minister of the New Testament*, he immediately adds, by way of exposition, that he is a *minister of the spirit*, and contrasts the *letter* with the *spirit*. We must now inquire into the reason of this designation. The exposition contrived by Origen has got into general circulation—that by the *letter* we ought to understand the grammatical and genuine meaning of Scripture, or the *literal* sense (as they call it), and that by the *spirit* is meant the allegorical meaning, which is commonly reckoned to be the *spiritual* meaning. Accordingly, during several centuries, nothing was more commonly said, or more generally received, than this—that Paul here furnishes us with a key for expounding Scripture by allegories, while nothing is farther from his intention.[283]

Calvin proceeds to give his own understanding of "letter" and "spirit" in this verse, arguing that "by the term *letter* he means outward preaching, of such a kind as does not reach the heart; and, on the other hand, by *spirit* he means living doctrine, of such a nature as *worketh effectually* (1 Thess. 2:13) on the minds of men, through the grace of the Spirit." When Paul referred to "the letter," therefore, he "meant *literal* preaching—that is, *dead* and *ineffectual*, perceived only by the ear. By the term *spirit*, on the other

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[282] Puckett, "Calvin," in McKim, *Major Biblical Interpreters*, 175.
[283] John Calvin, *Second Corinthians*, 172.

hand, is meant *spiritual* doctrine, that is, what is not merely uttered with the mouth, but effectually makes its way to the souls of men with a lively feeling."[284]

Calvin then goes on to an explicit rejection of allegorical interpretation by commenting on Paul's words, "for the letter kills." He writes that these verses were "mistakenly perverted, first by Origen, and afterwards by others, to a spurious signification. From this arose a very pernicious error—that of imagining that the perusal of Scripture would be not merely useless, but even injurious, unless it were drawn out into allegories." The problem with this was twofold: "there was not merely a liberty allowed of adulterating the genuine meaning of Scripture, but the more of audacity any one had in this manner of acting, so much the more eminent an interpreter of Scripture was he accounted. . . . Even good men themselves were carried headlong, so as to contrive very many mistaken opinions, led astray through a fondness for allegory."[285]

Calvin not only rejects allegory but provides an interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6. "The meaning of this passage," he concludes, "is as follows—that, if the word of God is simply uttered with the mouth, it is an occasion of death, and that it is *lifegiving*, only when it is received with the heart. The terms *letter* and *spirit*, therefore, do not refer to the exposition of the word, but to its influence and fruit."[286]

Calvinian Paradox?

Looking more broadly at this commentary, what does Calvin make of paradox in this epistle? In mounting an answer to this question in a manageable manner we will look

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[284] Ibid.
[285] Ibid., 174-175.
[286] Ibid., 175.

at a smattering of the most conspicuously paradoxical passages in the letter and note Calvin's comments.

For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. (1:5)

Calvin interprets this verse not as meaning ("positively") that the more we suffer, the more we are able to comfort others, but that ("negatively") to the degree we suffer we experience God's comfort. "Paul's meaning, then, is that God is always present with him in his tribulations, and that his infirmity is sustained by the consolations of Christ, so as to prevent him from being overwhelmed with calamities."[287] Calvin acknowledges that comfort meets us in affliction, then, but does not take this to be a counterintuitive commendation of suffering but simply an encouragement that God does not forsake his people in such difficulty.

. . . as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (6:10)

This verse is no more explicitly paradoxical (as a means to understanding the broader argument of the letter) than 6:10. Calvin interprets these three phrases, as well as the ones which precede them, as targeted directly at Corinthian ingratitude. Calvin sees Paul's claim (for example) of being joyful as refuting the Corinthian despising of him as pathetically overcome with grief. The reformer does acknowledge that these verses counter the Corinthians "by way of irony," but this is not developed. Indeed, the very

[287] Ibid., 112-113.

space Paul gives to 6:10 (one paragraph) is perhaps indicative of his estimation of the significance of such irony as a key to the epistle.[288]

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (12:9-10)

On these crucial verses Calvin again allows for what paradox exists but is reluctant to go beyond this and connect this passage with other portions of the epistle or to address what in Corinth may be fueling Paul's self-description here. He comments on verse 9, "Our weakness may seem, as if it were an obstacle in the way of God's perfecting his strength in us. Paul does not merely deny this, but maintains, on the other hand, that it is only when our weakness becomes apparent, that God's *strength* is duly *perfected*." He paraphrases verse 10 as so: "The more deficiency there is in me, so much the more liberally does the Lord, from his strength, supply me with whatever he sees to be needful for me." He goes on to describe the intent of this verse in Paul's life, and in application to contemporary readers, as being the realization of one's weakness. He writes that the hardships listed in verse 9 "are exercises for discovering to us our own weakness; for if God had not exercised Paul with such trials, he would never have perceived so clearly his weakness." For Calvin, then, the point of these verses is to bring us to acknowledge our weakness and to distrust ourselves and rely instead on God.

This loses the strong sense of paradox in the text, however, which ends not with weakness but with strength: "When I am weak, *then I am strong*." Weakness is not an end but a means to another end: strength. This is not fleshed out by Calvin and may be

[288] Ibid., 253.

partly responsible for a concomitant lack of fleshing out the strong sense of irony and paradox in these two verses.[289]

For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. (13:4)

In this closing exhortation to emulate the weakness-unto-strength of Christ, Paul puts the finishes touches on a letter that uses paradox throughout to flip Corinthian worldliness on its head and expose it for what it is: contrary to the gospel of Christ, which is rooted not in militant victory but a shameful cross. Does Calvin address this in his comment on this verse? Yes—"To be weak in Christ means here to be a partaker of Christ's weakness. Thus he makes his own weakness glorious, because in it he is conformed to Christ." Yet Calvin spends most of his labors on 13:4 arguing that this verse does not promote Arianism, since the verse appears as if Christ was made weak against his own will. Thus he does not make paradox part of the central contribution this verse makes to the argument of 2 Corinthians, which I believe to be a mistake in light of the letter as a whole.[290]

The Post-Reformation Period (A.D. 1600-1900)

The centuries following the Reformation and responding to it led to both rationalism on the one hand and pietism on the other. Spinoza embodies the rationalistic elevation of the mind as supreme authority in biblical interpretation, while Spener, Francke and Zinzendorf epitomize a lived-out religion of the heart as the supreme goal of

[289] Ibid., 378-380.
[290] Ibid., 395.

interpretation. In America, Edwards shows us someone of penetrating theological depth who nevertheless kept this secondary to a life of affective love to God and neighbor. His overly allegorical exegesis, however, remains less than desirable.

Klein, Hubbard and Blomberg help us to sum up the two centuries following the Reformation by explaining that "the Post-Reformation period brought the fragmentation of approaches to biblical interpretation. On the one hand, the pietists continued to search the Scriptures to feed their hungry souls and to guide their quest for virtuous lives. On the other hand, whereas Aquinas had sought the integration of philosophy and theology, the rationalists promoted the radical divorce of each from the other."[291] Godliness sacrificed on the altar of the intellect, right doctrine sacrificed on the altar of piety—the centuries following the Reformation experienced a continued struggle for a biblical balance between head and heart.

