

Form/Structure/Setting

The thrust of what Paul has to say in the present passage is that his strength comes through admission of his weakness. He learned this lesson and shares it with the Corinthians in 12:1-10 in a highly polemical setting. The overall picture of our passage is that Paul has taken up the posture of boasting (12:1a; Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 325). As will be stated, he has been forced to do so by the Corinthians (12:11). Paul sees no value in such boasting (as his opponents evidently do), yet he goes on to relate the incident of his vision (12:1b-4). He exhibits concern not to draw attention to himself in this rehearsal by speaking in the third person. Paul knew "this man" who had a heavenly vision. The vision contained words that cannot be uttered by him or any mortal (12:4). In v 5, Paul begins to share with his readers that he is the "mystery" man of 12:2-4. Yet he refrains from using this fact as an opportunity to present his own apostolic person as something of great value. Rather, he turns toward his own weakness in continuity with 11:23-33. Instead of boasting in things that others cannot see, Paul urges his readers to look simply at what they know of him (12:6). (As will be seen, Paul offers demonstrable proofs of his apostleship, namely, his weakness and the fact that he was the one who founded the Corinthian church [Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 76, 77]. The subject of "proof" [δοκιμή] will arise again in chap. 13.) This leads into Paul's famous passage concerning the thorn in the flesh (12:7) and his prayer that it be removed (12:8). Having received an answer of no, Paul then proceeds to remark on the power of God coming through human weakness. In light of this experience (12:9), Paul boasts in his weaknesses, for in such weaknesses the power of Christ rests upon him. He then concludes our present passage by saying that he delights in weaknesses (12:10), for such is the time when he is strong, i.e., to do the work of an apostle (Phil 4:13).

This, in short, is a summary of 12:1-10. But we would be remiss if we failed to examine this passage with the intent to discover the literary style (see Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 396-411). In 12:1-10, we have a mosaic of literary devices that yields an interesting picture. In this passage Paul is answering a criticism from his opponents, namely, that he boasts little, and even when he boasts, it is only of weakness. Paul's reply is to engage in an *ad hominem* argument. He will presently meet the opponents on their own level and then, in a masterful way, show that it is his ministry, not theirs, that is of God. (Our present passage brings to mind Paul's "opening of his heart" in 6:11-13 [see *Comment* on these verses]. In the earlier passage Paul's thoughts were not kept to himself, but rather he shared more than he intended. In our present passage, Paul again opens up his inner thoughts, this time sharing an experience that up till then was known only to him and God. In 10:13 he had backed away from boasting; now he is urged to it by serious threats to his apostolate at 11:4, 13-15.)

Paul follows 11:33—the lowering of him by his friends via the Damascus wall—with verses that seek to build up "a certain man." In apologetic form 12:1-6a appears as an aretology, i.e., a tribute of praise in honor of a great

man as well as of a hellenistic deity. Paul seems to be building up this person only to point out that such a self-commendation is not the sign of a true apostle. Paul's picture here of a spectacular or even semidivine worker is reminiscent of the sophists (see *Comment* and Betz's argument; but note Zmijewski's [ibid., 379, n. 402; 411] reservations on the ground that the material is disparate). Paul seems to be attacking this way of promoting the Gospel, for 12:7-10 will lead the reader to see that expressing one's weakness is the only acceptable way to follow Christ in his service (see also 13:3-5; see Käsemann, *Die Legitimität*, 64: "this means that he wants to be understood only on the basis of his diakonia"). This final point is not confined only to the last part of 12:1-10. But in an opening irony, Paul introduces the thought in 12:1 that, while he must continue boasting, there is nothing to be gained by it (see J. L. Cheek, "Paul's Mysticism in the Light of Psychedelic Experience," *JAAR* 38 [1970], 381-89).

In 12:2-4 Paul reveals autobiographical information known before only to him and God. Fourteen years earlier (see *Comment* for discussion of the date of this vision) Paul was taken up into the third heaven, namely, paradise. The apostle relates twice that he is yet unsure as to whether this experience took place in the body or outside of it, i.e., with or without sensory perception. All the time he is describing this experience (though his description is vague and mysterious) he uses the third person. This may reflect Paul's Jewish background, or it may simply suggest that he wants his readers to see that, though he experiences visions and revelations like his opponents, nevertheless the man about whom Paul speaks is not the one he desires to emulate. Windisch, 370, describes the pericope as *Bescheidenheitsstil*, a style that trades on the speaker's modesty, but this is to be questioned; see Zmijewski, ibid., 336. It is doubtful too that Paul is engaged in "the objectifying of the I" (Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975], 214, 215), nor is he employing the convention of the pseudonymity of the apocalyptic, in which an anonymous seer transfers his personal experience to a well-known figure (see Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 75; contra J. Baumgarten, *Paulus und die Apokalyptik*, 143, 144). Paul neither is one who sells his teaching for profit nor baffles his hearers with mystical language simply for pride (like the sophists). Rather, in polemical fashion, 12:4 speaks of the things he knows as an apostle. He has heard inexpressible words. This paradoxical statement could not be verified by the Corinthians. The point is that Paul wants his readers to evaluate him on the basis of nothing except what they can see and hear of him (12:6) (i.e., the demonstrable evidence of his wretched experiences; see above). If Paul can convince them that this is the correct way, then, in turn, they should ask his opponents to provide similar tangible evidence. This is the challenge first posed in 11:21-23. And he trusts that his contest will lead the Corinthians to see that these opponents are indeed false in the sight of God.

In this section (vv 2-4) we note the parallel structures of Paul's two descriptions of his heavenly experience. The first description is found in v 2 and the second in vv 3, 4 (see Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 335; Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 381, for comment on the relation of the two vv).

v 2

- a) οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ
- b) πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκατεσσάρων –
- c) εἴτε ἐν σώματι οὐκ οἶδα,
- d) εἴτε ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα,
- e) ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν –
- f) ἀρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον
- g) ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ
- h) ---

vv 3, 4

- a) καὶ οἶδα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνθρωπον –
- b) ---
- c) εἴτε ἐν σώματι
- d) εἴτε χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα,
- e) ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν –
- f) ὅτι ἠρπάγη
- g) εἰς τὸν παράδεισον
- h) καὶ ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα, ἅ κτλ.

From this format, it appears that both descriptions are of the same event. V 3 begins with *καὶ* and some scholars (see *Comment*) think that this “and” introduces an additional vision. But it is doubtful that this is the case. More likely, vv 3, 4 reflect a repetition of the event described in v 2, and the second description is added to create a deeper impression (*Stilempfinden*, a semitic device like a *synthetic parallelism*). We see that Paul is speaking of only one event in vv 2-4 (see *Comment* for fuller discussion).

In 12:5 we have again Paul’s use of irony (see 12:1). The man who had this vision can surely boast of greatness, but rather the correct way, according to Paul, is to boast of the nonspectacular, namely, weakness. In 12:5 Paul refers to himself as the man who had the vision. This “introduction” is seen in the somewhat parallel construction of v 5:

ὑπὲρ τοῦ τοιοῦτου καυχῆσομαι,

ὑπὲρ δὲ ἑμαυτοῦ οὐ καυχῆσομαι, εἰ μὴ ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις

The last half of the second line points out that Paul has come in weakness (note adversative *δέ*; see Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 347). The polemic which started in 12:4 continues in v 5, for Paul has now set himself off from his opponents. He continues this polemic in 12:6, though in a restrained manner. If Paul had boasted about his own accomplishments, he would be truthful, for he had many things of which to be proud. (No doubt Paul was suspicious of the veracity of his opponents’ claims as in 11:21-23.) But instead of attacking his opponents in a more energetic manner, Paul begins a transition from the reasons for his being able to boast of himself to the reasons not to do so. The section of 12:7-10 becomes a discussion on weakness. Or, as Betz suggests, it is an “aretalogy of Christ” (see “Aretalogie”). In 12:7-10 Paul will explain that weakness is the way to power and this power comes from Christ, who was “crucified in weakness” (13:4). This has been called “the most celebrated paradox in the New Testament” by E. Fuchs (see Güttgemanns, *Der leidende Apostel*, 167, n. 110).

The idea of the thorn in the flesh has been the source of much discussion (see *Comment* for the various theories concerning the identity of the thorn). Paul is silent with respect to what this “thorn” was. Most likely, the Corinthians knew of what he was speaking. It has been noted that the account of the vision of Paul is placed between the experience of leaving Damascus hurriedly (11:32, 33) and mention of the thorn (Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 84, 85). The

vision is thus tempered and framed by the record of humiliating experiences. The thorn was given to prevent Paul from becoming conceited, literally “too uplifted” (see 11:20). In an indirect manner, Paul is still carrying on the polemic directed at his opponents. Had his opponents offered similar “guarantees” that they too would not be conceited? Or had they simply gloated all the more because of Paul’s “thorn”? This becomes even more striking in that Paul was probably ridiculed for his thorn. If it was an illness or physical defect, then his enemies could ask why he could not heal himself (see Jervell on the “sick charismatic,” “Der schwache Charismatiker,” 196, 197: “Paul is . . . presented as the weak, sick charismatic”). But in a sense Paul is saying he has been healed, for the ailment is from God, and thus in God’s power Paul is “made well.”

A quick glance at v 7b reveals a chiasmic, or criss-cross structure,

ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι	ἐδόθη
κολαφίζη	ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι

But to stop here with this observation overlooks the idea that between ἐδόθη and κολαφίζη we have another chiasmus (see Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 366), namely

ἐδόθη μοι	σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί
ἄγγελος σατανᾶ	με κολαφίζη

This second, or inner, chiasmus, highlights the point that the phrase “messenger of Satan” is in apposition to “thorn in the flesh” (Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 365, n. 299; 366). There is much discussion as to whether the thorn in the flesh refers to an illness of Paul or an opponent of Paul. It is difficult to be certain about either (see *Comment* for discussion of both sides of the issue), but the important thing to remember is that God has given Paul something to keep him weak, in spite of his heavenly vision, and that his weakness (picking up 10:10) becomes the “criterion of ministry” (Jervell, *ibid.*, 197; cf. Käsemann, *Die Legitimität*, 60–64).

From this account Paul, with God’s power upon him, had turned weakness into victory. The personal nature of this transformation can be seen from the chiasmic structure of 12:9, for the idea of grace and power is related to Paul’s own person (O’Collins, “Power,” 534; Plummer, 354; Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 377).

A ἀρκεί	C' ἡ γὰρ δύναμις
B σοι	B' ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ
C ἡ χάρις μου	A' τελείται

In a way Paul has experienced a cure, though not in the normal sense of the word. (Betz sees this v [12:9] as a healing oracle, “Aretalogie,” 294–97, but Zmijewski’s criticisms are well taken, *ibid.*, 379. More apposite is the form of Jewish prayer-speech, e.g., Mark 14:32–36, Jesus in Gethsemane, Windisch, 389; cf. Plummer, 445; Allo, 312; Prümm, *Diakonia* 1:670.) Paul has received the power of Christ because he has accepted the answer of God, and proceeded to minister in spite of the thorn not being removed.

He brings our passage to a climax by using a slogan, a piece of paradox, to argue once more against his opponents. "When I am weak, then I am strong" refutes the position of his opponents. The apostle has shown that if one must boast, then it should only be in weakness, so as to provide an opportunity for God's strength to be manifest (10:17). This is easy to see in light of Paul's parallel constructions of vv 9b, 10. We cite Zmijewski (*Der Stil*, 388) who builds on Windisch (393).

9b: ἥδιστα οὖν . . . ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις . . . ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ
 [. . . δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ
 10a: διὸ εὐδοκῶ ἀσθενείαις, κτλ. . . . ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ
 10b: ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ τότε δυνατός εἰμι

Paul's weaknesses—whether exhibited in his sufferings for the Gospel or centered in the thorn in the flesh—have been his criteria for true apostleship. He has entered into the fray, not in order to boast of his own achievement, but to boast of his weaknesses. By doing so he has offered the Corinthians an alternative to the opponents that harass him. The alternative is strength-based-on-weakness, a theme no doubt foreign to the opponents of Paul, but one that expressed the heart of his Gospel of a crucified Lord (Güttgemanns, *ibid.*, 170: his weakness is the power of the crucified).

Comment

1. *καυχᾶσθαι δεῖ*, "I must go on boasting." Literally, the text runs "it is necessary to boast." The use of the impersonal verb *δεῖ*, "it is necessary," alerts the readers that the theme of boasting will remain in front of them. Paul has "boasted" throughout chaps. 10 (vv 8, 13, 15, 16, 17) and 11 (vv 10, 12, 16, 17, 18, 30), and he will continue this theme in our present chapter (vv 1, 5, 6, 9). Paul counterattacked his opponents in the previous chapter by presenting his list of accomplishments (Tasker, 169). He was a Jew of the highest quality (11:21, 22). Moreover, he had the credentials of a true apostle. He had suffered much for the cause of Christ (11:23-28). Yet, Paul was hesitant to boast about himself. Rather, Paul boasted in order to show the power of God. He had written earlier (10:17), "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." Furthermore, in 11:30 Paul paves the way for similar boasting. He boasts in order to show his weakness. Denney sees Paul choosing to boast in things that men would judge as weak and shameful (343).

Paul was driven to boast (12:11). He has played the fool (*γέγονα ἄφρων*) for he has taken on the practice of boasting as the world does (*κατὰ σάρκα*, not *κατὰ κύριον*: see on 11:17; Windisch, 368). We note that in 12:1 Paul will continue this boasting, an idea suggested by the present tense. It is linked with 11:17 (Bultmann, 220). *καυχᾶσθαι*, "to boast," is a present infinitive, possibly Paul's way of showing that he will not cease to boast at this time (see 12:11). But there is a method to Paul's line of attack. He has to show that he is not inferior to the so-called "super-apostles" (11:5; 12:11). To do so, Paul boasts as do his opponents. But Paul's boasting will ultimately lead to God's glory, something his opponents do not set as their aim, in

his estimation (10:12). It appears that Paul felt it imperative to boast in order both to gain the attention of the Corinthians and to overthrow the position of his opponents, though he had his doubts about its effectiveness.

