

2 Corinthians

2. Visions, 2 Corinthians 12-13

We have seen that 2 Corinthians as we have it is almost certainly a composite pieced together from several letters from Paul to the churches at Corinth. We have suggested that 2 Corinthians 10-13 is probably the earliest part of that letter. Paul sent these chapters to warn the Corinthians about some “super apostles,” also called “false apostles,” who have appeared on the scene since his most recent visit. He is preparing the way for another visit to Corinth. This portion of our epistle is written as a kind of pre-emptive strike. If the Corinthians really hear and heed Paul’s words, he will be able to visit them rejoicing in reconciliation. If not, he anticipates that his visit will be harsh, demanding, and painful.

From 11:16–12:10 Paul engages in a kind of “fool’s speech” which we have seen was a familiar rhetorical device in antiquity. His role can be compared with that of the Fool in Shakespeare’s tragedy King Lear. Lear is tricked and misled by his daughters, Goneril and Regan. The Corinthians are tricked and misled by the super apostles. The fool appears to be foolish but in fact time after time tells Lear the sad truth about himself, which could be redemptive truth if only Lear would pay attention. Paul pretends to be foolish but spends these verses telling the Corinthians the sad truth about themselves and their seducers in the hope that they will turn toward Paul’s own apostleship and the truth of his gospel.

There is a deeper layer to the role of “fool” in 2 Corinthians, however. When we read the letters Paul writes to Corinth we discover that it is not only that he plays the fool, at some deep level he contends that the Gospel he preaches *is* foolish. He does not have to pretend that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his own apostleship are foolish. By every standard of the world,

the crucifixion and his apostleship really are foolish. But “the foolishness of God is wiser than humankind” (1 Cor 1:18–25).

Indeed John Schutz has suggested that in 2 Corinthians Paul deliberately describes his own apostleship in terms that conform his ministry to Christ’s sacrifice, so that the foolishness of his preaching may provide the Corinthians access to the saving foolishness of Christ’s cross.

Boasting about not boasting (12:1–10)

We have noted that because we get only one side of a discussion, Paul’s, we have no very distinct idea of what the super apostles were preaching, nor even a clear sense of what some of the Corinthians found persuasive in that preaching. From these ten verses it seems likely that the apostles who followed Paul to Corinth have boasted about their ecstatic, mystical experience of God and have perhaps criticized Paul for being a little too earth bound.

Now perhaps for the first time in his ministry to them, Paul recounts an experience he had fourteen years previously when he, at least as profoundly as the false apostles, was caught up into the heavenly realms.

Not for the first time Paul begins to boast of his experience, then says that he knows that boasting is of no avail (the faithful boast only in the Lord.) Nonetheless, he feels compelled to continue. In part he feels compulsion because, whether he likes it or not, the Corinthians have compared him unfavorably to the apostles who followed him. In part, he is compelled to continue because his description of a transcendent experience serves to call into question the fundamental value of just such experiences. Foolishness has already turned out to be better than wisdom. Now weakness turns out to be better than super spiritual athleticism.

Whether out of modesty or as a kind of rhetorical distancing, Paul speaks of himself in the third person as “a man” (v 2), but there is no question that the experience he recounts is his own.

There are many accounts in Jewish literature of the second Temple period, roughly contemporary with Paul, about visions and ascensions. -- *1 Enoch*, for instance, included among the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, built on the Biblical report of Enoch being “taken” to heaven (Genesis 5:24) and described his heavenly journeys. Paul can assume knowledge of such accounts and does not really delineate the details of his experience. He accepts the common notion that there are levels of the heavenly realm and the third level, which he visited or saw, can also be called “Paradise,” a word used only here in Paul’s writings. (See Luke 23:43)

The point of telling the story, however, is not to say how fulfilling the religious experience was but how disappointing. Paul in fact has suffered from a “thorn in the flesh” (v 7). We have no way of knowing what particular malady so distressed him. Most likely it was some kind of physical affliction. Whatever it was, Paul thought it was sent by Satan. Elsewhere in 2 Corinthians, Satan is blamed for harassing people (2:11; 11:14). But more than that, Satan is for Paul (and for Jesus and for Job) the tempter whose temptation provides the opportunity for deeper faith.

Paul prays three times that the thorn might be taken away (v 8), displaying a kind of reticence that might commend itself to those of us who think that God may be counting our prayers and waiting till we meet the divine quota. What Paul gets is an answer to prayer but not the answer he wants: “My grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in weakness” (v 9). Wisdom perfected in foolishness; power perfected in weakness. Perhaps it turns out that

the “super apostles” aren’t so super after all; and the somewhat disappointing parent of the Corinthian churches displays the weakness, which is always also paradoxically, God’s power.