How did 2 Corinthians fare in the centuries following the Reformation? "By the eighteenth century," writes one scholar, "the profound delight that the letter inspired in its readers was overtaken by more mundane concerns. J. S. Semler (1776) considered that 2 Corinthians must have been composed of at least two letters; A. Hausrath (1870) posited his 'four chapters hypothesis' concerning chapters 10-13."[292] Though Scripture as a whole was re-enthroned in the first two centuries of Protestantism's existence, 2 Corinthians continued to lag behind. Romans and Galatians had sparked the Reformation, and while 2 Corinthians made the cut onto F. C. Baur's *Hauptbriefe*,[293] little systematic scholarship was devoted to this epistle.

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[291] Klein, et al., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 43.
[292] Humphrey, "Book of 2 Corinthians," in Vanhoozer, *Interpretation of the Bible*, 138.
[293] Baur considered Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians as the only authentically Pauline epistles.

Jonathan Edwards

We begin with the Northampton pastor who, though he did not write a commentary on 2 Corinthians (or any other book of the Bible with the arguable exception of Revelation), did comment extensively on the letter. In his *Notes on Scripture* Edwards does not, unfortunately, speak to 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, the height of Pauline paradox, nor of other passages such as 1:5, 4:16, 6:10, 8:2, or 13:4. Indeed, a review of his 41 references to 2 Corinthians reveals nothing in terms of seeing paradox as a particularly conspicuous theme in the epistle.[294]

Paradox is not absent in Edwards, however. In an ordination sermon in 1740 Edwards speaks of the counterintuitive nature of the gospel in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians, basing his message on 2:11-13. In the course of the sermon he says that

> the gospel revelation concerning a crucified God was not so but appeared to them absurd and contrary to reason, as it follows: "But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumblingblock, and to the Greeks foolishness." But the apostle observes that these philosophers, with all their boasted wisdom or reason, could never discern the truth in the things of God, and that this is done alone by the Gospel that they account inconsistent and self-contrary, and that God had made foolish their wisdom and baffled that human reason that they so much relied upon.[295]

The gospel, says Edwards, is "self-contrary." It is paradoxical. In another sermon, this time on 2 Corinthians 4:7, Edwards' theme is that "God is pleased to make his own power appear by carrying on the work of his grace by such instruments as men, that in themselves are utterly insufficient for it." He later writes that if pastors' "own abilities

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[294] Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 15, *Notes on Scripture*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 664.

[295] "Ministers to Preach Not Their Own Wisdom but the Word of God," in Richard A. Bailey and Gregory A. Wills, eds., *The Salvation of Souls: Nine Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Call of Ministry and the Gospel by Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 114.

and performances are but mean, yet if they have a true love to souls and desire of advancing the kingdom of Christ, God is able to make the weapons of their warfare mighty to the pulling down of strongholds."[296]

In *Religious Affections* we find the same theme, though more implicit, as Edwards discusses humility and what it means to live the Christian life like a little child. He says that truly gracious affections display such child-like characteristics in a person's life, and notes that it is not what one would expect: the powerful infusion of grace into the human heart melts and softens a person. From his experience in the two revivals in Northampton between 1734 and 1742, Edwards knew that obnoxious "passion" is not indicative of truly gracious affections.[297]

August Hermann Francke

The successor to Spener's German Pietism wrote of the joy indubitably concomitant with true Christian suffering: "In this faith, then, he takes upon himself quite willingly everything that God sends to him of misery and practices to be ever more joyful and cheerful in poverty, illness, yea, even death and all that wherein the faithless person would otherwise despair." From where does such joy in the midst of difficulty come? "For yea he knows and believes most surely that all this has been laid upon him by the hand of his faithful and loving heavenly Father, who thereby shows him his fatherly love in Christ." Francke then elaborates on this paradox:

> Yea, if he is despised, reproached, and persecuted by the world for his piety's sake, he overcomes such through this faith and will thereby be ever fresher and

[296] "Ministers Need the Power of God," *Salvation of Souls*, 45, 52.
[297] Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 294-305, 308-309, respectively.

> more confident, considering it as nothing but joy and grace of God that he is deemed worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of the name of Christ (Acts 5:41; Matthew 5:11,12; Luke 6:22). Through this faith he also is gladly satisfied with the grace of God (2 Corinthians 12:9), and learns to say from the bottom of his heart from Psalm 73, 'Lord, if I only have you I ask nothing of heaven and earth. Even if both my body and soul languish, you are still God, ever my heart's comfort and my part.'[298]

Francke clearly understands the paradoxical nature of Christianity, as did Edwards. Yet (also like Edwards) this does is not fueled by any particular understanding of 2 Corinthians.

Matthew Henry

One name that has not been mentioned yet in this study but which is instructive to note concerning 2 Corinthians is Matthew Henry (1662-1714). The son of a Nonconformist English pastor, he pastored in London from 1687 to 1712, during which time he wrote his famous commentary on the whole Bible (1704-08). Bray writes that "many of his interpretations verge on the allegorical, a fact which distances him from the Reformers,"[299] yet his comments in 2 Corinthians are hermeneutically responsible.

One finds arresting statements in seeking to understand the role paradox plays in this letter when reading his words on key passages in 2 Corinthians. Regarding 6:10, for example—"as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything"—Henry writes that the apostles "were thought to have nothing, yet they possessed all things. They had nothing in themselves, but possessed all things in Christ. Such a paradox is a Christian's life." So also in 12:20 we

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[298] "Scriptural and Basic Introduction to Christianity," in Gary R. Sattler, *God's Glory, Neighbor's Good: A Brief Introduction to the Life and Writings of August Hermann Francke* (Chicago: Covenant, 1982), 253.
[299] Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 188.

find that "when we are weak in ourselves, then we are strong in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."[300] In viewing his comments on 2 Corinthians as a whole, however, it is evident that this is not seen as a framework to the whole epistle.

Paradox Outside 2 Corinthians

Many statements of paradox in the Christian life could be drawn upon which own no apparent connection with 2 Corinthians. Henry Scougal (1630-1657), for example, professor of divinity at Aberdeen at age 19, has written of those who have participated in the divine nature that

> chastisements, though they be not joyous but grievous, would hereby lose their sting, the rod as well as the staff would comfort him – he would snatch a kiss from the hand that was smiting him, and gather sweetness from that severity – nay, he would rejoice that though God did not the will of such a worthless and foolish creature as himself, yet he did his own will, and accomplished his own designs, which are infinitely more holy and wise.[301]

Scougal captures the paradoxical nature of the Christian life with these words written in 1656. Yet it is not rooted in 2 Corinthians (in any observable way).

The Puritans captured the paradoxical nature of the gospel as much as anyone. In a Puritan prayer we read statements such as:

> Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly, Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision, where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights; hemmed in by mountains of sin, I behold thy glory. Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit, that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all, that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive, that the valley is the place of vision.

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[300] Leslie F. Church, ed., *Matthew Henry's Commentary in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 1832, 1837.

[301] *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001), 76-77.

> Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells, and the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine; let me find thy light in my darkness, the life in my death, thy joy in my sorrow, they grace in my sin, they riches in my poverty, they glory in my valley.[302]

John Howe (1630-1705), a moderatist Puritan pastor in England, wrote this in a series of thirteen sermons on regeneration: "[T]o be born is to die. Every one that is thus born, dies at the same time: that is, when he is born to God, and made alive to God through Jesus Christ, he is dead and crucified to the world: it becomes a despicable thing."[303]

These are remarkable statements of what I have argued to be the hermeneutically controlling principle of 2 Corinthians. As powerful a statement of the message of 2 Corinthians these may be, however, they are not explicitly connected with this epistle and therefore remain, however useful they may generally be, outside the purview of this study.

