1214 Suffering, third heaven, proof, edification, forbearance, faith - 2Co(11)16-(13)14 (by Whirlwind)

First, we discussed how Paul was not ashamed to be an apostle of Christ. We saw that God is not a God who dictates every action; Paul explained that he was compelled to give examples of the many sufferings he had endured, and he ultimately used the example of being lowered from a city wall to demonstrate his sincerity and the necessity of his revelation. Second, we discuss the event of Paul's being caught up to the third heaven, the Paradise, which we explain the event using the analogy of a "dream within a dream." Paul did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body when he was caught up to the third heaven. He explains that the Lord, for his own good, deliberately left a thorn—a servant of Satan—in his flesh. Third, we mention the miracles God granted Paul to demonstrate the apostleship. Fourth, it briefly discusses how all these things were for the edification of the Corinthian church. Fifth, Paul clarifies the clear evidence that Christ speaks within him, and we also discuss the true meaning of baptism. Sixth, it discusses Paul's exhortation to the Corinthian church, urging each person to examine themselves to see if they have faith. Finally, it briefly concludes with words of encouragement and blessing.

Please note that this article is an expansion of the topicwise Bible study held on Sunday (11/1/26). Unless otherwise specified, verses refer to those in NASB95. If this article refers previous articles, they can all be found on our website, 'https://a-christian-voice.com/'; click on 'Understanding Spiritual Life'.

1. Paul is not ashamed to be an apostle of Christ

"Again I say, let no one think me foolish (G878); but if you do, receive me even as foolish (G878), so that I also may boast a little. What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting. Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. For you, being so wise (G5429), tolerate (G430, bear with, suffer) the foolish gladly. For you tolerate (G430) it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face. To my shame (G819) I must say that we have been weak by comparison. But in whatever respect anyone else is bold (G5511)—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold (G5511) myself. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my

intense concern? If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands."(2 Corinthians 11:16-33)

From the very beginning, he states that he is not a fool; he is merely boasting a little as a fool out of necessity. Therefore, what he says is not spoken by the Lord's command, but rather within the freedom God has granted him. From this, we can see that God is not a God who dictates every action. He then speaks of the patience shown by a wise man in the viewpoint of human. Reading the passage makes it clear what he means: the wise man he refers to was able to demonstrate such patience precisely because he was strong! That is why he says something like, "To my shame (G819) I must say that we have been weak by comparison. ..."(2 Corinthians 11:21)—a statement that is, of course, meant to humble himself since he was strong.

He then gave examples to illustrate his courage as a servant of Christ. Before saying this, he first stated that there was nothing wrong with his lineage; he had no choice but to cite these examples. The events that had already taken place by the time he wrote the Book of 2 Corinthians were sufficient; there was no need to mention future events, as some might do—such as referring to his imprisonment in Rome to illustrate how often he had been imprisoned. In fact, this also explains why we should read Paul's epistles in chronological order. He stated very clearly, "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying."(2 Corinthians 11:31) He could have chosen not to speak of these things, but he would never knowingly and willfully lie and sin, for he is in Christ Jesus. As the Scripture so aptly states, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."(1 John 3:9) When a person sins, he has certainly slipped out of Christ at that moment—that is to say, he is no longer in Christ at that time. But "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."(1 John 1:9) Then after confession, we can return to being in Christ. Here we can also see that just because the matters he raises are recorded elsewhere does not mean we should only mention those things that have been mentioned in other passages; for the rest, please read the Scriptures yourself to learn that many other events took place as well.

First, we see that he had no choice, for he had to address a challenge from the Corinthian church: to explain why he was "...not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles."(2 Corinthians 11:5). Furthermore, he said, "I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me."(2 Corinthians 11:1) Regarding the fact that he had no choice, he states even more directly, "Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; ..."(2 Corinthians 12:1) Let us now take a look at some of the sufferings he mentions.

Regarding "in far more labors," he mentioned in the Book of 1 Corinthians that he was voluntary, saying, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God

with me."(1 Corinthians 15:10) As for "the Jews thirty-nine lashes," the reduction from 40 lashes is because the Book of Deuteronomy states: "then it shall be if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall then make him lie down and be beaten in his presence with the number of stripes according to his guilt. He may beat him forty times but no more, so that he does not beat him with many more stripes than these and your brother is not degraded in your eyes."(Deuteronomy 25:2-3) To avoid exceeding the limit, the maximum punishment was thirty-nine blows. One of the three times he was flogged occurred in Philippi, where "The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely."(Acts 16:22-23) Here, too, we are given an example of his being imprisoned on multiple occasions. The one instance of being stoned refers to the time he fainted during his first missionaryjourney, which took place in the city of Lystra: "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. ..."(Acts 14:19-20) So he had merely fainted; he was not actually dead like someone thinks.

"Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?"(2 Corinthians 11:28-29) So he also endured inner anguish. He said, "If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness."(2 Corinthians 11:30) He knew very well, "..."My grace is sufficient for you (Paul), for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."(2 Corinthians 12:8-9)

Finally, he used the example of being lowered from the city wall to illustrate his honesty: "When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul (Paul). They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket."(Acts 9:23-25) He had many examples of his integrity to choose from, but this was the only one that occurred shortly after his conversion, before he went to Arabia to receive a revelation (see Galatians 1:16-17)—that is, it was not based on revelation. Ultimately, he would come to realize that relying solely on his own zeal and knowledge would not sustain him in the long run like in this example said.

2. The account of Paul being caught up to the third heaven, the Paradise

"Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my

own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."(2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

He says, "...I will go on to visions ..."(2 Corinthians 12:1) So he was speaking of the Lord's appearance to him. He said, "And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows."(2 Corinthians 12:3) Some might wonder, "Isn't he lying? How is this possible?" Yes, it is absolutely possible. The best analogy is a dream within a dream—when you have one dream and then have another dream within it, and in the second dream you realize you've woken up. At that moment, you have no idea you're still in the first dream; so how could you possibly know whether you were in the body or out of the body? It is only after waking up from the first dream that one realizes it was a dream. I wonder if any of you have ever had a dream like this? I think I've only had one such dream, and that's what made me realize this is a very good analogy that helped me understand this passage.

Of course, the analogy can only go so far. Paul was indeed caught up to the third heaven, though whether in the body or out of the body, he himself did not know. He knew that such a man "was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak."(2 Corinthians 12:4) He "...will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me."(2 Corinthians 12:6) So even though he understood those secret words, he knew they were not to be spoken—and of course, he did not speak them.

As for the Lord's revelation, it is very clear that it concerns that thorn in the flesh: "Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me."(2 Corinthians 12:8). On the third occasion, "...He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." ..."(2 Corinthians 12:9). He knew that the thorn was a servant of Satan sent to attack him, and that the Lord had deliberately left it there for his own good, lest he become conceited because of the greatness of the revelations he had received. Since he knew this to be true, he stopped asking, realizing, "...Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."(2 Corinthians 12:9) His conclusion was clear: "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."(2 Corinthians 12:10) How is this possible? Because the power of Christ sustains him, he is indeed made strong.

3. God gave Paul miracles and other signs to demonstrate the evidence of his apostleship

"I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong! Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?"(2 Corinthians 12:11-18)

He said once more that he had no choice but to speak out in order to prove that in no way was he inferior to those "most eminent apostles." "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles."(2 Corinthians 12:12) You see, the church in Corinth really went too far; even his preaching the gospel to them for free became a charge against him. He made it very clear: "But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit."(2 Corinthians 12:16) Truly, "...If I love you more, am I to be loved less?"(2 Corinthians 12:15)

He says, "Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children."(2 Corinthians 12:14) So he goes on to say, "I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. ..."(2 Corinthians 12:15) Please note that here it is stated that parents who have the means to provide for their children should do so; if parents lack this ability but their children are wealthier, the children should do the same in return. Otherwise, it becomes, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."(1 Timothy 5:8)

He clearly told them, "Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?"(2 Corinthians 12:17-18) Please note that we know the Greek word for both "Holy Spirit" and "spirit" is the same; therefore, we must distinguish between them. For example, if someone says this refers to the Holy Spirit, that is incorrect, because it is speaking of the choices we make within our own spirit.

4. Everything is for the edification of the church in Corinth

"All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved. For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced."(2 Corinthians 12:19-21)

He made it clear that some in the Corinthian church were questioning him, but he wanted that they realized that everything was for their edification. He was ready to visit them again, but he feared that when he returned, "...I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; ..."(2 Corinthians 12:20) These negative issues had essentially all been mentioned in his first letter. And "I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced."(2 Corinthians 12:21) Fortunately, Titus brought news of their genuine repentance.