Barrett views the sentence "I must go on boasting" as a Corinthian watchword (306). This is not an untenable position, for Paul has a habit of using slogans (see 1 Cor 6:12, 13; chap. 7 and, in our letter, on 5:18–21). If Paul was responding to the "mode of operation" of his opponents, it makes sense that he would use this watchword. The main thrust of the opening words of 12:1 is that Paul evidently considered boasting the best way to overcome the tide of opposition that was against him. He uses the opponents' term but "undercuts its value and hints at the genre of his language" by his addition in 12:1b (Fallon, 105).

οὐ συμφέρον μὲν, "though it is of no advantage." We have already discussed the textual variations of this clause. There still remains the question of punctuation (see *Notes*). The KJV/AV puts a full stop after μὲν. But this is not the best choice. Most likely, our present clause is a parenthesis between "I must go on boasting" and "I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord" (Barrett, 306, 307; Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 325, 326). This is seen in the construction of 12:1 by noting Paul's use of μὲν and δέ. These particles bind together the second and the third clauses of our verse. Robertson calls the participle συμφέρον (from συμφέρειν) an accusative absolute (*Grammar*, 1130). But the syntax of this clause is not the major point for concern.

One question that surfaces is why the writer continues with such "foolish discourse" (as boasting: Héring, 89) if it is of no advantage. This would be a valid query if Paul is to be taken literally. Paul's normal usage of συμφέρειν usually describes the welfare of the Christian community, not of the individual (8:10; 1 Cor 6:12; 10:23; 12:7). Did Paul really feel that his boasting would build up the church? This is an issue put by Schlatter, *Paulus*, 658, who speaks of the "criterion of usefulness to the church" as a ruling factor in the discussion; it corresponds with οἰκοδομή in Paul's earlier writing to the Corinthians. (So Baumgarten, *Paulus*, 145, 146, who sets Paul's ecclesiology over against the rivals' "enthusiasm" and interest in personal ends.) In an indirect way, he does wish above all to build up the church (13:10), (but we will see that Paul apparently saw little value in dwelling on the visionary aspect of his life as an aid in edifying the church [Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 72]). This is apparent if one refrains from interpreting these words with sterile literalness. Instead, the phrase "of no advantage" is most likely a polemical statement against his opponents, who have boasted to aid their own cause. Boasting of one's self is not a sign of apostleship. Paul sees boasting as useless unless in the final analysis it deflects glory away from man and directs it toward God. As we shall see, Paul's apostleship is marked by weakness, even in boasting. The "thorn in the flesh" is a means to lead to God's glory, not Paul's.

For Paul, boasting is of no advantage in and of itself. Filson is correct to note that Paul is attempting to show the Corinthians that they are wrong to see good in the boasting of the false apostles (405). If this last point is true, then the words "of no advantage"—if taken literally—do not reflect the total meaning of Paul. True, the apostle expresses his distaste for boasting by

uttering these words. Nevertheless, he also senses that desperate situations call for desperate measures (Filson, *ibid.*). Possibly Paul has the same ambivalent emotions in his approach to boasting as he did when he wrote the painful, or severe, letter (2:4; 7:8). When Paul constructed the severe letter, he did so with much apprehension. Moreover, he was unsure of the outcome, for he might have been totally rejected by the Corinthians. Likewise, he cannot, with exactness, measure the outcome of his boasting. Yet, he feels it is a necessary evil. As Barrett writes, "It is not expedient to boast, but it might be even more inexpedient not to boast" (306). There may be a touch of irony in 12:1*b*, especially as at v 6 Paul will acknowledge that he is speaking only "as a fool."

ἐλεύσομαι δὲ εἰς ὄπτασις καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου, "I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord." If our assessment of 12:1*b* is correct, then Paul retains some embarrassment as he writes these words to the Corinthians. As a rule, Paul does not brag about his visions from the Lord. We must not let the several references in the Acts of the Apostles lead us to think otherwise about Paul (18:9, 10; 22:17-21; 23:11; 27:23, 24; of interest to the Corinthians may have been the vision at Corinth, in which Paul is strengthened by the Lord in a vision [ὄραμα; Acts 18:9] to stay in the city; yet it remains true that for Luke Paul is both a great miracle worker and a suffering figure who is by no means rescued through miracles: see Jervell, "The Signs of an Apostle," 85). Hughes is right in appreciating the event of 12:2-4 as possibly the "most intimate and sacred" of all Paul's religious experiences (428). Yet, Paul has been forced to share this event, and this sharing is accomplished through boasting (12:11).

To be more specific, Paul is using the *ad hominem* form of argumentation. He has already set down that the purpose of his boasting is to highlight his weaknesses (11:30). In 12:1 the apostle is reporting that boasting will help no one. Yet, Paul feels that he must take his opponents head-on if he is to convince the Corinthians that he remains the true apostle. In short, Paul shows that he too has revelations and visions. (The use of the plural ὄπτασις, "visions," and ἀποκαλύψεις, "revelations," suggests that Paul's original intention was to delineate several visionary experiences [Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 72], but perhaps his reluctance to boast of such experiences led him to limit his "list" to only one.) He received "special" revelations. These revelations were understood by Paul as gifts from God (κυρίου is *gen. auctoris*). They were not given in order to authenticate his apostleship. Paul never uses his visions and revelations as signs to promote himself as "somebody special." (Bruce thinks that, in addition to confronting the position that the false apostles had visions and revelations, Paul may also be addressing the accusation that his ministry was based on an illusory vision, namely, the experience on the Damascus Road [246] in contrast perhaps to the "super-apostles.")

Paul's opponents could have leveled the charge against Paul that his lack of "visions" was proof that he was not a true apostle. But lack of frequent reference to visions and revelations is not grounds for concluding that Paul had little or no experience in this realm (Lincoln, "Paul the Visionary," 205). Rather, we have argued that Paul's reluctance to speak of visions stems from his desire to avoid drawing too much attention to himself. Paul proceeds with the account of his vision only with some embarrassment.

ἐλεύσομαι, "I will come," is the future of ἔρχεσθαι: εἰς, "to," helps to demonstrate the direction in which Paul's thinking is going. Though Paul is against boasting, nevertheless he comes to visions and revelations of the Lord. We may note that there is not a great difference between ὄπτασια, "vision," and ἀποκάλυψις "revelation." They are interchangeable terms (so Michaelis, *TDNT* 5:352, 353, who notes how at 12:7 Paul speaks only of ἀποκαλύψεις, "revelations"). The two words may be taken from the opponents' vocabulary (so Baumgarten, *ibid.*, 137; perhaps they point to the "realized eschatology" of the gnosticizing opponents at Corinth; they may have claimed their experiences as the highest form of ecstasy, perhaps associated with glossolalia; so Schmithals, *Gnosticism*, 209–11). The latter word, ἀποκάλυψις, crops up frequently in his writings. Several times in eschatological contexts Paul employs this word (Rom 2:5; 8:19; 1 Cor 1:7; cf. 2 Thess 1:7, but in a way different from here; Bultmann, 220). Also, it is used in reference to his conversion (Gal 1:12), as well as to a special revelation that preceded a journey to Jerusalem (Gal 2:2). From this, it is apparent that "revelation" is of wider importance to Paul than "vision" (Denney, 346). But we should not press this too far (Barrett, 307). Plummer perhaps captures the flavor needed when addressing the subject of visions and revelations, for he remarks that not all visions reveal something and not all revelations require visions (338; see also Tasker, 170). But we should note that in 12:1 Paul appears to be saying that the vision of 12:2–4 is a source of revelation. (It is interesting to note, however, that 12:9 was probably a direct revelation, without the aid of a vision [Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 72].)

This last point is seen from the construction in [εἰς] ὄπτασίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου, "visions and revelations of the Lord." Most scholars view this genitive as subjective, not objective (Barrett, 307; Plummer, 338; Bruce, 246; Tasker, 169, 170; Bultmann, 220; Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 73; see also Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 327, 328, "a genitive of origination," also see 330, 331; Georgi, *Die Gegner*, 298, n. 1, tries to see a distinction between Paul's use of κυρίου and the opponents' understanding; for him "the Lord" gave the revelations, whereas they took κυρίου as genitive of possession related to their transformation into Christ's image [?3:18] like a glorification). That is, more than likely Paul is speaking of visions and revelations given by the Lord rather than visions that see the Lord. But Lincoln is right to warn against too sharp of a distinction here ("Paul the Visionary," 205, 206). The author of the visions could also be the object of them (see also, Hughes, 428, n. 97; Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975], 414, n. 88, who argues that the genitive of 12:1 may have been deliberately ambiguous so that both thoughts are to be included).

It may be assumed that the opponents gloried in their transcendental experiences of "visions and revelations," though Windisch (368) is disposed to deny this ("it is nowhere *here* indicated that the opponents also can boast concerning such visions"). But Schmithals, *Gnosticism*, 209, is certainly correct to answer this denial, by pointing out that Paul's tack is not different from the one adopted in 11:22, 23; i.e., the comparison is "they—I too" or "they—I all the more." The difference, however, lies in the climax of the pericope, in v 9 where divine power in human weakness will be claimed as the "sole basis of the apostolic existence" (Baumgarten, *ibid.*, 144), i.e., in a word

from the Lord, not in a vision sent by the Lord. This is Paul's response; thereby he reduces the visionary experience to a revelation with a "word-of-God" character.

2. οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκατεσσάρων, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago." Immediately we are struck by Paul's use of the third person construction. It is accepted that Paul is referring to himself, but this has not prevented some helpful suggestions as to why Paul employed this use (see Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 336). One idea is to see that Paul is reflecting the rabbinical use of "this man" for "I" (Str-B 3:531). Also, some see that Paul is distinguishing between two men within himself, namely, Paul the visionary and Paul the man (Wendland, 219). But Héring is right to counter that it was the man, not the visionary that was taken up (90). That is, the self did not necessarily leave the body (see Windisch, 369, 370). Another argument against this Philonic-hellenistic distinction (maintained by Reizenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions*, tr. J. E. Stealy [Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1978], 82, 83) is that Paul *remembers* the revelation, a point against the concept of two personalities. If Paul had a personality split into two, then it is unlikely he would remember the incident. An illuminating proposal has been given by Betz, who identifies the parallels between this parody of an ascension narrative (12:2-4; *Der Apostel Paulus*, 84-92) and Paul's line of reasoning in these verses. Paul is reacting, says Betz (*ibid.*, 89), to opponents who are roughly congruent in style with the sophists of Socrates' time. We may recall that there was a reaction to the Socratic school that was centered in a group of teachers who took on the occupation of being a "wise person." These itinerant teachers taught for a fee. They were characterized as emphasizing material success, as well as using their influence for personal reasons.

Betz goes on to describe how the true philosopher used irony to vindicate himself. For the true philosopher, poverty and weakness authenticated the truth of his claim (*ibid.*, 15-18, 20-38). Normally, this person would avoid boasting, but if forced to, would defend himself against false charges by boasting and by "playing the fool." In doing so, the philosopher would refrain from referring to himself directly and thus downplay his own accomplishment (*ibid.*, 75-82). It is obvious that there are some similarities to Paul's situation. His opponents underline the material aspect of the ministry as well as use influence (in this case claimed from the Jerusalem hierarchy) as a weapon against the apostle. Likewise, Paul appears as one who "plays the fool" in order to show up his opponents as charlatans. But perhaps Betz has overstated his case, for it is doubtful that Paul was consciously following the Socratic line of thinking in this apology (Lincoln, "Paul the Visionary," 206). Barrett is probably right to notice an inner motivation for Paul's defense that is independent of tradition (307). And Kleinknecht, *Der leidende Gerechtfertigte*, 301-3, points to the biographical element in this *signum apostolicum* (see A. Henrichs's review of Betz in *JBL* 94 [1975] 312).

More likely, Paul's use of the third person is a means of reflecting his embarrassment (or reluctance) at boasting of what he has done or been a part of (see Furnish, 542-44). This makes sense in light of what is to follow. Paul will write in the *divinum passivum* in 12:7. What has happened has been done to Paul; he did nothing to obtain the vision (see Filson, 405). This

can be seen from the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ, "in Christ." It is more than simply a reference to being "a Christian" (so Barrett, 308). It is Paul's way of showing that it was in Christ's power that the following visions and revelations took place (Plummer, 340). Nothing of Paul's ability is spoken of here. This is yet another example of how all Paul's actions point to Christ, since he is a person "(who lives) in Christ" (Allo, 304, on the ellipse). Tasker relates that experience to being "in Christ," which could be also interpreted to mean that any Christian can have this privilege of a vision, for there are no "favorites" in the economy of the church (170); but 11:12 denies that Paul's apostolate ranks on a par with that of his rivals.

πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκατεσσάρων, "who fourteen years ago." The vividness with which Paul remembers this event is evident in that he can remember the time when it took place. The time of fourteen years before the writing of this epistle (or at least before the writing of chaps. 10–13) places the period about A.D. 44 (Hughes, 430; Filson, 405; Denney, 347; Barrett suggests A.D. 40, 308; Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 77, places it between A.D. 41 and 44; see R. E. Osborne, "St. Paul's Silent Years," *JBL* 84 [1965] 59–65). Whatever the date of Paul's experience, it was well before the founding of the Corinthian church. What remains a mystery is to what event specifically Paul is referring.