Spurgeon, Schlatter and Hodge

For three of the clearest expositions of paradox in 2 Corinthians we look to the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. There we find paradox in the writings of a British preacher, a German professor, and an American seminary president.

On 4 November 1888, Charles Spurgeon, Baptist pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, preached a sermon he entitled "A Paradox." The text was 2 Corinthians 12:10—"When I am weak, then I am strong." The sermon is shot through

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[302] Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 1.
[303] Edmund Calamy, ed., *The Works of the Rev. John Howe* (London: William Ball, 1838), 896.

with exposition of the counterintuitive nature of the Christian life; a few examples will suffice.

> When you get down, down, down, into utter weakness, then you will be strong, because then you will rest upon the Lord's salvation; but as you are strong in your thoughts of yourself, you are kept from Jesus.[304]
>
> In the idea of strength and wisdom lurks an awfully perilous weakness; but in a sense of personal weakness dwells a real strength.[305]
>
> When we are growingly weak, when we become weaker and weaker, when we seem to faint into a deeper swoon than ever as to our own strength, till death is written upon every power that we once thought we had, and we feel that we can do absolutely nothing apart from the Holy Spirit, then we are strong indeed.[306]

"A painful weakness," Spurgeon therefore concludes, "is strength. It may seem a paradox, but it is true."[307] Spurgeon brings out the paradox of the Christian life in this sermon as clearly as could be hoped for.

Adolf Schlatter, conservative New Testament scholar born in Switzerland in 1852, taught in Swiss and German universities for one hundred straight semesters. He wrote lay level commentaries on every book in the New Testament, though his crowning achievement in his pursuit of New Testament studies is his two-volume New Testament theology.[308] In the second of these two volumes, commenting on Paul's theology as seen in the Corinthian correspondence, Schlatter writes that Paul "does not pervert what he considers to be a special gift of divine grace as an instrument of self-glorification. We do not have from him a single record of a miracle he performed. To the contrary, he assigns

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[304] *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised by C. H. Spurgeon.* 63 vols (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1969-1980), 34:592.
[305] Ibid., 593.
[306] Ibid., 597.
[307] Ibid.
[308] *The History of the Christ*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); *The Theology of the Apostles*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). Originally published in German in 1923 and 1922, respectively.

positive value to his weakness and counts it among the means by which he fulfills his office."

How exactly does Paul's weakness facilitate the discharging of his office?

> The continual suffering he undergoes provides him with the benefit of turning the eyes of all away from him to the one from whom he receives the power by which he acts. Thus he can boast in his weakness. He is fully aware that this clashes with Greek sentiments, which esteem glorious manifestations and are ready to admire strength while contemptuously turning their back on weakness. But this is precisely what keeps Paul from minimizing his own weakness, for by acknowledging his weakness Paul prevents others from exalting him to the status of hero, demonstrating to all that the power manifested through him belongs to God (1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 4:7; 6:4-5; 11:30; 12:5, 10; Gal. 1:10; 4:13-14).[309]

Thus Paul's weakness, according to Schlatter, is his strength because it gives all glory to the Lord.

Charles Hodge joins Chrysostom and Calvin as one of the few systematic commentators on 2 Corinthians, and while he does not employ paradox as a hermeneutical key by which the letter as a whole can be unlocked, he does note it at important junctures. Of 6:10 ("sorrowful, yet always rejoicing") he writes:

> This is one of the paradoxes of Christian experience. The believer has more true joy in sorrow, than the world can ever afford. The sense of the love of God, assurance of his support, confidence in future blessedness, and the persuasion that his present light afflictions shall work out for him a far more exceeding and an eternal weight of glory, mingle with his sorrows, and give the suffering child of God a peace which passes all understanding.

Such is the way of Christ and his followers. In some mysterious way, joy comes not mainly despite suffering but through it. "He would not," Hodge therefore concludes of the authentic Christian, "exchange his lot with that of the most prosperous of the

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[309] *Theology of the Apostles*, 188.

children of this world."[310] Similarly, he later captures the essence of the message of 2 Corinthians when he comments thus on 2 Corinthians 9:6 ("whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully"):

> It is edifying to note the difference between the divine wisdom and the wisdom of men. As the proper motive to acts of benevolence is a desire for the happiness of others and a regard to the will of God, human wisdom says it is wrong to appeal to any selfish motive. The wisdom of God, while teaching the entire abegnation of self, and requiring a man even to hate his own life when in conflict with the glory of God, tells all who thus deny themselves that they thereby most effectually promote their own interests. He that loses his life shall save it. He that does not seek his own, shall best secure his own. He that humbleth himself shall be exalted.[311]

Spurgeon, Schlatter and Hodge, despite their widely divergent contexts, each affirms the paradox of the Christian life in which less is more, and each appeals to 2 Corinthians in support of it. Yet none understand paradox to be a hermeneutical key to the book, employed by Paul in light of the abundant worldliness under which the church at Corinth was on the verge of being submerged.

Conclusion

Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians holds the unique position of being both undisputedly Pauline and (until the twentieth century) persistently neglected. Certain passages have proved importance across the centuries, such as 3:6, which persistently fueled discussions concerning both the relationship between the testaments as well as that between literal and allegorical interpretation. Yet with a few exceptions, 2 Corinthians

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[310] *Exposition*, 164. Similarly regarding 1:5, "Alienation from Christ does not secure freedom from suffering, but it cuts us off from the only source of consolation" (7).
[311] Ibid., 219. Cf. also his comments on 4:7 (92) and 12:9-10 (286-289).

has been the subject of little systematic exposition. The purpose of this chapter has not been to adduce reasons for this neglect but simply to trace it in broad strokes through church history as a way of placing this thesis in historical context.

We have made three central discoveries on our trek through almost two millennia of church scholarship on 2 Corinthians. First, the understanding of 2 Corinthians 3:6 ("The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life") has been indicative of the prevailing exegetical method all through church history; while the early fathers often used the verse out-of-context to support an allegorical over a literal hermeneutic, Reformation exegesis recovered the contextual meaning of the text and the understanding that this verse speaks not to hermeneutics but biblical theology and the relation between the old and new covenants. The verse has to do not with how to interpret but with how to understand salvation history. Second, 2 Corinthians has been infrequently systematically expounded—John Chrysostom, John Calvin and Charles Hodge providing the three primary expositions. Third and most importantly, 2 Corinthians has not been expounded by any in such a way that paradox is understood to be some kind of hermeneutical key by which a unifying rubric to the letter emerges.

Is 2 Corinthians seen as a letter of paradox throughout the history of the church? The paradox of the Christian life, particularly in periods of suffering, has certainly been cherished. Yet this theme is not discernable in scholarship on 2 Corinthians in particular through the first nineteen centuries of the church.

CHAPTER 5

SCRIPTURE AND THE PARADOX: 2 CORINTHIANS IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of this chapter is to ask whether the paradox of 2 Corinthians, in which less is more, can be found elsewhere in the Christian Scripture. This chapter falls into four parts. First, we examine Paul's first letter to Corinth to see if what we have seen in 2 Corinthians is also true of 1 Corinthians. Second, we analyze the rest of the New Testament outside the Corinthian correspondence. Third, we move to the Old Testament to see what role, if any, paradox plays. We close, finally, with a look at representative samples of the Jewish intertestamental literature.

