

## 2 Corinthians 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] 2 Corinthians chapter 10 I, Paul, myself entreat you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away, I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh.

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience when your obedience is complete. Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ, so also are we. For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed.

I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. For they say, His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account. Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present.

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.

[ 1 : 30 ] But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you.

For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit in the labours of others, but our hope is that, as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence.

Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends. 2 Corinthians chapter 10 represents a significant shift in the tone of the letter, to the degree that a number of scholars have argued that it is either part of the earlier painful letter that Paul sent to the Corinthians, or another letter that he sent subsequently.

While there has been rebuke at various points in the letter to this point and polemic, the urgency and the polemical tone of much of chapters 10 to 13 feels a bit jarring after the joy and the relief of chapter 7.

Various explanations have been advanced by those arguing for the unity of the letter. Some, such as Ben Witherington, have argued that an understanding of the rhetorical techniques of the day supports the unity of the letter.

[ 2 : 52 ] Others, such as Murray Harris, observe the literary unity of the letter, but believe that Paul probably received some further news from the Corinthian church while he was still writing the letter.

As Harris observes, it is quite reasonable to presume that Paul's letters would have been composed and written over a period of days or weeks or months, during which time various developments might have occurred.

Beyond the fact that they are carefully crafted literary works that would have taken some time to put together, we need to consider that Paul had to wait for a suitable bearer to bring them to the church to which he was sending them.

Some such explanation is far more reasonable than the idea that the ending of the letter from chapters 1 to 9 was lost and the beginning of a supposed other letter from chapters 10 to 13 was

also lost without a trace.

Chapter 10 begins with another reference to Paul's anticipated visit. He wants to come to them in a spirit of meekness and gentleness, which is the ideal way of restoring people according to Galatians 6 verse 1.

[ 3 : 52 ] Paul also speaks of meekness and gentleness as characteristic of Christ. As a minister of Christ, this is the way that Paul wants to approach them. We've already seen Paul draw attention to the apparent contrast between his manner with them in his presence and his manner with them in his absence.

There are similar statements in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 9 to 21. The Corinthians have the choice which Paul they want to visit.

Paul would much prefer it to be the gentle Paul rather than the bold and forceful Paul, and he entreats them to allow him to come to them as a joyful father rather than as one who has the painful task of enforcing discipline.

The character of Paul and his companions seems to have been maligned by some in the Corinthian situation, and he needs to vindicate himself against the false accusations of his opponents.

Paul may minister in the world in the current age and in the realm of the body, walking in the flesh, but he does not operate on the terms of these things. Paul and his associates act with powerful force, albeit as people who do so in the weakness of their flesh.

[ 5 : 16 ] Paul describes his activity in military terms here. He may appear weak, but he has resources that they might not be taking into account. He is a sort of warrior in the gospel, prepared to pacify all resistance, destroying opposition and taking thoughts captive, much as he compared himself to a captive earlier in the letter.

At various points in Paul's epistles, we need to engage in what some have called shadow reading. We don't have first-hand texts or teachings from Paul's opponents, so we need to infer their teachings and positions from Paul's arguments against them.

Here the impression we get is that some of his opponents claim to belong to, or to represent Christ in some special way, setting them apart from others. And Paul clearly will not allow such a position to be entertained.

Paul has an authority relative to the Corinthians. It's given for their upbuilding. Although he's used military language and the language of destruction earlier on, the authority that he's been given has not fundamentally been given for that purpose.

Rather, it's been given for their upbuilding. Paul's opponents attack his consistency. They seem to claim that there's a discrepancy between the weighty, threatening and intimidating Paul projected by the letters, and the meek and underwhelming Paul that visits in person.

[ 6 : 32 ] This apostle's bark is much worse than his bite. Yet Paul makes clear that his authority is for the sake of building up, not destroying. His letters are not designed to frighten, but to build up.

If he does give warnings, it's not in order to frighten or threaten, but in order to build up, ultimately. That is the end for which they are given. Paul's ministry, whether physically present and in person, or at a distance by letter, is consistent.

It's driven by the same principles throughout. There are not two different Pauls. Paul's world was a highly status-conscious world, and concerns for status seemed to have been at play in the Corinthian situation also.

Paul had earlier used such dynamics of mutual comparison to encourage the Corinthians to match up to the example of the Macedonians, much as he had used the same dynamics with the Macedonians relative to the Corinthians.

Here there seem to be some who are comparing themselves very favourably to Paul, disparaging his ministry and authority and raising up their own. This is something that Paul clearly rules out elsewhere in his letters.

[ 7 : 37 ] Paul has a careful theological account of boasting, which negates human pride and the constant ways that people attempt to vaunt themselves over others. Challenging such a culture was also, we should remember, a recurring theme in Jesus' teaching.

Nevertheless, Paul's account of boasting encourages boasting in the Lord, boasting in the way that the Lord is at work in and through us and in others, boasting in the God-given fruit of our labours.

Now this boast, it is very important to remember, is not based upon anything that sets us apart from within ourselves, rather it's purely on the basis of the grace of God to us and through us.