With the date of A.D. 44 in mind, it appears we can rule out every other visionary experience of Paul recorded in the NT. His conversion on the Damascus road, an experience that apparently Paul was more than willing to rehearse (at least from Acts 9:3–19; 22:6–10; 26:12–18), certainly took place long before A.D. 44. We can also dismiss the event of the trance Paul fell into described in Acts 22:17–21, for in this account the Lord in a vision came to Paul. We read nothing there of Paul being "caught up to the Lord" (Denney, 347, 348). Events that surely were later than A.D. 44 are the vision of the Macedonian man entreating Paul to come and help (Acts 16:9) and the vision he had in Corinth (Acts 18:9–10; Hughes, 430). The period of "fourteen years" found in Gal 2:1 is probably only coincidental and has nothing to do with 2 Cor 12:2 (see J. Knox, *Chapters in the Life of Paul* [New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950] 78, n. 3).

One suggestion for the occasion of the experience described in 12:2–4 is that it transpired while Paul was in Antioch (Hughes, 430, 431; Denney, 347). We read that Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch a whole year (Acts 11:26). There is possibly a connection seen between the ecstatic experience (cf. 12:2–4) and the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas as missionaries (Acts 13:2, 3; so Allo, 304; Windisch, 369, 370). Perhaps in some small way, Paul related to the Christians at Antioch that he had received a vision at the hand of the Lord. Bruce only allows that we simply have a reference to an obscure period between the time when Paul was sent to Tarsus (Acts 9:30) and the meeting with Barnabas at Antioch (Acts 11:26; this can possibly be reconstructed from Galatians where Bruce places the visionary experience of Paul between Paul's departure for Syria-Cilicia [1:21] and his second post-conversion visit to Jerusalem [2:1], [Bruce, 246]; some strange proposals have been made to argue that Paul's spirit left his body at his stoning [Acts 14:19], or that he was one of the prophets mentioned in Acts 11:28, 29). All in all, we are better to recognize just how much conjecture is involved

and agree with Denney that there is nothing that we know of the apostle with which we can identify his experience of 12:2-4 (347).

εἴτε ἐν σώματι οὐκ οἶδα, εἴτε ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, “—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, only God knows.” As Paul is relating the experience of “this man” (namely himself) he breaks his thought and inserts a parenthesis. It is as though Paul catches himself and wants to make a sudden (albeit too short) reference to the event of his vision. Barrett remarks in some detail that the words of this parenthesis are not without reason (308, 309). That is, there was a reason why Paul makes a statement concerning being “in” or “out of the body.” On the one hand, Paul does not want to give an indication that he thinks the body is inherently evil. We saw this in our discussion of 5:1-10, where Paul sought to show that the whole person is involved in salvation, both body and spirit. In other words, Paul was probably well aware of the Corinthian-gnostic view that a religious experience was invalid unless it happened while one was out of the body (Philo wrote of Moses as having laid aside his body, *De Somn.* [1:36]). On the other hand, it could be that Paul was not intending to deny that one could have an “out of body” experience. Bultmann suggests that Paul’s use of “body” (σῶμα) shows that the apostle left open the possibility of the soul’s leaving the body for an encounter with the spiritual world (*Theology* 1:203). Elsewhere, Bultmann, in his commentary, 221, has a different idea to explain the expression: Paul is thought of as viewing his experience at a distance, as though he were simply an onlooker. Cf. Käsemann, *ibid.*, 55: “to distance oneself from the event as reported.” Such a “distancing” may also be seen in the contrast “I do not know . . . God knows” (Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 337).

Paul may be relating his ignorance of his state at the time of this event (Denney, 347, 348). He simply is not sure whether he went to the “third heaven” in body or in spirit (this may suggest that Paul was alone at the time, for if others had been with him, they could have answered the question of whether or not his body remained in this world; see Plummer, 342). To say that ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, “only God knows,” may be an attempt by Paul to state his ignorance of the matter. Because he refrains from giving an opinion one way or the other his opponents cannot totally reject his boasting. By not eliminating the possibility that Paul could have remained in the body, he avoids undercutting the validity of his other visions. Moreover, it was not uncommon to boast of having come into bodily contact with the divine (Jewett, *Anthropological Terms*, 278). Also, by leaving the door open to an “out-of-the-body” experience, he affirms his teaching of 5:1-10 that there is existence for the soul apart from the body, and that this existence is “one of perceptive consciousness” (Hughes, 431). This latter point no doubt would have caught the attention of the opponents. To have an out-of-the-body experience would have satisfied some Corinthians (Jewett, *ibid.*). As we shall see, Paul never explains in detail this event. Thus, Paul may have carefully constructed the parenthesis of 12:2 (and 12:3) in order not to “prejudice” his account with either side (those wanting an “in-the-body” experience or those who seek an “out-of-the-body” one) by taking a stand on the issue (Jewett, *ibid.*). (See also Saake, esp. 405; also *NovT* 15 [1973] 154.) On the other side, Schmithals, *Gnosticism*, 211 (followed by Baumgarten, “Paulus,” 143), sees

great significance in the second phrase, ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος, suggesting that Paul considered it possible that he did not leave the body. Hence Paul is deliberately denying the central gnostic concern of dualism with its practice of a celestial journey apart from somatic encumbrance. There may be intended mockery here; in reply to his opponents' certain belief in the soul's heavenward ascent, Paul professes not to know.

Aside from the anthropological considerations of this parenthesis, there is a syntactical detail to note. The first use of σῶμα in this parenthesis is without the definite article, but the second has one. Plummer submits that ἐν σώματι is a colloquial expression, paralleling Paul's use of ἐν with οἴκῳ, "indoors, at home" (1 Cor 11:34; 14:35). For Plummer this anarthrous use of σῶμα is adverbial (343). Possibly the explanation is simply that ἐκτὸς is an example of an improper preposition. This is also seen in 12:3 where Paul replaces ἐκτὸς with χωρὶς, "apart from." In both cases it appears we have improper prepositions, for "proper" prepositions do not always require the article (see Moule, *Idiom Book*, 83, 87, 114, 207).

ἀρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ, "was caught up to the third heaven." After the parenthesis, Paul completes his thought: "A certain man fourteen years before had been caught up to the third heaven." The use of ἀρπαγέντα (aorist passive participle of ἀρπάξω [the same verb ἀρπάξω is also found in v 4.]; such language reflects the idea of a "rapture of visions" [Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 81]; see *Apoc. Mos.* 37:5; also the idea of "catch up" is found in *Wisd Sol* 4:11; *Acts* 8:39; *Rev* 12:5), "caught up," is limited in Pauline literature. It is only found in our present verse and in 1 Thess 4:17, when Paul speaks of living Christians being caught up with Christ in the air. In Paul's time it was not uncommon to hear of someone being "raptured" into heaven (see Lietzmann, 153; also Betz, *Lukian*, 38, 142, 169). Much of apocalyptic literature is the product of the seer being granted insight into truths that are in heaven (C. K. Barrett, "New Testament Eschatology," *SJT* 6 [1953] 138, 139). Barrett makes out a case for this when he cites several sources that parallel Paul's experience (309, 310). These sources are found in apocalyptic writings such as *1 Enoch* (39:3-4; 52:1), *2 Enoch* (7:1) and *3 Apoc. Bar.* (2:2). But we also come across mystical speculation in rabbinic literature. (Cf. Bowker, "'Merkabah' Visions." In *Hag.* 14b there are four men who entered into paradise: Ben 'Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and R. Akiba. Of these four only R. Akiba returned unscathed: see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 14-19; also see P. Schäfer, "New Testament and Hekhalot Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and Merkavah Mysticism," *JJS* 35 [1984] 19-35; we shall see below that in 12:4 Paul describes his location as paradise, having changed the nomenclature from his earlier use of "third heaven.") Not surprisingly Barrett reports that hellenistic mysticism contains a similar phenomenon as found in Plato (see *Republic* 10:614-21; see too Philo *De Migr. Abr.* 34-35; *De Spec. Leg.* 3:1-2). Thus, Barrett is right when he concludes that Paul's rapture experience is not necessarily out of the ordinary. What is surprising is that Paul will soon depreciate the value of this experience (Barrett, 310).

What becomes a difficult question for scholars is one that centers on Paul's intended meaning behind his use of ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ, "to the third heaven." A survey of extant literature does not really answer the question. The New

Testament is relatively silent concerning the number of heavens in Jewish cosmology. We find in Eph 1:10 the plural *οὐρανοί*, "heavens," but this does little to help us (Lincoln, "Paul the Visionary," 213). It has been noted that the plural "heavens," found in the New Testament, is probably the result of the Hebrew *שָׁמַיִם*, *šāmayim*, "heavens," which is dual in form. In Ps 63:33 the psalmist describes God as riding upon the "heaven of heavens." This verse has led Hughes (see 432-34), who builds upon Bengel, to hold that Paul's reference to the third heaven is in line with the threefold division in the Old Testament (cf. Neh 9:6; 1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chron 2:6; 6:18; Ps 148:4; also see C. R. Schoonhoven, *The Wrath of Heaven* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966] 64). In this threefold division there is the atmospheric heaven, a stellar heaven (or firmament) and the limitless, or spiritual, heaven, where God is located (Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 77, 78; Hughes, *ibid.*). If this evaluation is correct, then we could say that Paul ascended to the highest heaven. But this conclusion is not certain, for there were other conceptions of the number of heavens (Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 381).

At the time of Paul and in Jewish antiquity, the idea of a sevenfold division of heaven was becoming popular. This concept can be found in *T. Levi* (3:1), *2 Enoch* (8-22) and *Asc. Isa.* (9). We also can locate the idea of seven heavens in rabbinic literature, such as the *Hag. 11b* (see *Pesiq. R.* 5; *Midr. Ps 92*; *Ab. R. Nat.* 37; *Pirqe R. El.* [154b]; see H. Traub *TDNT* 5:511-12). But three and seven are not the only numbers considered. The numbers *five* (see *3 Apoc. Bar.* 11:1, "And taking me from this, the angel led me to the fifth heaven") and *ten* (*2 Enoch* 20:3b, "and on the tenth heaven") are also suggested as identifying the levels of heavenly existence. With these differing accounts before them, some scholars have suggested that we simply cannot know the number of heavens in Paul's mind at the time of this writing (Bruce, 247; Filson, 405; see especially Barrett, 310, though he concedes that three seems a good possibility [Str-B, 3:531, 532]). Though certainty may remain beyond our grasp, it does appear probable that Paul had three heavens in mind.

The closing point of the preceding paragraph can be seen by Paul's use of *ἕως*, "up to." At first Plummer thinks that this "improper preposition" is not enough to prove that the third heaven is, in Paul's mind, the highest (343, 344). But Tasker is correct to conclude (and Plummer later comes to a similar conclusion) that it would seem illogical for Paul to write of such blessedness if he were not in the ultimate heaven (171). That is, Paul would be open to the criticism that his vision and revelation were inadequate if the Corinthians believed there to be seven heavens and Paul only "journeyed" to number three. This argument was observed long ago by Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 2, 30, 7). Thus, logic dictates that *ἕως*, in all probability, was used by Paul to show that he—whether in the body or out of it—was raptured up to the highest heaven, namely, the third heaven. This conclusion is also supported in light of the use of *ἕως*, as found elsewhere in the New Testament. When used with the genitive, the preposition denotes "as far as" (Moule, *Idiom Book*, 85; BGD, 335). While one could argue that "as far as" does not say with certainty that Paul had reached the limit, our assumption appears to be the position with the least questions left unanswered. The use of *ἕως*

in the New Testament (Acts 1:8; cf. *Ps. Sol.* 17:14) suggests that a limit had been reached. Also, in light of our preceding discussion, it seems that Paul needed to reach the zenith if he was to retain his credibility. Moreover, as we shall see in 12:4, the idea of "paradise" which is to be equated with the "third heaven" (Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 339, but denied by Prümm, *Diakonia* 1:650) suggests even more that Paul had reached the upper level. From our viewpoint, we see Paul as probably thinking of a threefold division of heaven.

3. *καὶ οἶδα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνθρωπον*, "And I know that this man." This sentence begins a verse that parallels or repeats the event described in v 2. Plummer concludes that the opening *καὶ* strongly suggests that Paul is speaking of two separate events, one that took place in the third heaven and one in paradise, or at least two separate stages of the same event (344). Either hypothesis was popular with the patristic writers (Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 1:5; Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 2:55; Tert. *De praesc. haer.* 24) as well as with some modern commentators (Denney, 349; Plummer, 344; Filson, 406; Schlatter, *Paulus*, 662, 663). These positions take on strength if one considers paradise as distinguished from the third heaven, for then it is quite apparent that Paul's writing has been accurately perceived. But this has not been accepted by all. Some argue that paradise and the third heaven are equivalent (Hodge, 283; Windisch, 371, 372; Tasker, 171; Barrett, 310; Hughes, 435). Moreover, since there is only one date given (the fourteen years in 12:1) and only one description of the content (12:4, albeit Paul shares little with his readers), it appears that in 12:2 and 4 Paul is speaking of the same event (Lincoln, "Paul the Visionary," 211). Our present verse is a continuation of the subject of 12:2. See pp. 391, 392 and Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 335, for a line-by-line comparison of v 2 with vv 3, 4, drawn from Windisch, 371.

The use of this connecting *καὶ*, if the last position is adopted, does not go unnoticed. It does suggest the idea of additional information, but not in terms of a second experience or stage. Rather, the *καὶ* suggests that Paul has added information concerning the third heaven. Namely, he clarifies somewhat his use of the term "third heaven" and describes it as paradise (see below). Hence, Paul resumes his retelling of a past experience (Hughes, 437).