All through we are asking first whether paradox *exists* in these other pieces of ancient literature, and second (if so) whether paradox *provides a comprehensive framework* for that literary piece, as, I have argued, it does for 2 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians

We begin with the first epistle to Corinth. What role does paradox play in this letter? Early on, certainly, this is a theme that comes on strongly. In the first four chapters, Paul pens statements such as:

> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1:20)
>
> God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world

> and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1:26-29)
>
> Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. (3:18-19)
>
> We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. (4:10)
>
> When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. (4:12b-13a)

Paradox is a clearly evident theme early on in 1 Corinthians (ch. 1-4[312]). In each of these passages we see an echo of the counterintuitive nature of Paul's apostolic ministry to the Corinthians. Yet while this is a strong motif early on, it becomes largely muffled as the epistle unfolds in chapter five and following (though see 15:36, 43, in which Paul speaks of the body being sown in ἀσθενείᾳ and raised in δύναμις[313]). For 1 Corinthians is largely taken up with specific issues of circumstance needing to be addressed by Paul, including:

- a case of sexual immorality (5:1-13)
- legal cases among believers (6:1-8)
- marriage (7:1-40)
- food sacrificed to idols (8:1-13)
- the Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
- spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40)
- orderly worship (12:26-40)
- believers' bodily resurrection (15:12-58)
- fundraising (16:1-4)

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[312] See Duane Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See also Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2003), 133.

[313] Gerald G. O'Collins insightfully points out, however, that we cannot wholly equate the paradox of 1 Cor 15:43 with that of 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (despite both containing ἀσθενείᾳ leading to δύναμις) because in 1 Corinthians the weakness leads to a subsequent manifestation of power, while in 2 Corinthians the two are simultaneous; it is a power *in* (ἐν, 12:9) weakness ("Power Made Perfect in Weakness," 531, 536).

Most of 1 Corinthians, then, finds Paul constrained to address specific concrete issues in the Corinthian church—whether raised by Paul (e.g. the case of sexual immorality in ch. 5 or lawsuits among believers in ch. 6) or by the Corinthians (e.g. marriage in ch. 7 or spiritual gifts in ch. 12-14).

In 2 Corinthians, contrariwise, Paul writes more independently. While he certainly has specific reasons for writing—it is not a mere ministry update—nevertheless *whereas in 1 Corinthians Paul addresses the fruit, in 2 Corinthians Paul addresses the root*. The first epistle to Corinth speaks to multifarious manifestations of a Corinthian worldliness which Paul then probes more deeply in 2 Corinthians. The first letter represents, largely, the symptoms; the second, the disease. This is not an airtight rule, of course—as has just been shown, 1 Corinthians does contain more general statements of paradox, and 2 Corinthians certainly contains instructions tethered to contextually-controlled circumstances (2:5-11 and 6:14-18 are examples of the latter). Yet this distinction remains generally true of the difference between these two letters vis-à-vis paradox, and helps one see that paradox plays a central interpretive role in 2 Corinthians in a way in which it does not in 1 Corinthians.

The Corinthian church, in other words, largely dictates the content of 1 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians, though a few instances of specific historical situations are addressed (2:5-11; 6:14-18), Paul is significantly freer to set his own agenda. He is not answering questions but going on the offensive (nowhere in 2 Corinthians does one see the refrain of 1 Corinthians, "Now concerning . . ." [*Περὶ δὲ*: 1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1]). A good example of this is fundraising, a theme which comes up in both letters but in representatively distinct ways. In 1 Corinthians Paul introduces this topic in the way

typical of 1 Corinthians: "Now concerning (*Περὶ δε*) the collection for the saints . . ." (16:1). He is addressing a question raised by the Corinthians. Yet while this subject of money surfaces in 2 Corinthians, too—indeed, it comprises two whole chapters (8-9)—Paul is no longer dealing primarily with logistics (how) but motivation (why). And his motivation, in the realm of money as in the rest of the epistle, is that, counterintuitively, gain comes by giving. Less is more.

We conclude that while paradox is evident to some degree early on in 1 Corinthians, it ought not to be seen as an interpretive grid to that epistle.

New Testament

Moving from the Corinthian correspondence to the rest of the New Testament, do we find paradox to be hermeneutically illuminating on a macro level to any other New Testament book—or, if not, evident in any degree? I believe that while the answer to the latter question is yes, the answer to the former question is no.

The paradox that in Christianity less is more is nothing short of profuse in the sayings of Jesus handed down to us in the four Gospels. I cite them all here, including in brackets parallel statements.

Matthew 10:39 [Luke 17:33]

> "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Matthew 18:1-4

> At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore,

whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 19:30 (and see 20:16) [Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30]

"But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Matthew 20:26-28 [Mark 10:43-45]

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Mark 4:30-32

And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Mark 9:35

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

Luke 9:23-24 [Matthew 16:24-26]

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."

Luke 9:48

The he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest."

Luke 14:11 [Luke 18:14]

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Luke 16:14-15

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

John 12:24-25

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernal of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces

> many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

In these many sayings a common principle emerges as Jesus teaches that salvation comes through loss, exaltation through humbling, greatness through service, massive trees through tiny seeds. Jesus is motivating his hearers to renounce themselves for the sake of the kingdom of God, yet he does not do it by exhorting them to reject self by a sheer act of will. Rather he describes the reality of which Paul later sought to convince the Corinthians: less is more. Losing one's life leads to gaining it. Humbling oneself leads to being exalted. Service leads to greatness. Jesus turns upside-down the value system of the world as he teaches that the God-given desire to be satisfied is satiated in the very things which appear to threaten such satisfaction.[314]

We find a few more examples of the paradox elsewhere in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Luke, found not on the lips of Jesus but the Magnificat of Mary, we discover the following prayer, cited here in full.

> And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; *he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away*. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." (1:46-55, emphasis added)

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[314] Though this thesis is not the place to flesh out such an observation, it is noteworthy that this provides a clear point of continuity between the teaching of Jesus and that of Paul, a continuity frequently challenged in the history of New Testament interpretation, most notably in the form criticism of Rudolf Bultmann. See David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); *Paul and Jesus: The True Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Though I have emphasized the most explicit statement of paradox, it is a theme throughout Mary's prayer: on the one hand, Mary acknowledges her "humble estate" as a "servant." Yet on the other hand, she rejoices in God's attention to her need. Mary provides an example of God manifesting his strength through the weakness of his servant.

In Philippians 2:5-11 we find another example of God manifesting his power through weakness, though this time it is the weakness of his Son.