Here, too, we see that we must not jump to conclusions about how God will work. In this instance, God first bestowed many gifts upon the church in Corinth, but they instead formed factions and so on, remaining carnal (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:1-4), so Paul wrote his first letter to rebuke them. If Paul had decided at that time that they were beyond redemption, there would have been no need to write the first letter at all. But he knew deeply, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus."(Philippians 2:5) He saw that Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me."(John 10:14) "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."(John 10:27) The Lord is all-knowing; He knew long ago that they were His sheep and would repent, but Paul did not know this. He loved them so much that he waited for their repentance while doing whatever he could to ensure that they, "...were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls."(1 Peter 2:25)

5. Paul explains the clear evidence that Christ speaks through him

"This is the third time I am coming to you. Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone, since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you."(2 Corinthians 13:1-4)

I had previously wondered whether it was Paul who was showing them mercy, but in fact it was Christ who was showing them mercy, because it was Christ speaking through him—a point I had not noticed, but my wife did. Consequently, the title of this subheading was changed, and this explanation was added to clarify why the title was phrased this way.

Paul clearly states that he did not merely visit Corinth twice; he intended to have the matter confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. This is a principle of the Old Testament (cf. Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15) and also a principle of the New Testament (cf. Matthew 18:16). On his second visit, "...I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone."(2 Corinthians 13:2). No wonder he waited until Titus brought news of their genuine repentance before he was willing to return to Corinth—for he loved them so much (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:11, 12:15).

He said, "since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you."(2 Corinthians 13:3) Christ was weak because He "....emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men."(Philippians 2:7). Therefore, during His incarnation, He was a complete human being. "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."(Philippians 2:8) Yet the fact that He still lives by God's power refers to "Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord."(Hebrews 13:20) "...we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you."(2 Corinthians 13:4) This means that our weakness stems from our humanity: "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin."(Romans 6:4-7) "Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him."(Romans 6:8-9) This sharing in his death and life is the true meaning of baptism.

6. Exhorting the Church in Corinth to examine themselves to see if they have faith

"Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test. Now we pray to God that you do no wrong; not that we ourselves may appear approved, but that you may do what is right, even though we may appear unapproved. For we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth. For we rejoice when we ourselves are weak but you are strong; this we also pray for, that you be made complete (G2676, perfection). For this reason I am

writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not for tearing down."(2 Corinthians 13:5-10)

Paul was actually warning them that not everyone is beyond rejection, so "Now we pray to God that you do no wrong; not that we ourselves may appear approved, but that you may do what is right, even though we may appear unapproved."(2 Corinthians 13:7) What people say really doesn't matter, "For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends."(2 Corinthians 10:18) "For we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth. For we rejoice when we ourselves are weak but you are strong; this we also pray for, that you be made complete"(G2676, perfection)."(2 Corinthians 13:8-9) Paul's words and actions were consistent: "For this reason I am writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me ..."(2 Corinthians 13:10) He knew very well that this authority was meant to build people up, and not for tearing down.

Finally, let us discuss the word "complete (G2676, perfection)", which appears only once. How, then, can we determine its meaning? This is because its root is "perfect (G2675, perfect, mending)", a word that appears 15 times—enough for us to discern its meaning. Two typical examples are these: "Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending (G2675) their nets; and He called them."(Matthew 4:21) and "and said to Him, "Do You hear what these children are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared (G2675, hast perfected) praise for Yourself'?""(Matthew 21:16) At this point, you might quite reasonably ask, what does mending a net have to do with being perfect? Think about it: can a mended net have holes? It must be perfect so that fish cannot leak out. Thus, this is a figurative use, where the same word is used to express both concepts. If you read through those 15 verses, you'll find that this usage is consistent.

7. Exhortations and blessings

"Finally (G3063), brethren, rejoice, be made complete (G2675), be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all."(2 Corinthians 13:11-14)

Notice that the word "made complete (G2675)" is mentioned here once again. At the beginning, it says there is a final word—and it truly is a final word. It is not long; it is simply a direct exhortation to the brothers, encouraging them to be holy. The "holy kiss" mentioned here was a custom of that time, completely different from the kissing between men and women; we won't go into detail here—please read the Scripture for yourself.

On another occasion when he spoke of "finally (G3063)," he began with this passage: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might."(Ephesians 6:10) But this

time the situation was entirely different; he seemed unable to stop himself. He spoke at length, covering Ephesians 6:10-22, which we will discuss in detail when we reach that passage.

Finally, there was a blessing: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all."(2 Corinthians 13:14) Every Person of the Triune God was mentioned! God has absolute sovereignty; He decides, and we can only bless and hope that this will come to pass.