εἴτε ἐν σώματι, κτλ. "—whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know, only God knows." For the second time in a short span, Paul inserts a parenthesis into his letter. This second "change of direction," though not verbatim with the first parenthesis in 12:2b, is nevertheless congruent in thought (Barrett, 310). The only differences are that in 12:3 Paul uses the words *οὐκ οἶδα*, "I do not know," only once, and he uses *χωρὶς*, "apart from," instead of *ἐκτός*. Neither change alters the meaning as described in 12:2. This would lead us to believe, in light of our earlier discussion, that Paul uses 12:3 to continue his description (begun in 12:2) of the visionary experience that transpired fourteen years before the writing of chaps. 10–13. We must not fail to see again Paul's use of the third person, as well as his admission of ignorance concerning the state he was in during this ecstatic experience, both evidently polemical devices to play down the opponents' claim to ecstatic experience as a validation of ministry. Paul, on the contrary, finds no edificatory value for the congregation in his experience.

4. *ὅτι ἤρπαγη εἰς τὸν παράδεισον*, "that was caught up to paradise." In this

verse Paul has changed the aorist participle ἀρπαγέντα (12:2) to the aorist passive indicative of ἀρπάξω, namely, ἠρπάγη. But we must make note of how both uses of the verb, as well as δίδωμι, “give” (found in 12:7 as ἐδόθη, “was given to me”), reflect passivity on Paul’s part (the passive is also seen in 12:12, [κατειργάσθη]). We see that the agent of these passive verbs can be identified from their context as God. This use of the *passivum divinum* is important for understanding Paul’s thought. His boasting cannot glorify himself, for God is the hidden agent behind these things. He took Paul up to the third heaven, namely paradise, as well as placed a thorn in his life. God also works through Paul (12:12). This fits well with our earlier discussion. Paul is God’s apostle, for God has both proclaimed the message of reconciliation through the apostle (5:18–20), and ministered in service to the Corinthians through the same apostle. Now, however, he steps up the presentation because he is in a serious conflict with his opponents. So intense is this conflict that Paul shares an event in his life perhaps, up to this time, unknown except to the Lord and himself.

Paul states that he was caught up to παράδεισος, “paradise.” This word is probably Persian in origin, meaning an enclosure or a nobleman’s park. Both the Hebrew (פַּרְדֵּי, *pardēs*; cf. Eccl 2:5) and the Greek (παράδεισος) languages borrowed the word. Not all literature places the paradise in the third heaven. Sometimes we read that it is found in the seventh heaven (*Asc. Isa.* 9:7; *Hag.* 12b). More likely, though, Paul considers the third heaven and paradise the same. Just such an equation is found in 2 *Enoch* 8 and in *Apoc. Mos.* 37:5 (see also J. Jeremias, *TDNT* 5:765–73). An interesting note is that the LXX renders the earthly Garden of Eden (גַּן עֵדֵן, *gan ‘edēn*) as παράδεισος (see Gen 2 and 3). The OT does not refer to the garden as the abode for the righteous after death or a final resting place for them. The development of the term is seen in apocalyptic literature (*T. Abr.* 20; 1 *Enoch* 60:7–8; 61:12; 70:4; 2 *Enoch* 9:1–42:3; *Apoc. Abr.* 21:6–7; see Windisch, 372, 373).

The word “paradise” occurs only three times in the New Testament. In addition to our present text, we find it in Jesus’ statement to the penitent thief (Luke 23:43) and in Rev 2:7 (“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is the paradise of God”). It appears certain that the paradise mentioned in Revelation and the paradise of our own text are one and the same. We might even link the paradise of Rev 2:7 with Rev 22:1–5, a description that reminds us of the paradise that was originally lost. The heavenly paradise of Rev 2:7 is located in the heavenly garden (Bruce, 247; cf. *T. Levi* 28:10; 4 *Ezra* 4:7–8; 3 *Apoc. Bar.* 4:8; *Hag.* 15b; *Gen. Rab.* 65). The mention of paradise in Luke 23:43 offers us no location, but there is no doubt that it refers to the gathering of the righteous after death (Bruce; see Origen, *De Princ.* 2. 9, 6).

Hughes suggests that Paul’s shift from “the third heaven” to “paradise” is for added information, that in this explication Paul discloses the nature of the third heaven (437). We are not privy to what Paul heard, as we shall see. Paul is granted the secrets of both the intermediate state and the glorious consummation (Lincoln, “Paul the Visionary,” 214; but since he cannot reveal the content of the vision described in 12:2–4, this may be why Paul is so hesitant to expound the state of the believer after death [see 5:1–10]).

H. Bietenhard is too rigid when he concludes that Paul saw a vision of the world to come but not of the future (*Die himmlische Welt im Urchristentum und Spätjudentum* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1951] 167). We must not draw so sharp a distinction between the life hereafter and the future. Paul's understanding of eschatology will not permit it. (See Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 84, who interprets 12:1–10 as a form of realized eschatology. But the drift of the passage is more antienthusiastic and opposed to a presently fulfilled eschatology; see Baumgarten, *ibid.*, 146.) But we also must be cautious and concede that whatever teaching we have on these subjects (both the hereafter and the future), little has been related to us by Paul from the experience of 12:2–4. Whether because of being forbidden to speak by God concerning these things or because he was unable to translate heavenly thoughts into human language (see below), Paul shares no details with his readers. More pointedly the “inexpressible words” are a counterblast to gnosticizing secrets putatively revealed to the opponents.

καὶ ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι, “and he heard unspeakable words which a human being is not permitted to utter.” Unlike his gnostic and mystical counterparts, Paul says practically nothing about what he saw or heard while in paradise. Whether or not Paul created a play on words (Plummer thinks so, 345) is unclear, though we do notice paradoxical language. Paul heard words that are ἄρρητα (from ἄρ-ρητα, BDF § 11.1), “ineffable,” “unspeakable” (KJV/AV), “inexpressible” (NIV). The use of ἄρρητα, with ἄ-privatum, so “unutterable” (see Barrett, 311), is similar to that use in the mystery religions (Héring, 91, n. 10; cf. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11:23; Philo, *Legum Alleg.* 2:56; Euripides, *Bacch.* 472; Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 302; Herodotus 6:135; Lucian, *Menipp.* 2; see Windisch, 377, 378). Also, the notion of secret revelation (cf. *disciplina arcani*) is found in rabbinic literature (see J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, tr. F. H. and C. H. Cave [London: SCM Press, 1969] 237–41; also see Spittler, “Limits,” 263, 264). The idea of a sealed revelation (which is what Paul's revelation basically is) is found in the Old Testament (Isa 8:16; Dan 12:4; cf. 2 *Enoch* 17; Rev 14:3). Though Paul's experience was not “unusual,” we go too far in thinking Paul is dependent on borrowed tradition in order to compose his thought of 12:2–4 (Barrett, 311).

A closer look at ἄρρητα ῥήματα reveals the meaning to be either words that are not able to be translated (Lincoln, “Paul the Visionary,” 210) or those not able to be shared because of their sacredness (BGD 109), or simply “the language of the heavenly sphere” (Käsemann, *ibid.*, 56, 57, which may be what Rom 8:26, 27 also refer to: see Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, tr. G. W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 241, but this is unlikely [Martin, *The Worship of God*, 179], even if vv 2–4 in our chapter may be a reference to glossolalic speech as “celestial tongues” [1 Cor 13:1; 14:2, 14, 18; on these vv the present writer may refer to his *The Spirit and the Congregation*, esp. 66, 71]). It is not too hard to imagine that what Paul heard was ineffable. But the clause that follows ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι, “which a human being is not permitted to utter,” places the emphasis on his being forbidden to relay what he heard (Lincoln, “Paul the Visionary,” 216; *pace* Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 215, who argues for the ineffability of Paul's experience). Paul

was not to tell anyone else what he heard. While *οὐκ ἐξόν* may mean "it is not possible," most likely it means "it is not lawful," for the usual idea behind *ἐξεστὶ* is "it is lawful" (Hughes, 439, n. 119).

But if our conclusion is true—that Paul is not permitted to share his adventure, except in general terms—then a needed question is, Of what value was Paul's experience? The sharing of this event would be quite valuable to the Corinthians in that they would be shown that indeed Paul can boast. Also they could see that his boasting, not that of his opponents, was grounded in God's strength. But moreover, and of utmost importance, this experience is invaluable to Paul in asserting his apostolic leadership at Corinth, and opposing a false eschatology of present glory, pneumatic ecstasy and a powerful presence in the influence of his rivals, whose ministry had so many tangible and sensory experiences to confirm it that it bypassed the weakness of the crucified Jesus and despised his suffering servant Paul (10:10; 13:1-4).

Tasker is correct in saying that "this particular revelation was for Paul alone" (172), as Paul's ministry was unique. Though we may come away somewhat frustrated and disappointed at the lack of information given here (as in 5:1-10), perhaps Calvin's dictum is right in that this experience was "to strengthen Paul by special means that he might not give way, but might persevere undaunted." This experience, though not communicable (as a result of its sacredness) must have had an untold influence on Paul. If this event transpired *ca.* A.D. 44, then it was an incalculable boost to him as he embarked on his ministry. We may never know the many times Paul received inner strength (inward renewal, 4:16-18) from his remembering this event. What is more, this "boast" did not end with him, but overflowed in blessing to the generation of his time (Hughes, 439).

5. *ὑπὲρ τοῦ τοιούτου καυχῆσομαι*, "I will boast on behalf of this man." Paul continues his third person construction in a section (vv 5-7a) that looks like an insertion between vv 1-4 and 7b-9a, which are both "reports." He still refrains from signaling to his readers that he is the man who received this revelation. Some (Luther; Strachan, 29) have taken *τοιούτου* to be neuter, thus leaving us with the words "of an experience" instead of "on behalf of this man." But this view has not been generally accepted. For one thing, Paul has used *τοιούτος* as masculine in 12:2 and again in 12:3 to refer to a human being. For another, *ὑπὲρ . . . ἐμαντοῦ*, found in 12:5b, provides balance and it is surely masculine as it refers to Paul. Moreover, if Paul was thinking of the experience of 12:2-4 (rather than the man) when he used *τοιούτου*, more likely than not he would have used the preposition *ἐν* (as he does with *ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις*, 12:5b), for Paul's penchant is to use *ὑπὲρ*, "on behalf of," with *καυχᾶσθαι* to signify a person (see 7:14; 9:2; cf. Hughes, 441, n. 120; Barrett, 311; Plummer, 345, 346; Bultmann, 224; see BDF § 196).

What Paul appears to be doing in 12:5 is preserving his desire to boast, but not in himself. The man mentioned in 12:5a of course is Paul. But by writing in this manner, he diverts any plaudits from himself, for in the second part of 12:5 he openly speaks of himself and does so only in terms of weakness. Paul is seeking to avoid the accusation that he has sought to enhance his person in the eyes of the Corinthians through self-commendation. The goal in 12:5 is to direct glory to God (Tasker, 172, 173).

It has been suggested that in 12:5 the apostle is distinguishing between two aspects of himself (as was discussed in 12:1). To be sure, on the surface it appears that way. But it is doubtful that he is discussing anthropology in our v. There does not appear to be a duality of personhood as much as a desire of Paul to direct attention to God (see Héring, 91). Käsemann's suggestion that Paul downplays his vision because it fails to build up the church (a similar idea of Paul's downplaying his gifts is found in 1 Cor 14:19 [the subject of tongues], *Legitimität*, 62–66; also see R. P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984]) is closer to the truth than Lietzmann's contention (155) that the apostle distinguishes between "Paul the apocalypticist" and "Paul the man," but it still fails to capture the desire of Paul to stay out of the limelight. Barrett is correct to suggest that the apostolic sign of weakness was foremost on Paul's mind. If 12:5 is probably ironical and built on the antithesis *καυχῆσομαι/οὐ καυχῆσομαι* (Bujard, *Stilanalytische Untersuchungen*, 186) with a certain "distancing" between Paul the writer and his experience (see *Form/Structure/Setting*), Barrett's position is better (312). We shall see that the theme of weakness becomes an important one in 12:5b–10.

ὑπὲρ δὲ ἑμαυτοῦ οὐ καυχῆσομαι εἰ μὴ ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις, "but I will not boast on my own behalf, except in [my] weaknesses." For the first time since 12:1 Paul refers directly to himself. From 12:5b to 12:10 Paul is a visible figure in the discussion. And in 12:5b he presents the ground rules for the remainder of the passage. Apostolic weakness will be the topic of discussion. But this is not done in an attempt to gain pity; rather, it is to show that God works through this man. He is a legitimate apostle, and the Lord has appeared to him in a unique vision.

Earlier in this v we saw the use of *ὑπὲρ* with *καυχᾶσθαι*. In the second half of our present v the same construction appears, except in the negative (*οὐ καυχῆσομαι*). Paul will not boast on his own behalf (note use of *ἑμαυτοῦ*, which is not ironical as Allo, 309, thinks), since this boasting could lead to his receiving a high place in the minds of the Corinthians for the wrong reasons. To ensure that this does not take place Paul adds "except in my weaknesses." Paul has put the idea of weakness before the Corinthians throughout this epistle. We saw this in 6:4–10 and more recently 11:23–28 (see Barré, "Qumran," 216–19). More specifically, in 11:30 Paul states that he will boast only to show his weakness. He illustrated the thought of 11:30 by relating the incident of being lowered down the Damascus wall (11:32, 33). In 12:7 Paul will again describe his weakness by speaking of the thorn in the flesh. Placed between the wall-incident and the thorn (both humbling experiences) is what may be called a highlight of Paul's life, namely, the ecstatic experience of fourteen years earlier (fourteen years, we may suppose, is a long time to remain silent about such a unique event as the experience of 12:2–4; such a silence may indicate that Paul considers any such experience as of little value for accrediting him in his apostleship [Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 77]). It appears that Paul has left no room for the objection that he was no true apostle of God. At one extreme, Paul has placed before his critics the true sign of apostleship, namely, weakness. At the other extreme, Paul has been in the presence of the new world, with possibly an experience no one

else could share. But Paul was still vulnerable to any detractor who did not accept his understanding of "vocation as weakness." This v therefore places side by side the two ideas of personal relationship to God and apostolic service in Paul's life (Kümmel, 212).