> Have this mind in yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The broader context is of a call to Christian humility (2:1-11). Paul therefore closes this section by rooting this exhortation in the humility of Christ, which resulted in his final glorification. The *less* of verses 6 to 8 led to the *more* of verses 9 to 11. The Philippians are thus exhorted: "Have this mind in yourselves" (v. 5). The humiliation which leads to exaltation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is not an anomaly when compared to Christian experience, but, a pattern built into the DNA of the gospel itself. Sze-kar Wan thus rightly speaks of Paul's defense of the legitimacy of his ministry in 2 Corinthians with reference to the *kenosis* of Philippians 2:7 when he says, "Authentic ministry is at heart kenotic ministry."[315]

Other New Testament corroborations of the Corinthian paradox are seen in Hebrews 11:34 and James 4:10. The former passage speaks of Old Testament saints who

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[315] *Power in Weakness*, 15.

lived exemplary lives of faith, one characteristic of which was that they "were made strong out of weakness (ἐδυναμώθησαν ἀπὸ ἀσθενείας)."[316] Here one finds precisely the same dynamic—ἀσθένεια leading to δύναμις—as in the climax of 2 Corinthians (12:10, "When I am weak [ἀσθενῶ], then I am strong [δυνατός]"). James 4:10 similarly reads, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." As in Proverbs 29:23 and Luke 14:11, the paradox is fleshed out here in terms of pride and humility. The way to be exalted, all these verses agree, is to be abased. It is counterintuitive. And it had been forgotten by the Corinthians.[317]

The paradox that less is more surfaces throughout the New Testament, but in no book outside 2 Corinthians does it provide a hermeneutical lens by which the entire book is illumined.

Old Testament

Paul's concession that the opponents to his ministry in Corinth were "Hebrews," "Israelites," and "the offspring of Abraham" in 2 Corinthians 11:22 points to a strong Jewish heritage among his opponents, whether they were unbelieving Jews or Jewish Gnostics. Ulrich Heckel has maintained, moreover, that the background of 2 Corinthians 10-13 is the concept of the fool in Jewish wisdom literature.[318] One might legitimately ask, then, if Paul's opponents (who had at least some connection to Judaism) ought

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[316] On weakness in Paul generally and in this verse specifically see David Alan Black, "*Paulus Infirmus*," 78.

[317] Marva Dawn goes so far as to find in every book of the New Testament the presence of "a theology of weakness" (*Tabernacling of God*, 50-57)

[318] *Kraft in Schwachheit: Untersuchungen zu 2. Kor 10-13*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993). See also Sigurd Grindheim, "Paul's Critique of the Jewish Confidence in the Election of Israel in 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10 and Philippians 3:1-11" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity International University, 2002), 111ff.

already to have recognized the counterintuitive nature of life among the covenant people of God. In other words, would Paul's principle of "less is more" have been entirely new to his opponents? If this principle is evident in the ancient Jewish writings such as the Old Testament and the intertestamental literature, it would appear that Paul's paradoxical principle underlying 2 Corinthians should not have been an entirely fresh perspective to his readers.

Can one detect, then, this principle of paradox in the Old Testament and the other Jewish literature of the Second Temple period? Though it is nowhere as pervasive a theme as in 2 Corinthians, I maintain that the answer to this question is yes. Thus if Paul's opponents had paid closer attention to their own literature, they may have been able to avoid the error which Paul seeks to undermine throughout 2 Corinthians. We look first at the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. Examples include the following.

Exodus 1:11-12

> Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel.

1 Samuel 2:4-5 (Hannah's prayer after Samuel was born)

> "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn."

Proverbs 11:24

> One gives freely, yet grows all the richer;
> another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.

Proverbs 29:23

> One's pride will bring him low,
> but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.

Isaiah 40:29

> He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.

Ezekiel 21:26

> "Thus says the Lord GOD: Remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, and bring low that which is exalted."[319]

In each of these passages we are confronted with the counterintuitive, paradoxical nature of living as a true member of the people of God.[320] Yet while it is not difficult to find paradox in the Old Testament, in no book does it serve as a comprehensive hermeneutical framework. Rather one finds scattered seeds of the paradoxical nature of faithful living which, under the teaching of the New Testament writers, would later blossom into clarity.

Intertestamental Literature

The Pauline paradox is not abundant in the early Jewish literature.[321] Yet we do at times see brief foreshadowings of the truth later brought to full light in the shameful cross of the glorious Son of God, embodied in the ministry of Paul, and resisted by the Corinthians.

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[319] The interpretive difficulty of the verse is manifest in the translation of the NIV: "The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low." The two infinitives (הַגְבֵּהַ, to make high, exalt; and הַשְׁפִּיל, to make low, abase) at the end of the sentence could be translated either way.

[320] One additional passage could possibly be added. Job 5:11 reads, "[God] sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety." Because this is Eliphaz speaking, however, one of several characters in the book of Job who ultimately serves as a foil to true piety, we ought not to read this as *necessarily* indicative of divine truth.

[321] I am using the terms "Second Temple Judaism" and "early Judaism" interchangeably.

Apocrypha and Pseudepigrepha

In the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, we read the following in the contribution attributed to Judah:

> Those who have died in grief will be raised in joy,
> Those who are in poverty for the Lord's sake will be made rich,
> Those who are in hunger shall be filled,
> Those who are weak will be strong,
> Those who died on account of the Lord will be wakened to life. (Testament of Judah 25:4)

This is a startling crystallization of the paradox highlighted by Paul all through 2 Corinthians, as a comparison of the passages suggests.

Testament of Judah 25:4	**2 Corinthians**
Those who have *died* in grief will be *raised* in joy . . . Those who *died* on account of the Lord will be wakened to *life.*	For we who live are always being given over to *death* for Jesus' sake. . . . he who *raised* the Lord Jesus will *raise* us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. (2 Cor. 4:11, 14)[322]
Those who are in *poverty* for the Lord's sake will be made *rich* . . .	. . . as *poor*, yet making many *rich* (6:10) For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was *rich*, yet for your sake he became *poor*, so that you by his *poverty* might become *rich.* (8:9)
Those who are in *hunger* shall be *filled* . . .	. . . as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, *hunger* . . . as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet *possessing everything.* (6:4, 10) . . . I am *filled* with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy. (7:4)
Those who are *weak* will be *strong* . . .	When I am *weak*, then I am *strong.* (12:10)

[322] See also 2 Cor 7:3-16, in which we again find the three concepts (as in Test. Jud. 25:4) of death (2 Cor 7:3, 10), grief (2 Cor 7:8, 9, 10, 11) and joy (2 Cor 7:4, 9, 13, 16).

"The resurrection," writes Simon J. Gathercole on this passage in Testament of Judah, "brings a reversal of fortunes: poverty to riches, lack to fullness, weakness to strength, all bracketed within the inclusion of resurrection in the first ('they will rise in joy') and fifth ('they will be awakened in life') lines."[323] This is precisely the paradoxical framework we have seen in 2 Corinthians.

The Maccabean writings contain a few examples of paradox which echo the heartbeat of 2 Corinthians. In 1 Maccabees 2, a dying Mattathias (the inaugurator of the Maccabean revolt against Seleucid control of Palestine) gives a final charge to his followers to be zealous for the Torah. In closing, he instructs them to remember that "none of those who put their trust in him will lack strength. Do not fear the words of sinners, for their splendor will turn into dung and worms. Today they will be exalted, but tomorrow they will not be found, because they will have returned to the dust, and their plans will have perished" (vv. 61-63). Here is certainly a graphic instance of the paradox that (in the words of Jesus two centuries later) "those who exalt themselves will be humbled" (Luke 14:11). What then of the reciprocal truth, that those who humble themselves will be exalted? This is hardly the note Mattathias strikes next in verse 64: "My children, be courageous and grow strong in the law, for by it you will gain honor." This latter exhortation may indeed be closer to the practice of the super-apostles than of Paul. Nevertheless verses 61-63 do describe the fate of the wicked in terms of paradox—they will get the precise opposite ("dung and worms") of what they appear to enjoy in this life ("splendor").[324]

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[323] *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 74.