Getting Ready for the Next Visit (12:11–21)

In these next verses Paul moves from his (wise) fool’s speech to immediate practical concerns about his relationship to the church of Corinth. On the one hand, he is specific about the details of his current situation. He has already sent Titus to check up on the Corinthians and is not pleased with what he has heard (v 18). Paul plans to visit again and has high hopes that by the time he comes the Corinthians will have repented and mended their ways.

On the other hand Paul uses an image here used earlier in this letter (11:1–2). In those verses he compared himself to a father preparing to present his daughter, the Corinthians, as a bride to Christ the bridegroom. Now in more detail he likens himself to the Corinthians’ parent (v 14). Indeed in the history of the Corinthians he was not just “like” a father, he was their founding father. He started the church and has all the parental rights and privileges that the super apostles can never rightly claim.

Again he returns to a theme clearly important to the super apostles and perhaps to the Corinthians themselves. The fact that he did not take financial compensation from them is not a sign that he was not a genuine “professional/paid” apostle (v 17; cf. 11:8–9). It is not a sign that he did not love them. It is rather that like a good parent his role is to encourage and strengthen, not to depend and take advantage.

In vv 19–21 Paul is more detailed about the transgressions he fears the Corinthians have not corrected. But again, as is often the case in Paul, the list of possible misbehaviors is sufficiently varied and sufficiently vague that it is hard to be clear what particular offenses now

offend him. To be sure, from 1 Corinthians on (and perhaps even in the earlier letter cited in 1 Cor 5:9, Letter A) Paul has been concerned with some kinds of immoral sexual practices among the Corinthians, and this passage indicates that his anxiety has not yet abated (v 21).

Paul, who worries about being “humbled” (v 21), seems even more concerned that the Corinthians will not acknowledge his superiority to the supposedly superior super apostles. The fear that God will humble him before the Corinthians is the fear that the Corinthian believers will think that the super apostles’ criticisms have been vindicated. Here comes that weak old Paul again.

Weak old Paul makes clear that he has every intention of exerting his parental rights. It’s that letter that Mother or Father wrote when the first report card came home from college. “I’m on my way. Shape up.”

The Weakness of Christ (and of the apostle) (13:1–40)

As the letter draws to a close, Paul reiterates his fundamental theme, central to his dealing with the Corinthians. He is like a father and has the right to deal with them as such. He will deal with them by the power of Christ, which remarkably is manifest in the terrible weakness of the crucifixion. He will deal with them in the power of his apostleship, which remarkably is manifest not despite the fact that he is less charismatic than his opponents, but because of that fact. When he is weak, he is strong. The opening of the chapter (13:1–2) provides a powerful summary of the theological underpinning of these chapters, this letter fragment, 2 Cor 10–13.

Typically Paul closes this letter with a series of exhortations and reminders, but here the exhortations are shaped again by the theme of weakness and strength. Now, admitting his own weakness, his prayer is that the Corinthians may be strong: Strong enough to refrain from

immorality; Strong enough to resist the temptations of the super apostles (who finally work for Satan); Strong enough to welcome Paul so that his fatherly visit, which perhaps also foreshadows Christ's visit at the end of history, will be full of gratitude and affection.

Benediction (13:11–13)

The general admonitions of these verses are fairly typical, but they also demonstrate what we so often see in Paul's letters, his strong sense that his churches are joined together in prayer and concern for one another and in mission, too.

The final verse may have originally been the final verse of this letter, represented by chapters 10–13 or may have been moved by the editor from some other portion of the Corinthian correspondence to close the whole canonical 2 Corinthians.

Commentators rightly point out that this benediction does not assume anything like the full doctrine of the Trinity. What we have rather is an invocation of those “persons” who, in a not very systematic way, remain the major actors in the drama of Paul's apostleship, the Lord Jesus Christ, God, the Spirit (and the communion the spirit provides with God and with fellow Christians.)

The benediction is in the wrong order for the not yet developed Trinitarian doctrine. The Father of course comes first. But the benediction may be in the right order for a letter that stresses how the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the crucified one, has redeemed the apostle and continues to redeem his children at Corinth.

Questions for discussion:

1. Are you persuaded by Paul's rhetorical moves in this portion of the letter, arguing that strength comes from weakness?
2. Do ecstatic or extraordinary experiences of prayer or closeness to God play a role in your own life and are they accompanied by some "thorn in the flesh"?
3. What is the role of money in your relationship to your religious community?

Further Reading:

Dustin Watson Ellington, "Not Applicable to Believers? The Aims and Basis of Paul's 'I' in 2 Corinthians 10–13," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131 (2012) 325–40.

Jason B. Hood, "The Temple and the Thorn: 2 Corinthians 12 and Paul's Heavenly Ecclesiology," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21 (2011) 357–70.

Andrew T. Lincoln, "'Paul the Visionary'" The Setting and Significance of the Rapture to Paradise in II Corinthians XII.1–10," *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979) 204–20.