6. *ἐὰν γὰρ θελήσω καυχῆσασθαι, οὐκ ἔσομαι ἄφρων, ἀλήθειαν γὰρ ἐρῶ*, "Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be foolish, for I speak the truth." The direction of our discussion of these words will point to the idea that Paul is writing in a polemical (though restrained) fashion. At the conclusion of 12:5, Paul has "introduced" himself into the present passage. (We know all along that the "other man" was Paul; but the Corinthians may not have been aware of that at the beginning of 12:1-10.) Our present v provides a transition (awkward with *γὰρ*, which does not explain anything; Windisch, 381) for Paul's readers because 12:6-10 reads as though Paul has been talking explicitly about himself. Moreover, as was discussed above, the weakness of Paul now becomes an important theme of 12:6-10. Thus, 12:6 provides a shift for the Corinthians. Their attention is now focused on Paul and in turn on his weakness.

Paul keeps the idea of weakness before his readers, but he does so in an interesting way. He opens 12:6 with *ἐὰν γὰρ θελήσω καυχῆσασθαι*, "even if I should choose to boast." The verb *θέλω*, "to want," "to wish," is in the subjunctive mood. This is dictated by *ἐάν* (Plummer, 346, for grammatical usage). We note that there is little difference at times between the aorist subjunctive and the future indicative ("It is quite possible that the future indicative is just a variation of the aorist subjunctive," Robertson, *Grammar*, 924), but the idea of the subjunctive fits better into our context. Barrett notes that *θέλω* carries with it an element of deliberate choice (312). Considering the *Sitz im Leben* of 2 Corinthians, we can see that a boast by Paul would have been both expected and probably appreciated by the Corinthians. But Paul has chosen another way to go; instead of boasting of himself, he boasts of God (10:17, 18).

Paul could choose to boast of himself, for he would have solid grounds on which to do so. Unlike his opponents, who probably boasted of visions they did not have (Barrett, *ibid.*), Paul has just related a vision which he has experienced. Paul's use of *ἄφρων*, "foolish" (see 11:16a), probably includes the idea of a person who is caught in making false claims. Paul avoids this problem because he speaks in truth (*ἀλήθειαν . . . ἐρῶ*; Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 355), not only concerning the ecstatic experience of 12:2-4, but also about the other visions and revelations that he has been given and which he could relate if he were pressed to, but then he would be a "fool," or acting *κατὰ σάρκα*: so Bultmann, 225. Moreover, Paul's speaking in truth is a polemical stance against his opponents, as has been noted, for he did not consider his opponents as being truthful (see 13:8).

At first we might consider it a problem for Paul that he cannot offer "more proof" of his vision of 12:2-4. But this is just the point Paul will make. Neither can his opponents back up their claims in the sense of proving that they have experienced all the visions they may be reporting to the Corinthians. Paul will show that his visionary experience of 12:2-4 led to his being weak. Furthermore, Paul is saying that (as will be seen) his visions are not the criteria by which to judge him (Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 74, 75). Rather, the

way in which he has lived for God is the standard to use; or it is an appeal to the ministry that is performed according to the standard God has set (going back to 10:13–16). Paul's ministry is characterized by weakness and church planting. Even Paul's opponents cannot deny the veracity of the stripes he has suffered for the Gospel nor can they overlook that he was the one who founded the church at Corinth. They may evaluate Paul's sufferings incorrectly, but what he is should be evident to all. He is a weak servant of God, chosen by him to be an apostle, which is what he is to the Corinthians.

φείδομαι δέ, μή τις εἰς ἐμέ λογισθῆται ὑπὲρ ὃ βλέπει με ἢ ἀκούει [τι] ἐξ ἐμοῦ, "But I refrain [from boasting] so that no one will think more of me than what he sees in me or hears from me." Paul knows that some Corinthians will accept and believe his experience of 12:2–4. With this in mind, Paul expresses his wish that he not receive more credit than is due him (Héring, 92). If Paul is given too much praise for his vision, then the Gospel message would be clouded. This is the charge he brings against his opponents. Thus, Paul does not want to be regarded more highly than he should.

φείδομαι literally means "I spare" (see 1:23; 13:2; Rom 8:32; 11:21; 1 Cor 7:28; "I spare myself," Barrett, 312). If Héring is right that the idea of "not wishing to crush" those reading this message is behind our word, then possibly Paul also has his opponents directly in mind (92). This may explain the restraint that Paul exhibits in this polemic against his enemies. But when the verb is taken in the conative sense (Barrett's evaluation of the present tense, 312), it follows that Paul is refraining from leading the Corinthians down the wrong path. He could share more of his visionary experiences with the Corinthians, but he stops short of doing so (Bultmann, 225: "I could relate more experiences like that in vv 2–5; I truly have had them"). He takes this line of action so that people will not miss God's power in seeing his accomplishments and so that they will judge Paul by the acceptable criteria, i.e., not κατὰ σάρκα, but κατὰ κύριον (11:17, 18). The people of Corinth cannot evaluate his visions, for such experiences remain hidden from them. However, they can judge what they see in and hear in his case. The coupling of the verbs βλέπειν/ἀκούειν is to be taken as more than simple references to the everyday events in Paul's life. The verbs are to be understood as referring to his humility and (ἢ is copulative: BDF § 446.1) weakness and to his acceptance by God as a true and faithful apostle (Cambier, "Le critère paulinien," 498–505). Paul wished to be judged on more than simply the externals of his service (so Käsemann, *Legitimität*, 63, an idea going back to 5:12 [see *Comment* there]). His service is the means by which others may see that he is an ambassador for Christ; his weakness is a means by which the power of Christ is truly displayed, i.e., in line with 4:7 (see *Comment*).

The use of λογισθῆται (aorist subjunctive from λογίζεσθαι) possibly carries with it the idea of commercial accounting (see Lietzmann, 155; Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 359, citing Philem 18 to show it as a current metaphor; cf. BDF § 145.5). This would not be surprising in such a commerce-oriented city as Corinth; but it is evidently a slogan in this correspondence (11:5; see 10:2, 7, 11 to do with *Evidenzproblem*; Betz, *ibid.*, 68, 74, 121, 134). Paul is emphatic in saying that one should not credit to his account any "wares" except those that are visible. His readers should turn from Paul's visions and reflect on

the message he has preached and the sufferings he has endured. Paul invested himself greatly in the pathos of this v. Not only is he the subject of four verbs (*θελήσω, ἔσομαι, ἔρω, φείδομαι*), but we also see three uses of personal pronouns in 12:6b (*ἐμέ, με, ἐμοῦ*; also cf. *ἐμαντοῦ* of 12:5). This should tell us that by the time the Corinthians read (or heard) the words in 12:7, they were prepared to link the “unknown man” of 12:2-5a with Paul. The double accusative in “more” and “me” is to the point (BDF § 157).

The apostle has exhibited much restraint at this point, for he could have directly attacked his opponents on the grounds that they misrepresented both himself and themselves. Rather, Paul leaves such a conclusion to be worked out in the mind of the Corinthians. He does this by indirectly showing that the true man of God will seek to avoid inordinate self-esteem based on visions and revelations. Perhaps the indefinite *μή τις* (“no one”; Paul is not excluding anyone) is Paul’s way of showing hope that both the Corinthian church and his opponents will evaluate him on what is (to him at least) self-evident (Héring, 92).

7. *καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων*, “even the extraordinary revelations.” The modern interpreter may wonder, after reading the Greek text of 12:7, if Paul set this text down the way he had intended (Barrett, 313). We have already examined the textual questions surrounding the v and have opted to view the above phrase as completing the sentence in v 6 (see *Notes* on 12:7). 12:6 had closed with Paul saying that he refrained from boasting about what was unseen. He wished the people to evaluate him on what was tangible, by something they could see, i.e., his trials. But we may wonder if Paul was convinced that, after telling them of his vision, his Corinthian readers would heed his concern (12:2-4; and we must remember that some may have known of Paul’s other visions, especially the one in Corinth [Acts 18:9, 10]). There could possibly have been some who, with good intentions, would consider Paul to be an exceptional person because of his ecstatic experience. After all, Paul had his followers at Corinth (“I follow Paul”; 1 Cor 1:12). Moreover, he had won a majority back to him as recorded in 7:8-16. In spite of new and recurring problems, there were some who would take this new piece of information and place Paul high in their estimation. Paul’s choice of *ὑπερβολῇ*, here a *dativus causae*, is somewhat ambiguous. The composite noun can mean either “excess” (*ὑπέρ-* of quantity) or “extraordinary” (*ὑπέρ-* of quality). Paul’s use of the word in 2 Cor (4:17; 1:8; cf. also 4:7; Rom 7:13; Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 12:31) might tip the scales in favor of the qualitative aspect (so Zmijewski, “Kontextbezug,” 272), but perhaps we should not draw too sharp a distinction here (see Héring, 92). The fact that *ἀποκαλύψεις*, “revelations,” is plural has led Plummer, 347, to raise again the idea that 12:2-4 speaks of two separate revelations. But we have already judged this position to be doubtful (so Güttgemanns, *Der leidende Apostel*, 161, n. 55, who argues his case that v 7 moves “without a perceptible break” from the account in v 4, against several interpreters). Moreover, as has been stated before, the Corinthians were probably aware that Paul had some visions (but not nearly enough to satisfy the opponents). He had been accused of being out of his mind (5:13). But the significance of the vision in 12:2-4 is its dimension in terms of “revelation.” In short, it probably fell as a bombshell on some, though ignored or scoffed

at by others. There was no way on Paul's part that he would become too proud or conceited over this incident (he will presently explain why to the Corinthians this is so). But there was always the possibility that some at Corinth would treat his mystical experience in a way that Paul himself would disown.

διὸ ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι, ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί, ἄγγελος σατανᾶ, ἵνα με κολαφίξῃ, ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι, "Therefore, in order that I should not become conceited, I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, in order to batter me, that I should not become conceited." Discussion of this verse will not lead the exegete to certainty regarding the identity of Paul's "thorn in the flesh." As Hughes aptly writes, the thorn "is another one of those questions which, on the evidence available, must remain unanswered" (442). This is not to say that a study of past theories concerning the present topic will be of no benefit. Quite the contrary, for if we are to understand the basis for God's strength in Paul—namely, through weakness—then it is imperative that we consider the options and at least form general conclusions regarding Paul's situation. But this is to say that our present discussion offers no certain conclusion that has up to now eluded scholars.

διὸ ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι, "Therefore, in order that I should not become conceited." The use of διὸ, "therefore," alerts Paul's readers that some form of summary statement is to follow in this new sentence, a view to be argued for against other possibilities, e.g., that διὸ is an afterthought, a textual corruption, an unstressed anticipation of ἵνα, the next word; rather it introduces the "following connection" as an inferential conjunction (Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 354; Bultmann, 226, both relying on E. Molland, "Διὸ" in *Serta Rudbergiana* [1931] 49, 50, which I have not been able to consult). Paul has presented the Corinthians with the information that he experienced a unique vision. In turn, he has related to them that, in spite of this event, he will not boast about it (though essentially he has already boasted and feels that he has joined [12:11] in the activity of his opponents, an activity which he devalues [12:1]). Thus, Paul now proceeds to give, in general terms, one reason why he is unable to boast: God has sought to keep Paul from becoming conceited. The ἵνα twice in one v, "in order that," alerts us to three purpose clauses in close symmetry. First, there was a reason for the giving of the thorn and that reason is that Paul should not become proud. Second, the satanic messenger came in order to batter him. Third, this encounter was (again) to prevent his conceit. The word for "exalting oneself" ("becoming conceited," ὑπεραίρωμαι) is found only one other place in the NT (2 Thess 2:4), where Paul describes "the man of lawlessness" as exalting himself against God. If Paul felt inclined to exalt himself, i.e., to be independent of God as an act of ὕβρις, "pride," the thorn was sent to prevent that from happening. More important, if the Corinthians wanted to place Paul "on a pedestal," the thorn would prevent such action. That Paul was intent on showing that he was not free to put himself above others is seen in this construction (cf. Rom 12:3). The identical purpose clause ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι both begins and ends this verse. The emphasis is clear; Paul is weak and this is further demonstrated by the thorn in the flesh. (Surprisingly, the NIV fails to translate the second ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι clause, and we may note how Schlatter, *Paulus*, 665, in recognizing a "medley of two kinds of composition," seeks to attach the clauses to two different

parts of the sentence, going back to v 6 to connect the first *ὡς* clause to the “abundance of revelations” as a kind of “intrusion.”)