[324] All Apocryphal quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (*The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2003]).

Two instances of paradox emerge in 2 Maccabees. In the midst of a narrative outlining the suppression of Judaism under the Seleucid oppressor Antiochus IV in the late second century B.C., the author pauses briefly in chapter six to call the reader to reflect on the greater purpose of the sufferings his fellow Jews are presently undergoing. We read:

> Now I urge those who read this book not to be depressed by such calamities, but to recognize that these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people. In fact, not to let the impious alone for long, but to punish them immediately, is a sign of great kindness. For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins; but he does not deal in this way with us, in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Though he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people. Let what we have said serve as a reminder; we must go on briefly with the story. (6:12-17)

This more general principle from the Testament of Judah and 2 Maccabees 6, in which suffering is seen (contrary to Corinthian sentiment) as a profitable mercy from God, can be seen embodied in the horrifying account in 2 Maccabees 7 of a Hebrew woman and her seven sons, each of whom defiantly refused Antiochus' command "to partake of unlawful swine's flesh" (v. 1). One by one, the sons are tortuously killed. Throughout the account, however, the sons are encouraged by the life to come and future resurrection of the body. The second son, after seeing his older brother tortured and killed, tells the king: "you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws" (v. 9). The third son, similarly, freely offering his tongue and hands to be cut off, declares: "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." After six of the seven sons had been killed, the mother

demonstrated equal resolve to count of value those things to which the world is indifferent: "the Creator of the world," she pronounces, "who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws."

Finally, the youngest son is not only threatened with torture if he will not comply to the king's demanded breach of Hebrew law but promises an easy and lavish life if the youngest son will but concede. The son replies:

> [O]ur brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of everflowing life under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our fathers, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by afflictions and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty which has justly fallen on our whole nation. (vv. 36-38)

We note: after enduring a brief suffering, these martyrs will drink of "everflowing life." Though not quite as obvious as in Testament of Judah, this too testifies that the Jews of the pre-New Testament period were cognizant of the paradoxical nature of living life as a member of the people of God. Such a life involved both suffering and future glory.

Finally, certain passages in the body of early Jewish literature echo Paul in 2 Corinthians in that both contain lists of hardships. Examples are 1 Enoch 103:9-15 and 2 Enoch 66:6. Victor Paul Furnish, in his comments on 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, directly connects Paul's short list of sufferings in these two verses to these two intertestamental passages.[325] Since, however, these lists supply only one half of the equation—that is, sufferings without the attendant joys (*less* divorced from *more*)—these passages, while

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[325] Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 282. Savage mentions these two passages only in passing (*Power in Weakness*, 170).

certainly echoing a significant element of Paul's strategy in 2 Corinthians, do not compare well with our analysis of Paul's use of paradox in that epistle. Nevertheless they do affirm the awareness of Second-Temple Jews of the reality of suffering for the sake of their faith.

Dead Sea Scrolls

Though it is unwise to hold Paul's readers accountable for cognizance of these writings as they were probably borne out of an isolated wilderness community at a generally unknown time, the Qumran writings contain a few strong examples of paradox. "The Thanksgiving Hymn," for example, includes the following:

> Thou wilt conceal the truth until [its] time,
> [and righteousness] until its appointed moment.
> Thy rebuke shall become my joy and gladness,
> and my scourges shall turn to [eternal] healing
> and everlasting [peace].
> The scorn of my enemies shall become a crown of glory,
> and my stumbling (shall change) to everlasting might. (1 QH 9:24-26)

A few lines later we read,

> [Thou wilt bring healing to] my wound,
> and marvellous might in place of my stumbling,
> and everlasting space to my straitened soul. (1 QH 9:27)[326]

In both passages the affliction of the writer exults in the attendant joy and gladness which will inevitably ensue. Yet this is somewhat different than Paul's strategy in 2 Corinthians, for in these Qumran statements the eagerly awaited vindication appears to be an

[326] Translation from Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 4th ed. (London: Penguin, 1995), 218. For other paradoxical (though somewhat less explicitly so) statement of paradox in "The Thanksgiving Hymn," see 3:10, 2:23-25, 4:8, 23, 27, 28, 5:15, 11:3. See also Barré, "Qumran and 'Weakness,'" 216-227.

eschatological glory. In 2 Corinthians, by contrast, Paul speaks of a glory, joy and power which is to be known in this life's shame, difficulty and weakness.

Philo

Despite his massive literary output, Philo of Alexandria was probably not known to many of the writers of the New Testament due to his chronological proximity to them (less than a century of separation) combined with his geographical distance from them (as a diaspora Jew). Nevertheless he is included in this discussion due to one particularly startling passage, found in his *De Vita Mosis* (*The Life of Moses*). Retelling Moses' encounter with the burning bush in Exodus 3, Philo writes:

> Now, as he was leading the flock to a place where the water and the grass were abundant, and where there happened to be plentiful growth of herbage for the sheep, he found himself at a glen where he saw a most astonishing sight. There was a bramble-bush, a thorny sort of plant, and of the most weakly kind (ἀσθενέστατον), which, without anyone's setting it alight, suddenly took fire. (1:65)[327]

To this point the reader familiar with 2 Corinthians likely will not have noticed any particular resemblance of Paul with Philo, despite the presence both of weakness and a thorn in the latter (though Philo uses βάτος, consonant with the LXX [Exod. 3:2-3], not σκόλοψ).

Yet Philo goes on to intepret the event with his usual allegorical method:

> [T]he burning bramble was a symbol of those who suffered wrong, as the flaming fire of those who did it. Yet that which burned was not burnt up, and this was a sign that the sufferers would not be destroyed by their aggressors, who would find that the aggression was vain and profitless while the victims of malice escaped

[327] *Philo, Vol. VI,* LCL, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 311.

> unharmed. . . . But the details of the comparison must be considered. The bramble, as I have said, is a very weakly (ἀσθενέστατον) plant, yet it is prickly and will wound if one do but touch it. Again, though fire is naturally destructive, the bramble was not devoured thereby, but on the contrary was guarded by it, and remained just as it was before it took fire, lost nothing at all but gained an additional brightness. All this is a description of the nation's condition as it then stood, and we may think of it as a voice proclaiming to the sufferers: "Do not lose heart;[328] *your weakness is your strength* (τὸ ἀσθενὲς ὑμῶν δύναμίς ἐστιν), which can prick, and thousands will suffer from its wounds. Those who desire to consume you will be your unwilling saviours instead of your destroyers. Your ills will work you no ill. Nay, just when the enemy is surest of ravaging you, your fame will shine forth most gloriously. (1:67-69)[329]

Here we see the exact same principle of strength in weakness as employed all through 2 Corinthians, with particularly strong comparison to 12:10, where Paul writes: ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι. The two key terms, ἀσθενὲς and δύναμις, are both employed in both writers—and, what is more, *the former is again seen as the means to the latter.* I conclude that while this paradox does not appear to have been a controlling hermeneutical principle in any of Philo's writings, he has reflected on the Old Testament in such a way which confirms that paradox was a principle in the Old Testament, of which Paul's readers perhaps ought to have been aware.

Josephus

What of other early non-canonical sources? Taking one step closer to the time of the New Testament, we cast an eye toward Josephus, the Palestinian Jew who has provided more information than any other writer of the first century regarding the history of the Jews in the time between the Testaments. Josephus, who was probably born about a generation after Philo, comes close to the kind of paradox employed by Paul in 2

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[328] Cf. 2 Cor 4:1, 16 (though Philo uses the verb ἀναπίπτω).
[329] Ibid., 311-12. Emphasis added.

Corinthians when he describes the courage of a group of Sicarii[330] who, having fled to Egypt, have been captured and tortured by the Romans: "But what was most of all astonishing to the beholders, was the courage of the children; for not one of these children was so far overcome by these torments as to name Caesar for their lord. So far does the strength (ἰσχύς) of the courage [of the soul] prevail over the weakness (ἀσθένεια) of the body."[331] Here indeed Jospehus is speaking of a strength that exists in the midst of weakness, yet not only does he use a different word for strength (ἰσχύς) than has Paul throughout 2 Corinthians (δύναμις, used hundreds of times elsewhere by Josephus), he speaks of this strength prevailing over the weakness, rather than of the strength finding its genesis in the weakness. Thus weakness and strength are still seen to be antithetical.

Epistle to Diognetus

The "Epistle to Diognetus," a second-century Christian apologetic work, contains a much more robust element of paradox. Speaking of first-century Christians, the author writes that "following the native customs in eating and food and in the rest of life they demonstrate the character of their own citizenship as marvelous and admittedly paradoxical." The writer then explains why he makes such a statement.

> They dwell in their own homelands, but as resident aliens; participating in all things as citizens, and enduring all things as strangers; every strange place is their homeland, and every homeland a strange place. They marry as do all, bearing children; but not exposing[332] those who are born. A common bread they share, but

[330] That is, "daggermen." The Sicarii were an extreme form of Zealotism. See Martin Hengel, *Die Zeloten: Untersuchung zur judischen Freiheitsbewegung in der Zeit von Herodes I. bis 70 n. Chr.*, Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums (Leiden: Brill, 1976) or Gerhard Maier, *Mensch und freier Wille nach den jüdischen Religionsparteien zwischen Ben Sira und Paulus* (Tübingen: J. C. Mohr, 1971).

[331] *The Wars of the Jews*, 7:419.

[332] Lit. "to propel something with a forceful motion, throw" (BDAG, 906). Cf. Luke 4:35.

> not bed.[333] In flesh they exist, but not according to flesh do they live. On earth they remain, but in heaven are they citizens. They are obedient to the laws that have been appointed, and by their own lives they conquer the laws. They love all, and by all they are persecuted. They are unknown,[334] and they are condemned; they are put to death, and they are made alive.[335] They are impoverished, and they make many rich; of all things they are lacking, and in everything they abound. They are dishonored, and in their dishonors they are glorified. They are blasphemed, and they are justified. They are reviled, and they bless;[336] mistreated, they honor. Doing good they are punished as evil; being punished they rejoice as being made alive.[337]

In the next chapter of his epistle, moreover, the author describes Christians in terms remarkably similar to 2 Corinthians 5:1, saying that for believers "the immortal soul dwells in a mortal dwelling; and Christians dwell as aliens in perishable places, waiting for the imperishable place in heaven."[338]

Here indeed, then, is a striking delineation of the nature of the Christian life as being inherently paradoxical—this word is even itself employed (παράδοξον[339]). Nevertheless this is not a theme pervasively present throughout the twelve short chapters of the epistle.

Conclusion

All this may seem quite interesting yet irrelevant; but such is not the case. For Paul may have been influenced by any or all of these three bodies of literature. Admitting

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[333] Lit. "a common table they share but not bed." I am trying to capture the alliteration and single-letter difference in the Greek text: τράπεζαν *κοινὴν* παρατιθένται, ἀλλ' οὐ *κοίτην*.
[334] Cf. 2 Cor 6:9.
[335] Cf. 2 Cor 6:10.
[336] Cf. 1 Cor 4:12.
[337] *Epistle to Diognetus* 5:4-16 (*The Apostolic Fathers: II,* LCL Vol. XXV, trans. Bart D. Ehrman [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003], 139-140). My translation.
[338] *Epistle to Diognetus*, 6:8. My translation. Overlapping vocabulary includes οἰκία, σκῆνος, and ἐν οὐρανοῖς.
[339] Cf. Luke 5:26 (a *hapax legomenon*); BDAG, 763.

that much of the New Testament would have been written either after Paul or close enough to his own ministry that he would not have been aware of it, the Synoptic tradition would probably have been planted firmly in the mind of the apostle, as has been argued at length by (for example) David Wenham.[340]

Nevertheless the conclusion of this chapter is that in 1 Corinthians, the rest of the New Testament, the Old Testament, and the intertestamental Jewish literature, one discovers hints of paradox, though it never provides a hermeneutical key to an entire book. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is the only piece of relevant ancient literature in which paradox plays a pervasively controlling role.

[340] See footnote 313 above.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

> So, when the time for the Isthmian games arrived, and everybody was at the Isthmus, [Diogenes] went down also. For it was his custom at the great assemblies to make a study of the pursuits and ambitions of men. . . . And when a certain man asked whether he too came to see the contest, he said, "No, but to take part." Then when the man laughed and asked him who his competitors were, he said with that customary glance of his: "The toughest there are and the hardest to beat, men whom no Greek can look straight in the eye; not competitors, however, who sprint or wrestle or jump, not those that box, throw the spear, and hurl the discus, but those that chasten a man." "Who are they, pray?" asked the other. "Hardships," (πόνους) he replied, "very severe and insuperable for gluttonous and folly-stricken men who feast the livelong day and snore at night."[341]

So writes Dio Chrysostom, a contemporary of Paul and a first-hand spectator of the Isthmian games held regularly in Corinth. Here we find not only a window into the self-indulgence of the Corinthians but also a startling corollary to Paul's method of argumentation in his letter to the church in this city, a church that seems to have allowed Corinthian sentiment to influence it rather than a crucified Christ influence the city.

As we bring this study to a close, we note first that 2 Corinthians holds the unique position of being both undisputedly Pauline—included, for example, along with Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Galatians in F. C. Baur's delimited *Hauptbriefe*—yet also persistently neglected.[342] Certain passages have proven important across the centuries. An example is 2 Corinthians 3:6, which for centuries fueled and informed discussions concerning both the relationship between the testaments as well as the relationship between literal and allegorical interpretation. Yet with a few exceptions, 2 Corinthians has been the subject

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[341] *Dio Chrysostom, Vol. I*, 379-383.