Paul confesses that he is not the agent responsible for this thorn. He reports that the thorn *ἐδόθη μοι*, “was given to me.” It is doubtful that Satan is the giver, even if *σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί* is the grammatical subject of *ἐδόθη*. If Paul had intended to convey such information, he most likely would have chosen a word other than *διδόναι*. This word was usually employed to denote that God’s favor had been bestowed (cf. Gal 3:21; Eph 3:8; 5:19; 1 Tim 4:14). Plummer suggests that if Satan was the agent, *ἐπιτίθημι*, “lay upon” (Luke 10:30; 23:26; Acts 16:23), or *βάλλω*, “cast” (Rev 2:24), or *ἐπιβάλλω*, “put on” (1 Cor 7:35), would have been more appropriate (348). As mentioned earlier, we have an example of the *passivum divinum*. This “divine passive,” speaking of God as the hidden agent behind events and experiences in human lives, fits well into Paul’s thinking. He sees both the revelation and the thorn as from God. (Smith makes the point that Paul may not have viewed the thorn as a “gift.” Moreover, he says that Paul refrains from saying the thorn was God’s will [“The Thorn,” 411]. Paul viewed the thorn as a bitter reality that drew him closer to God. But whether or not Paul saw this as a good thing in the beginning remains beyond our ability to answer.) Hence Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 368, is correct when he writes that though “thorn” can be assumed to be the grammatical subject of “was given,” in reality “the evidence points to God being the essential acting subject.”

σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί, ἄγγελος σατανᾶ, “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan.” Much scholarship has been devoted to this phrase, yet undeniably mystery and uncertainty remain. And as will be seen, this attention is not limited to modern times only, but has marked exegetical and devotional study throughout church history.

σκόλοψ can be taken to mean “thorn” or “stake” (Schlatter [*Paulus*, 666] suggests that *σκόλοψ* could be equivalent to *σταυρός*, “cross”; cf. Origen *c. Celsum* 2.68). The more common rendering of “thorn” is well attested (see LXX [Num 33:55; Ezek 28:24; Hos 2:6], KJV/AV, RSV, NIV; note NEB has “a sharp physical pain,” which is then interpreted in a footnote to be a “stake, or thorn, for the flesh”; see also BGD, 756; Delling, *TDNT* 7:411, 412). A case can be made for rendering “stake.” Park argues that “stake” could have been a concept borrowed from the military (“Paul’s ΣΚΟΛΟΨ,” 180–82). Such stakes were used to slow an enemy’s progress (as in the form of a fence or wall), or to torture and to execute an enemy (such as by impaling). The idea of “stake” looks plausible except that Park makes too much of the severity of Paul’s problem (*ibid.*, 182, 183). To say that “stake” implies the intensity of Paul’s problem whereas thorn suggests he has a superficial affliction is not satisfactory. Furthermore, to portray the situation by suggesting that Paul was helplessly impaled on a stake (Hughes, 447) rather overlooks the power he felt was working in him. For these reasons we choose “thorn” as our rendering (“splinter,” Bruce, 248; Plummer, 348). (For the moment, we postpone the discussion of the different possibilities that are attached to “thorn,” in order to examine Paul’s use of *τῆ σαρκί*.)

There is uncertainty in identifying Paul’s use of *σάρξ*, in the expression “in the flesh.” The question centers on whether to render this phrase “in

the flesh" or "for the flesh." It is a question of whether to take τῇ σαρκί as locative dative or dative of disadvantage (Tasker, 174, *dativus incommodi*). (Allo's view [310] that the dative τῇ σαρκί is explanatory of μοι, "given to me, that is, to my flesh" [on the basis of Rom 7:18], is not likely. Rather the dative is explained as closely tied to the substantive [σκόλοψ; the usage as in 1 Cor 7:28] "by analogy" [BDF § 190.3].) If it is the former, then most likely Paul is speaking of a physical malady or ailment, for we should understand σάρξ in the neutral sense, namely, the physical body (Bruce, 248; Barrett, 315; Filson, 407; Schweizer, *TDNT* 7:125 for "flesh" as a synonym for man's corporeal existence; Bachmann, 392, n. 1: a metaphor for the most real physiological meaning of human life; so BGD, 743). (We have already discussed how Paul could use σάρξ in a nontheological manner; see *Comment* on 7:1.) The argument against taking the dative as locative is that, if Paul intended it this way, he would have included the preposition ἐν, "in" (Plummer, 348). On the contrary, it has been proposed that this is the dative of disadvantage ("for the flesh"). If this position is adopted, then σάρξ takes on the Pauline sense of man's lower nature (Tasker, 174). Opponents of this position argue that if Paul had wanted to convey this meaning of σάρξ he most likely would have contrasted it with some reference to the Spirit (Hughes, 448). On the basis of Hughes's thinking, we understand "flesh" to be of the nontheological category (see Jewett, *Anthropological Terms*, who interprets σάρξ as equal to σῶμα [158], but as belonging to the old eon [455]; cf. 5:17).

The exact meaning of thorn remains elusive. No one has yet given an interpretation that is generally accepted. There are historical surveys in Plummer, 348–51; Hughes, 443–46; Allo, 313–21; Güttgemanns, *Der leidende Apostel*, 162–64. The first interpretation was offered by Tertullian *de Pudicitia* 13.17, who took the thorn to mean Paul had a pain in the ear or head (also see Jerome and Pelagius). Chrysostom, *Hom.* 26, understands σατανᾶς, "Satan," in the general sense of adversary, and he concluded that Paul's thorn was his opponents. (Specifically, Chrysostom has Alexander the coppersmith in mind.) Recently this argument has been revived (Tasker, 176; Mullins, "Paul's Thorn"; Barré, "Qumran," 222–25, sees that there is a connection between 1QH 2:23–25 and 2 Cor 10–13, for in both contexts weakness is the result of persecution; Bieder, "Paulus," 319–33, argues that the opposition is that seen in 11:14 [332], heretical adversaries at Corinth who are Satan's emissaries; but can "messenger" be equated with διάκονοι? asks Güttgemanns, *ibid.*, 164; see below). The support of this position is well worth noting.

There are four basic points that endorse the position that the thorn refers to Paul's opponents. First, the phrase ἄγγελος σατανᾶ, "messenger of Satan" (note σατανᾶ is a Doric genitive of σατανᾶς, which is of irregular declension), could refer to a person, for this is the normal use of ἄγγελος (it is not likely that as yet "angel" was a technical term). It appears that Paul does not use ἄγγελος except to refer to a person. Second, one must not forget that chaps. 10–13 describe Paul's fight against his adversaries. We see in 12:12 that Paul is in conflict with those who would question his apostleship. Moreover, in 11:13–15 Paul understands his conflict with his opponents as a conflict between God and Satan (see Kleinknecht, *Der leidende Gerechtfertigte*, 293). Paul sees himself as a representative of God and the false apostles as representing

Satan. In this conflict Paul views Satan as a (false) messenger of light (11:14). It follows that the use of messenger is in reference to a person, not an illness. If this is so, then the use of *σκόλοψ* in 12:7 should not be understood as referring to some physical malady.

A third point is seen in the clause *ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ*, "in order to batter me." The verb *κολαφίζειν* (see the uses in Mark 14:65; Matt 26:67; cf. 1 Cor 4:11) speaks of one who is beaten or battered about, especially by blows to the head (see K. L. Schmidt, *TDNT* 3:819-21; and idem, "Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς κολαφιζόμενος und die 'colaphisation' der Juden," *Mélanges offerts à Maurice Goguel*, Bibliothèque Théologique [Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1950]; *Aux sources de la tradition chrétienne*, FS M. Goguel). This has led some to conclude that the choice of *σκόλοψ* refers specifically to a person, thus pointing to Paul's opponents. A fourth item is that in the LXX we find thorn associated with opponents of Israel. The Canaanites, who are permitted to remain in Israel, are "thorns" (Num 33:55). In Ezekiel (23:24) the foes of Israel are described as "thorns." These four points show that a case can be made for considering Paul's thorn as the adversaries that dog him at Corinth (see also patristic support in Augustine, Theodoret, Theophylact).

However, there is much support for the view of the thorn as referring to something other than the opponents of Paul. The medieval thinkers (from Gregory the Great to Aquinas) understood the Vulgate rendering (however, a "misrendering," Hughes, 444; see 442-46 for a helpful excursus on the history of interpretation of the "thorn") of *stimulus carnis* to imply sexual temptation. The Reformers (such as Calvin and Luther) viewed Paul's thorn in the flesh as spiritual temptation. Few modern commentators adopt this view (but see J. J. Thierry, "Der Dorn im Fleische," *NovT* 5 [1962] 301-10). Rather, the majority opt for some form of physical ailment (see the full note in Windisch, 385-88, "Die Krankheit des Apostels Paulus," with bibliographical references). One common ailment suggested was a severe form of ophthalmia. This is inferred from the colorful language of Galatians. In 4:13 Paul speaks of a weakness of the flesh (*σάρξ*), and proceeds to acknowledge the willingness of the Galatians to pluck out their eyes and give them to him (4:15). Also, Paul is seen as closing the Galatian epistle by noting that the handwriting is his own, for this writing is in large letters (6:11). Also appeal is made to the (hypothetical) case of Acts 23:5 where Paul fails to recognize the high priest. This defective eyesight may stem from, as the theory goes, the scales that fell from Paul's eyes after his conversion experience (Acts 9:9, 18). This theory, though interesting, has received little support in recent times (though see Nisbet, "The Thorn").

Another ailment suggested is epilepsy (Lightfoot), possibly as a result of the experience Paul had at his conversion. That is, the fact that Paul fell down on the road to Damascus has been seen as evidence that Paul was epileptic, but this is doubtful (see Allo, 316).

One of the more attractive hypotheses is that of W. M. Ramsay (*St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*¹⁸ [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935] 94-97; followed by Allo). Paul, it is said, suffered from a form of recurring malarial fever. It has been suggested that he contracted this disease (specifically Malta fever; so W. M. Alexander, "St. Paul's Infirmity," *ExpTim* 15 [1904] 469-

73; 545–48) in Pamphylia. For Ramsay, this theory covers all the symptoms Paul seems to exhibit. Accordingly, Paul was incapacitated by the attacks of this fever. If the fever seared the head, one can appreciate how Paul felt battered about.

Other forms of suffering have been suggested. The thorn, e.g., may have been the agony that Paul experienced at the Jewish rejection of the Gospel (Ph. H. Menoud, "L'écharde et l'ange satanique [2 Cor 12.7]," *Studia Paulina*, 169). We know this was a problem for Paul as recorded in Romans chaps. 9–11, especially 9:1–3. Menoud does make the point that Paul never mentions sickness in his tribulation-lists (Barré, "Qumran," 224, notes that 12:7 is framed by two such lists, namely, 11:21b–29 and 12:10a). Clavier ("La santé de l'apôtre Paul," *Studia Paulina*, 78, 79) believes that Paul suffered disorders to his nervous system as a result of the hardships he endured and the shock his psyche received from his visions and revelations. Yet, with all these physical ailments suggested, one wonders with Binder whether or not a person who was so often on the "battlefield" could have been so physically weak and still have withstood the rigors of Paul's life ("Die angebliche Krankheit").

But this is not to say that the supposition that Paul's suffering was physical cannot also be defended. It is worth noting that Satan is associated with physical illness in the biblical tradition. We see this in Job 2:5 where Satan is allowed (by God's permission) to inflict sickness. Also in Luke (13:16), Satan is credited as the one responsible for the woman being bent over for eighteen years. There is nothing to suggest that a "literal" messenger (ἄγγελος) was the agent for these respective illnesses. In addition, the term "angel of Satan" was not necessarily a common phrase (see Barrett, 315; Matt 25:41; Rev 12:7, 9; Str-B 1:136, 983–94). Contrary to those who see ἄγγελος as signifying a "person" (specifically, adversaries), Paul may have simply been attributing his ailment to satanic origin (possibly through demonic agency; Price, "Punished," 33–40, understands the thorn to be a demon), but always with the conviction that God was in control (Barrett, 316). Probably the most telling argument against the position that Paul was referring to human opponents as the thorn in the flesh (and by now it should be apparent that the possibilities offered concerning the thorn roughly fall into two categories, namely, human opponents and physical ailment) is found in 12:8. This verse relates that Paul prayed that God would remove the thorn. Would the apostle pray to be spared persecution? This is doubtful, since persecution was the fuel on which Paul seemed to thrive. The more he was persecuted the more he seemed determined to press the claims of his apostolate. Moreover, if this thorn was given to Paul near the time of his revelation of 12:2–4, then it is doubtful Paul was speaking of the opponents in 11:13–15 (against Bieder), for he had yet to confront them. Yet, we must honestly recognize (and so in recall of Binder's thesis) that a chronically ill Paul does not fit well with the picture of Paul found in the New Testament. Rather, Paul is one who must be seen as in robust health and with a strong constitution. On the other side, at Corinth where his apostolic role was under fire, any physical weakness would have seemed a liability, then Paul could not deny that the estimate of his person in 10:10; 11:21; 12:10, is valid, however much it was exploited by his traducers.

Something in the nature of defective speech has also been suggested as Paul's thorn (W. K. L. Clarke, *New Testament Problems* [London: SPCK, 1929] 136-40, followed in part by Barrett). This could account for his making a bad first impression at Corinth (1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 10:10). Moreover, it may supply the reason why he was impressive in his letters, but "deficient" in his speech (10:1, 9, 10, 11; 11:6). Such an ailment would not prove incapacitating nor drain one's strength, yet it would be humiliating, evoking ridicule and scorn (see Marshall, "A Metaphor of Social Shame," *NovT* 25 [1983] 315, 316, who identifies the thorn as a "socially debilitating disease or disfigurement which was made the subject of ridicule and invidious comparison," which discredited the value of the vision-audition experience. He argues that the upshot of the pericope is the idea: God defeated his apostle, in line with 2:14, as Marshall interprets the verb there). But again this is only a guess. We simply do not know the meaning behind "the thorn in the flesh." At best we can say with Bruce that the thorn attacked Paul some time after the ecstatic experience. From the present tense of *κολαφίζειν* it appears that this was a continual problem. It seems also likely that Paul suffered a kind of physical disorder, but even that is uncertain. In all probability, the Corinthians knew of what Paul spoke. We, however, are left on the outside listening to one side of a two-sided conversation. We will probably never know the truth (or, at least, never know for sure we have the truth).

But this examination of the possible meanings of thorn is worthwhile. From studying the possibilities we can see two important points and several consequences. First of all, the thorn was inherently evil. Nowhere does Paul infer that this thorn was good. It was used to buffet Paul and caused him great consternation and pain (so Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 370, 371, who remarks that, while the image of a thorn is a plastic one, it does have the connotation of the *painful side* of Paul's sufferings). Second, and more important, the thorn served a good purpose as a gift from God. The importance of the passive verb *ἐδόθη*, "was given," can hardly be exaggerated. God is the unseen agent behind the bitter experience. The paradox is that behind the nonpersonal, passive word form of the verb lies "the veiled allusion to God as author" (Prümm, *Diakonia* 1:657). Some momentous consequences follow. First, this passive formulation with the divine concealed in a human trial places the experience on a theological plane, where the need for a theodicy is urgent. Paul will partly address this issue in vv 9, 10 by introducing the christological motif and a vindication of his service for Christ. Then, Paul's suffering is viewed within the context of divine grace which not only allowed the affliction but sustained the sufferer in it (Schlatter, *Paulus*, 668). The thorn humbled (and humiliated) Paul; he could never revel in his great vision for very long before he would be reminded of his thorn. But, third, this negative factor, as 12:9, 10 tell us, was an opportunity for God to demonstrate his power. Paul acknowledged God's power as he acknowledged his own weakness. Maybe Paul reflected many times that, if he had not received the vision, he would have not received the thorn. But this made little or no difference to him. Because of his weakness, he became a powerful instrument for God. Paul's own personal interest is shown in the *inclusio* and chiasmic form:

μοι ——— σκόλοψ
 ἄγγελος σατανᾶ ——— με

to me ——— thorn
 messenger ——— me
 of Satan

8. ὑπὲρ τούτου τρίς τὸν κύριον παρεκάλεσα ἵνα ἀποστῆ ἀπ' ἐμοῦ, "Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me." In 12:8 Paul proceeds to some autobiographical material concerning his beseeching the Lord to remove this messenger of Satan. Grammatically speaking, ὑπὲρ τούτου refers to ἄγγελος σατανᾶ instead of σκόλοψ ἐν σαρκί. This is because ἀποστῆ (from ἀφιστάμαι, "to take away," again passive) is used of persons, not things, throughout the NT (Hughes, 449, n. 139; cf. 1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 2:19; Heb 3:12; Luke 4:13). At first thought, we might be inclined to translate the οὗτος/τούτου as "he" (so Barrett, 316) instead of "this matter" or simply "it" (neuter; NIV; KJV/AV; RSV; NEB). This personification is tempting but undesirable. At best all we can say is that Paul considered the "messenger of Satan" in a quasi-personal sense (Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 375; Hughes, 441, n. 120). We need to note that in 12:7 the phrase "messenger of Satan" appears in apposition to the words "thorn in the flesh"; thus the "it" of 12:8 (the object that Paul wished removed from his life) may mean either the thorn or the messenger, without affecting the meaning of the v (12:8; see *Form/Structure/Setting*). As stated earlier, it is quite probable that Paul did not have any special person in mind when he wrote 12:7. Any persecution from opponents, especially that resulted in suffering, would not have been an item Paul would have sought to evade. For Paul, his sufferings, in some way, reflected the sufferings of Jesus (Col 1:24). The οὗτος (see BDF § 290.3) most likely is a reference to Paul's thorn; the use of the "messenger of Satan" probably is Paul's way of saying that evil forces (though permitted by God) were a part of his life.

Paul reports: τρίς τὸν κύριον παρεκάλεσα, "three times I pleaded with the Lord." In all probability, κύριος here is the personal object of a prayer directly to Christ (Bultmann, 227). This can be seen from 12:9, which speaks first of "my power" (which refers to Christ) and then "Christ's power." Héring takes this as the only occasion (to the point of its being true "undeniably," 93, n. 20) during which Paul prayed directly to Christ and not to God the Father. But see possible examples to the contrary (1 Thess 3:12–13; 1 Cor 1:2; 16:22; and also Filson, 409; R. J. Bauckham, "The Worship of Jesus in Apocalyptic Christianity," *NTS* 27 [1980–81] 322–41; P. F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church* [London: Alcuin Club/SPCK, 1981] 36; R. T. France, "The Worship of Jesus" in *Christ the Lord*, FS D. Guthrie, ed. H. H. Rowdon [Leicester: IVP, 1982] 17–36). Immediately, the reader is impressed by the number of times Paul sought (παρεκάλεσα: BDF § 392; but not "begged" [see Barrett, 316, and 8:6; 9:5 but see on 10:1, 2]) a subsequent cure (A. Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient East*, 153, 308, speaks of an interesting parallel with the prayer of M. Julius Apellas). The number three is a reminder of Jesus' temptations in the Garden of Gethsemane and the three times he petitioned the Father to remove the cup from him. Chrysostom and Calvin suggest that τρίς is symbolic, representing many times. But also the "three"

could reflect the Jewish importance attached to this number when related to blessings (see Acts 10:16; John 21:17; also *Midr. Tehuma* 22.2). And three-fold prayers are well attested in Greco-Roman religion (Windisch, 389, 390; cf. Betz, "Aretalogie," 293). Whatever Paul's meaning, it remains a question as to whether these three occasions of prayer were the result of three separate attacks of his malady or all are located during the time shortly after the first attack. The latter makes sense in light of the point that Paul had had sufficient time to accept this affliction and had learned to live with it (Bruce, 249). This is seen in what follows especially if the aorist tense in *παρεκάλεσα* "suggests that the fact [of prayer] had passed, so that Paul no longer prayed for this object" (Allo, 312), while the next line has a notable change of tense. But maybe the "three times" prayer is a stereotyped expression for urgency in praying (so Güttemanns, *ibid.*, 166 n. 94).

9. *καὶ εἶρηκέν μοι*, "And he said to me." In oracular form (Betz, "Aretalogie," 294 ff., "*eine indikativische Heilsbestätigung*," esp. 297) the answer to his prayer came. It was not what he desired; rather (we may suppose) it was what he needed. The attention of most readers is drawn to the answer that follows but we should not overlook the construction of these opening words. *εἶρηκεν*, "he said," is the perfect of *λέγω* (12:9 is a "fair example of the true Greek perfect," Moule, *Idiom Book*, 15, against other suggestions: that the perfect is the same as an aorist tense [Windisch, 390, n. 1: cf. 11:25], or that the classification is that of a "narrative perfect," BDF § 343.2). That the use of the perfect speaks of something that happened in the past is evident. This suggests a decision that is regarded as final by Paul (Bachmann, 401). But more than that, Paul's choice of the perfect tells us that he still hears the echo of this divine oracle (*εἶρηκεν* is frequently used of divine utterances [Plummer, 354; Acts 13:34; Heb 1:13; 4:3, 4; 10:9; 13:5: these references are to OT citations]). The answer, coming after Paul's third petition, "was ever sounding in the apostle's ears" (Hodge, 286). When we examine the content of this answer, we shall see the reason. In all probability, what he had heard in the past remains a present source of power and comfort (Bruce, 249). While some could argue that the perfect can be understood in a punctiliar sense it is not likely in this case. We noted in 12:8 that *παρεκάλεσα* was in the aorist. Paul had pleaded with the Lord, but this was a thing of the past (Allo, 312, cited above). Paul's use of the perfect and the aorist together in 12:8, 9 appears as a conscious attempt on his part to tell the Corinthians that he had ceased to petition God to remove the thorn (aorist), while he still keeps the answer as an ever-present source of comfort (perfect). In 12:9a, though the answer was a thing of the past, it resounded with vibrancy and vitality in the present. The answer was final, but it also was advantageous for Paul for it was a means to strengthen him. In spite of his weakness, Paul would be strengthened. Though he had a thorn in the flesh, he still could carry on his work for God. This is indeed marked as "the veritable highpoint of the entire sentence sequence" (Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 378), in the light of the next line.

ἀρκεῖ σοι ἡ χάρις μου, ἡ γὰρ δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται, "My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is fulfilled in weakness." The words that follow—

“he said to me”—reveal the answer Paul received. Hughes has called this answer, “the summit of the epistle. . . . From this vantage-point the entire range of Paul’s apostleship is seen in focus” (451). Though his petition for removal of the thorn was denied, Paul appears confident that, whenever the messenger of Satan “beats him about,” he will have the strength to overcome. The words recorded here may have been a direct communication to Paul from Christ (O’Collins, “Power,” 530; these may be the only words of the risen Christ that we find in Pauline literature, though we may question O’Collins’s position in light of 1 Cor 11:23–26: but he is correct if the issue is one of discovering *oratio recta*: see D. E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 247, 248, 261, 269, 321).

Paul’s use of *χάρις*, “grace,” may or may not refer specifically to his situation of 12:1–10. *χάρις* has received wide use in our present epistle (1:2, 12; 4:15; 8:1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 19; 9:8, 14). For Paul “grace” can speak of his special call to apostleship (1 Cor 15:10; cf. Rom 1:5; 12:3). The fundamental aspect of grace is God’s love toward man shown in Christ (8:9). Through it a person can be assured that no suffering (Rom 8:38, 39) can overpower those who are in Christ (Barrett, 316). This grace is the way by which “any man becomes the sort of Christian that he is” (*ibid.*). No doubt Paul had in mind the thorn in the flesh when he related the wording of 12:9. But it is possible that he also had in mind the many sufferings that had accompanied his apostleship. We simply have to remember the tribulation-lists that dot the horizon of 2 Corinthians (6:4–10; 11:23–28; 12:10). Taking this one step farther, we may have a general principle for Christians concerning weakness (Bultmann, 228, 229: see below). That is, we see a law in 12:9 regarding Christian service (Käsemann, *Legitimität*, 39). O’Collins, however, disagrees (“Power,” 534). This last discussion will come up again (see below) at the conclusion of our comment on 12:9. For now it is sufficient to note that the grace of God was exhibited in Paul’s life though weakness (“This Divine gift is perpetually sufficient, good for his whole life,” Plummer, 354).

ἀρκεῖν, “to be sufficient,” carries with it the idea of “being enough” (see G. Kittel, *TDNT* 1:464–67); here the verb has a theological nuance, which makes it distinctive. The stoic parallels, e.g., Epictetus *Diss.* I.1, 7–13, IV.10, 14–16, are not really to the point, since the point of comparison is not inner freedom or adequacy but the possession of the Spirit or God’s gift and an admission of human weakness to be reinforced by the divine strength; Bultmann, 228, makes this clear, drawing a contrast between Paul and the stoics. The contrast between Paul and Judaism is striking as well, since Deut 3:26 is no adequate parallel, as this is more a pious resignation to necessity than a positive accession of *δύναμις*, “strength.” What we can say is that Paul is convinced that neither the thorn nor trials of any sort will cause him to cease in his service to God. The following clause restates the same theme.

The power (*δύναμις*) spoken of is the power of Christ. This is why the “my” is inserted in the translation (see also NIV; RSV; KJV/AV; Bruce, 249; but the “my” is absent from NEB and also from Barrett, 316, and is a secondary textual reading). At the conclusion of 12:9 Paul again speaks of the *δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ*, “the power of Christ” (see Tasker, 179). It is right to take *δύναμις* and *χάρις* as synonyms (O’Collins, “Power,” 522; Bultmann, 229). By under-

standing power to represent the power of Christ, Paul is close to personifying power in our present v (Héring, 93). See 1 Cor 1:24 where Christ is said to be the power of God. This personification suggests that Christ reaches fulfillment (*τελείω*) in Paul (Windisch, 391; Gal 2:20 as a *unio mystica*). But such an understanding of Paul is unusual, for he likes to speak of believers being *ἐν Χριστῷ*, "in Christ." In this phrase, Christ is treated as a personality in whom all Christians are incorporated (see C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, SBT 2d ser. 1 [Naperville: Allenson, 1967] 21-42).

The power Paul experienced is fulfilled (*τελείται*: Delling, *TDNT* 8:58-61) in weakness (*ἀσθένεια*: here "the most outstanding example of Paul's usage of *ἀσθένεια*"; Black, *Paul*, 151). The concept behind "fulfillment" is that of bringing to completion (*τελειώσις*). Some translate it as bringing power to perfection. But "perfection" does not here speak of moral behavior, rather of God's power as it is made the main focus of Paul's work. This is the main thrust behind 12:1-10. But unlike Paul's opponents—in whom God's glory was not an aim—the apostle boasts of his weakness (in particular, his thorn). Barrett is certainly correct, if slightly anachronistic, when he writes, "Divine power is scarcely perceptible in the impressive activities of the ecclesiastical potentates with whom Paul has to contend" (317).

Some maintain that Paul's choice of *τελείω* is a deliberate rebuttal of the gnostics. The connection is made when *τέλειος* is considered synonymous with *πνευματικός* (see Schmithals, *Gnosticism*, 163, 164; also see E. Güttgemanns, *Der leidende Apostel*, 168; U. Wilckens, *Weisheit*, 218, n. 2). But the alternative proposal of Georgi that Paul's opponents were Jewish Christian missionaries cannot be ignored (see also O'Collins, "Power," 531; see Betz, "Aretologie," 304, 305). If this position is true, then we can say, as does O'Collins, that the gnostics did not have a monopoly on the use of *δύναμις* and *ἀσθένεια*. Moreover, Paul was not consciously responding to the Gnostics in this emotional and intimate passage under study. What can be said is that the fulfillment of God's power comes not in heavenly visions and ecstatic demonstrations, but in earthly weakness (see Güttgemanns, *ibid.*). And to mark off Paul from his opponents, it is clear that, while both groups shared a revelatory experience, Paul—unlike his rivals—does not report a healing, to provide a proof of the validity of his apostleship (Fallon, 106).