[342] Linda L. Belleville suggests reasons for this which complement my historical survey in ch. 4 above; see "A Letter of Apologetic Self-Commendation: 2 Cor. 1:8-7:16," NovT 31/2 (1989): 142-44.

of little systematic exposition before the twentieth century—John Chrysostom, John Calvin, and Charles Hodge providing the three outstanding exceptions. It is not difficult to ascertain why, considering the emotionally raw nature of the letter as well as the large amount of material which assumes contextual knowledge shared only by the writer and his audience.[343]

More to the point, secondly, even among those few who have worked exegetically though 2 Corinthians, paradox has been largely ignored as a hermeneutical key by which a unifying rubric to the letter might emerge. Even among the flowering of commentaries on the epistle in the last fifty years, paradox does not figure in as an interpretive key in any of those written in English—though the commentaries of J. Paul Sampley,[344] Geoffrey B. Wilson[345] and Paul Barnett,[346] as well as the work of Timothy Savage,[347] Frank Thielman[348] and Karl Plank,[349] show promising signs of reversing this trend. Yet even in these writers paradox or irony as a central controlling rubric, rooted in the socio-ecclesiological situation in Corinth, is not considered.[350] Savage comes closer than

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[343] According to Frederick W. Danker, "A modern interpreter has about as much chance to comprehend all the nuances in 2 Corinthians as an Amish farmer to understand a Doonesbury comic strip. Reading the letter is tantamount to eavesdropping on a private conversation in which the dialoguers make no explicit reference to data that are essential for decoding the discourse" ("Review of *2 Corinthians*, by Ralph Martin," *JBL* 107 [1988]: 550).

[344] "Second Corinthians," in *New Interpreter's Bible*.

[345] *2 Corinthians*.

[346] I am thinking of both of Barnett's 2 Corinthians commentaries, one in the BST series (1988) and the second in the longer NICNT series (1997).

[347] *Power Through Weakness*.

[348] *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

[349] *Paul and the Irony of Affliction*.

[350] Thielman, though he has not written a commentary on 2 Corinthians, may nevertheless provide an exception. In his *Theology of the New Testament*, he summarizes the message of 2 Corinthians this way: "Paul's goal is to encourage the newly repentant majority to remain loyal to the gospel and to provide them with the theological resources for answering those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart.

"These theological resources can be summarized in one line: God's power is perfected in weakness (cf. 12:9). Paul's opponents have placed confidence in the outward trappings of "fleshly" power: letters of recommendation, rhetorical skill, and an overbearing demeanor. Paul, however, places confidence in the God who works through affliction, sorrow, and poverty to bring about life. Paul shows in 2

anyone to the claim of this thesis, yet his study is confined to 2 Corinthians 3-4 and reflects solely on Greco-Roman backgrounds. While one is able, moreover, to discern paradox throughout the ancient literature of the rest of the New Testament, the Old Testament, and early Jewish writings, nowhere outside 2 Corinthians is a book written with this as the fundamental underlying principle.

I have attempted to show, therefore, that the apostle employs theological paradox throughout 2 Corinthians to upend Corinthian sensibilities more influenced by secular culture than a cross-centered gospel, culminating in the statement which forms the pinnacle of a paradox-saturated letter: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (12:10). Richard Bauckham supplies one side of the paradox when he states of this epistle that "Paul's weakness is the recurring theme"; Frances Young and David F. Ford supply the other side in their statement that "the leading concept is that of power" in 2 Corinthians.[351] Adding together these two assertions, both of which are inadequate by

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Corinthians how God has done this with Jesus, the Macedonian Christians, the Corinthians Christians, and, most significantly in light of the opposition that he faces, with himself. This theological principle undergirds the letter from beginning to end, giving unity to what is in other ways a difficult and disorganized argument" (326)

In concluding his analysis of this letter, Thielman writes: "Every major section of 2 Corinthians emphasizes that human weakness is the environment in which God's grace flourishes. . . . Paul argues that God's grace expresses its full power in the weakness of suffering and in the unseen condition of the heart (3:2-3; 5:12). 'My grace is sufficient for you,' says the crucified and risen Lord, 'for my power is made perfect in weakness' (12:9). Paul knows that God works in this way so 'that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead' (1:9) and 'to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us' (4:7). Those who boast, as he had said in 1 Corinthians and repeats here, should boast in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17). Paul was troubled, however, by the Corinthians' failure to understand this critical theological principle. . . . Second Corinthians, then, represents an effort to reassert in the Corinthian community a fundamental theological principle and to urge the Corinthians to embrace that principle by taking a practical step of obedience. In a variety of ways and with several confusing shifts in subject and tone, Paul argues a single thesis: God's power is perfected in human weakness. Those who have experienced the gracious work of this power have moved their focus from the face to the heart—from the seen to the unseen—and they inevitably become the instruments through which God graciously gives salvation and comfort to others" (340-41).

[351] Bauckham, "Weakness," 4; Young and Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 239. Michael Barré ("Qumran and 'Weakness'") provides another exploration into the theme of *weakness* in 2 Corinthians, and Alexandra Brown ("The Gospel Takes Place") another elucidation of that of *power* in the epistle.

themselves, and seeing that the weakness Bauckham notes *is the avenue for* the power Young and Ford point out, we arrive at the key to understanding 2 Corinthians.

"The Corinthian church," writes C. K. Barrett, "had still not learned the hardest lesson of the Christian faith; it had still not yet discovered that the Christ the church proclaims as Lord is Christ crucified." We close with Barrett's ensuing summary of the situation at Corinth and its accordant relevance for today.

> The church at large, not only the church at Corinth, never has learned, and never can learn, this truth in such a way as to be beyond the danger of forgetting it, and the Corinthian letters stand in the New Testament as in some respects its clearest and most urgent reminder of this eminently forgettable truth, of the grim fate of a wealthy, spiritual and successful church that forgets it, and that the only mark of legitimacy in the Christian church is that it carries in and with itself the death of Jesus and the promise of resurrection.[352]

[352] *Second Corinthians*, 49-50.

APPENDIX

OUTLINE OF 2 CORINTHIANS
AS SEEN THROUGH THE UPSIDE-DOWN NATURE OF THE GOSPEL

I. Chapters 1-7 The *Apostle*: Gospel Ministry Explained

1:1-2	(Greeting)			(encapsulated in)
1:3-7	Comfort	through	Affliction	(1:5-6)
1:8-11	Deliverance	through	Burdening	(1:9)
1:12-22	Grace	through	Simplicity	(1:12,15)
1:23-2:4	Joy	through	Pain	(2:3)
2:5-11	(Reconciliation for the sinner)			
2:12-17	Victory	through	Captivity	(2:14)
3:1-6	Sufficiency	through	Insufficiency	(3:5)
3:7-11	(A Greater Glory [*argumentum a fortiori*])			
3:12-18	Transformation	through	Unveiling	(3:12-13)
4:1-6	Ministry	through	Self-renunciation	(4:5)
4:7-15	Life	through	Death	(4:11)
4:16-18	Renewal	through	Corrosion	(4:16)
5:1-10	Dwelling	through	Homelessness	(5:1)
5:11-21	Sinlessness	through	Sinfulness	(5:21)
6:1-13	Blessing	through	Suffering	(6:10)
6:14-7:1	Welcoming	through	Separation	(6:17-18)
7:2-16	Joy	through	Grief	(7:10)

II. Chapters 8-9 The *Audience*: Generous Moneyhandling Exhorted

8:1-24	Abundance	through	Poverty	(8:9,14)
9:1-15	Reaping	through	Giving	(9:6)

III. Chapters 10-13 The *Agitators*: Gain-seeking Measurement Exposed

10:1-18	Commendation	through	Denigration	(10:10,18)
11:1-15	Exaltation	through	Humbling	(11:7)
11:16-33	Confidence	through	Hardship	(11:30)
12:1-10	Strength	through	Weakness	(12:9-10)
12:11-21	Superiority	through	Inferiority	(12:11,15)
13:1-4	Power	through	Weakness	(13:4)
13:5-10	Approval	through	Apparent Disapproval	(13:7,9)
13:11-14	(Closing)			

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