The notion of weakness is an important idea in 12:9, 10. (The noun appears three times and the verb once.) O'Collins is right in pointing out that "Paul understands his weakness Christologically" ("Power," 532; so Güttgemanns, *ibid.*, 169, 170, tellingly). What Paul has suffered has been done so for Christ. Furthermore, in the crucifixion, Paul can see Christ as weak (Wilckens, *ibid.*, 48; cf. 13:4). He can also see God's power manifested (fulfilled) in the resurrection. Thus, in Christ's suffering, God's power was completed. That Paul is weak (and even weaker because of the thorn) is yet the "best possible hope for the display of divine power" (Barrett, 317).

ἡδιστα οὖν μᾶλλον καυχῆσομαι ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις μου, "Therefore I will most gladly boast in my weaknesses." Having received the assurance that his weaknesses will not hinder his work for God, Paul presents the ruling attitude that prevails in his life. Instead of asking God yet again to remove the thorn, Paul understood this liability as a means tending to God's glory. The *οὖν*, "therefore," tells Paul's readers that he has concluded something about his

situation (BDF § 451.1). ἡδιστα, "all the more gladly," is the superlative of ἡδέως (thus a possible rendering is the relative "most gladly," Barrett, 317). Paul's prayer (12:8) was answered in the negative. In time, Paul has come to accept this answer as in his best interest. That *καυχήσομαι* is in the future tense should not lead us to think Paul has yet to boast in his afflictions. A quick glance at 4:7–18 affirms that Paul glories in God, not himself. But he had been driven (12:11) to boast by the exigencies of the new situation consequent on the arrival of "false apostles" in 11:4, 13–15. He has related his vision to the Corinthians. In turn, he says, as we have noticed, that this vision was not his "badge" of apostleship. Rather, his sufferings prove him a *bona fide* minister of God. Even more, Paul revels in his weaknesses, for in them God uses him as an instrument for truth and righteousness (6:4–10).

A question centers on Paul's use of *μᾶλλον*. It has the idea of "rather" behind it (BGD, 489). It is doubtful that it goes with ἡδιστα as *μᾶλλον* does not strengthen superlatives (Plummer; cf. BDF § 246). Paul will boast in his weaknesses rather than in something else (Robertson, *Grammar*, 664). Possibly the something else is "revelations and visions" (*pace* Plummer, 355).

ὡς ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμέ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ, "in order that the power of Christ may rest upon me." The *ὡς* introduces the reason (or purpose; we shall discuss the issue of whether weakness is a means to finding a power already within, or a means to receiving power from outside) that Christ's power rests on Paul. This conjunction governs the subjunctive mood, an example of which we find in ἐπισκηνώσῃ (from ἐπισκηνοῦν). We might note that the use of the verb in 12:10 is a *hapax legomenon*. Plummer (355) calls the idea behind ἐπισκηνοῦν a "bold metaphor." What we see is the Hebrew concept concerning the presence of God as it was found in the Jewish Tabernacle and first Temple. Many have noticed this point (Plummer, 355; Strachan, 33; Héring, 94; Tasker, 179; Hughes, 452; Barrett, 367; Schlatter, 669; Hodge, 287; Güttgemanns, *ibid.*, 169; Bultmann, 230) and related it to the Hebrew term שָׁכַן , *š'kînāh*. This OT-Jewish term referred to the presence of God dwelling with the people (Exod 40:34). In the NT the root *σκην-* clearly suggests the Hebrew root for "abide," namely, שָׁכַן , *šākan*. It is said in John 1:14 that Christ was "dwelling among us" (literally, "pitching his tent"), and in Revelation (7:14; 12:12; 13:6; 21:3) that God will dwell with the saints (cf. also Ezek 37:27 and Zech 2:10, both in the LXX; see also Philo, *Quis div. haer.*, 23). In some sense then, the power of Christ alighted on Paul as a result of his accepting God's will not to remove the thorn (see chap. 5 where Paul also uses the tent imagery in his discussion). But in examining this point, we are led to ask another question: Did Paul see weakness as a means of revealing a power already present in him, or is weakness the door through which comes the power of Christ? Another way to phrase the question is to inquire whether the prefix *ἐπι-* in the verb ἐπισκηνοῦν is vertical (i.e., Christ's power descending *onto* Paul from above: so Windisch, 392; Lietzmann, 156), or horizontal (i.e., Christ's power expressing itself *through* Paul and his apostolic career, so Michaelis, *TDNT* 7:389; cf. Schlatter, *Paulus*, 669; Allo, 312).

Bultmann interprets 12:9 as referring to a revelatory function of weakness. For him, struggle is not approved by God as a means for living the Christian life. Rather, for Bultmann, God is only satisfied with total surrender, which

signifies no more struggle. By doing this, the person will know and, only then will he truly know, that he is a sinner (see *Theology* 1:285, 349, 351 and in his commentary, 228-30). By discerning weakness, a person discovers the power within. For Bultmann, Paul's dictum (12:9) for power holds true for any Christian. Plummer concurs, for he writes that God's power becomes more evident in weakness, not more real (354). Betz views the weakness of Paul, not as the indwelling of the messenger of Satan but as an "epiphany" ("*eine Epiphanie*") of the crucified Lord ("Aretalogie," 303).

An opposite point of view is taken by Käsemann. He understands weakness as an ontological reality (see *Legitimität*, 39; also see 13:3, 4). Windisch (391, 392) sees Paul's weakness as a precondition for the power of Christ to enter him. Strachan shows a similar understanding, but O'Collins may be right in spotting a Pelagian tendency in Strachan's thinking ("Power," 530).

O'Collins favors the position that weakness is ontological rather than revelatory ("Power," 537). However, he does allow for "something in the order of revelation." The ontological reality of the gift of power leads to an "epiphany" of this presence. Possibly O'Collins sums up best the role that weakness played in Paul's life. What we can see is that Paul has experienced a higher degree of communion with God because of suffering in general and the thorn in particular. We probably will never know the invaluable aid the experience of 12:1-10 played in strengthening Paul over the arduous years of his ministry.

O'Collins, however, parts company with Käsemann (who is followed by Schmithals, *Gnosticism*, 163; Windisch, *ibid.*; Wendland, 224, 225) concerning whether or not Paul's teaching of 12:9 is to be understood as a general rule for the Church as a whole. O'Collins (*ibid.*) maintains that in 12:1-10 Paul is speaking of himself—his vision (12:1), his thorn (12:7), his prayer 12:8—and thus we should follow Betz's contention ("Aretalogie," 297) that the oracle was directed at Paul and not the community. But we wonder if Paul would want to be understood like this. More likely he would not accept this exclusivist interpretation, for it would make him out as somebody special. This is an elitist idea that Paul fights against throughout his letter (1:24; 3:3, 18; 6:3; 7:3; 10:13; 11:21, and esp. 13:9). (Surprisingly, O'Collins admits that Christians have the right to apply Paul's words of 12:9 to their lives ["Power," 534]. But this, in effect, undercuts O'Collins's position.)

10. διὸ εὐδοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις, ἐν ὑβρεσιν, ἐν ἀνάγκαις, ἐν διωγμοῖς καὶ στενοχωρίαις, ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ, "For this reason, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in anguish, in persecutions and distress for the sake of Christ." We observed the use of διὸ in 12:7. Possibly this is a connection between the thought there ("therefore in order that I not become conceited") and the summary he gives in this v. Paul has not fallen into conceit because of the thorn in the flesh God gave him; yet, Paul has overcome—in a spiritual sense—this thorn and its attendant weakness by accepting it and learning to live with it. He has overcome his handicap because the power of Christ rests upon him, exactly as in 4:7.

Because this power is now Paul's (in a secondary sense), he delights (εὐδοκῶ) in what has happened to him. The rendering of εὐδοκῶ as "content" (RSV) or "well content" (NEB; Barrett, 317; also see Phillips, "I can even

enjoy") misses the point of this verse. Paul is so aware ("conscious," is how Tasker, 179, puts it) of the power of Christ (i.e., the grace of Christ) that he delights in (a semitism with α , b^e , BDF § 196, 206.2, and implying consent to, approval of, saying yes to [*ja sagen zu*, Bultmann, 230]) his afflictions and weaknesses (*ἀσθένειαι*, κτλ.: a mini "catalogue of crises"). *ὑβρεῖς*, "insults," a noun to be taken passively (G. Bertram, *TDNT* 8:305), is used by Paul only here (see Acts 27:10, 21), and has specific allusion to his Corinthian enemies who resisted him in mockery (11:19–21) and by opposing his Gospel. So Windisch, 393. The ASV translation of "injuries" for *ἐν ὑβρεσιν* is not commonly followed. For "in anguish" (*ἐν ἀνάγκαις*) see *Comment* on 6:4. Here it goes in close association with "insults," directed at his apostolic work.

διωγμοί translates as "persecutions" and suggests such persecutions as those resulting from religious reasons (BGD, 201; Rom 8:35; cf. 2 Thess 1:4; 2 Tim 3:11). We have *στενοχωρία* in 6:4, and cf. 4:8 for the verb.

The tribulation-list supplements and illustrates Paul's discussion on weakness. We note that the afflictions are endured *ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ* "for the sake of (lit., "on behalf of") Christ." Such an idea repels the mistaken concept of suffering that has sometimes pervaded church history. Those who have experienced or encouraged self-afflicted wounds, endured martyrdom simply as a means of seeking to become righteous, and practiced asceticism solely as a means of securing God's favor are guilty of emphasizing merit, not faith (cf. Ignatius of Antioch). Human suffering in and of itself does not display divine power. Such bravado only produces rewards for the morbid fanatic or the foolish (Tasker, 179). Or, as Hughes proposes, "a joyless theology of insecurity" is the outcome of such endeavors. Rather, Paul exhibits a joyful walk with God undergirded by a firm security in God's grace. So deep-seated is Paul's delight that what he has endured does not compare to what is his in Christ.

ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι, "When I am weak, then I am powerful." This sentence is the gnomic climax of 12:1–10. Perhaps this is a parody (Betz), but no more than in a peripheral sense (Barrett, 317, 18; Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 395, who treats the dictum as a paradoxical keyword which expresses the highpoint of the section). Paul has stated in succinct terms and a concise manner the essence of his apostolic ministry. The temporal particle *ὅταν*, "when," introduces the idea of the indefinite. (Possibly, if being weak referred to a specific time, then we would have had *ὅτε*. In one sense, Paul is weak because of the thorn. But in an added sense, Paul has brought his whole ministry [weaknesses, insults, anguish, persecutions, and distress] into the picture. Paul is not only concerned with the thorn when he writes 12:10b; he is concerned with his ministry [or any Christian's ministry in general].) Whenever God's servants humble themselves and acknowledge their weakness, then the power of Christ can flow through them. This is a justification of "My grace is sufficient for you" (Plummer). God has more than compensated for the fact that the thorn was not removed. In short, the response of 12:9a as a divine *ἀπόκριμα* is the "answer" in Paul's best interest. (We have translated *δυνατός* as "powerful," so that there is consistency in 12:9, 10 with respect to *δύναμις*, i.e., God's might in human frailty. This translation procedure is not usually followed.)

Explanation

The present passage provides one of the most enlightening treatments by Paul on the meaning of strength-in-weakness. Paul resisted the taunts of his opponents who insisted that they were better suited to represent the ministry of God in Corinth. The opponents came to this conclusion on the ground and evidence that they had demonstrable gifts that attracted attention to their own persons. Paul countered by insisting that his credentials were not spectacular visions (though he had visions to his credit); rather, he boasted of the power of Christ that rested upon and worked through him. And it was not as though Paul had no demonstrable gifts. He did have, namely, his weakness and his ministry to the Corinthians. Herein is the paradox. These were the reasons why Paul entered into a "debate" with his opponents. He wanted to show that boasting was of little value unless such boasting directed attention (and glory) to God. Because he was weak, Paul's ministry did just that. Thus, he has shown that boasting (in the common understanding of the word) was not of God. One should "boast" to glorify God, not oneself. But "boasting" now has assumed a different character, returning in thought to 10:17, 18.

Paul resisted the temptation of steering off the course set before him. He could have easily taken the detour of self-commendation in order to avoid the jibes and jabs of his opponents. He could have also taken such an alternate route in the hope of convincing the Corinthians (again) of his integrity and honest desire to better them. Paul remained faithful to the truth (13:8).

Paul recognized that his religious experiences (i.e., visions and revelations) were valid and helpful. He considered them a privilege and an honor. They were from God, and Paul never questioned the validity of them. Such times, especially that described in 12:2-4, were of much aid for Paul. It is highly unlikely that a recall of the vision (12:2-4) ever failed to strengthen Paul. But he never appealed to it to validate his apostolate. Instead, his appeal lies elsewhere, e.g., in 3:1-3; 13:1-4, 8, 9.

But Paul's greatest boast was the strength of Christ which resided in him. God had accepted Paul's weakness; and in a dialogic encounter Paul learned that such a thing—even a humiliating thorn in the flesh—can and does lead a person to God. By accepting God's will, Paul was able to grow as a minister of the Gospel, as well as a disciple of Christ. At firsthand, Paul understood the "weakness" Christ exhibited in going to the cross (13:4). Moreover, he saw the true power of God in the resurrection of the heavenly Lord who spoke to him. In 12:9, 10, Paul names a rule of life that overturns the world's understanding and yet provides a key to service in Christ. This rule is Paul's guide: "When I am weak, then I am powerful."