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2 Corinthians

This *will be* the third *time* I am coming to you. "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established." 2 Corinthians 13:1

Despite the seeming obvious nature of the words of this verse, it is highly debated over, both in the initial clause and in the quote. First Paul says, "This *will be* the third *time* I am coming to you." What does that mean? The obvious answer is that he had been there twice and this would now be his third visit. If one were to simply read the epistle without studying Acts and 1 Corinthians, this would be the obvious conclusion.

However, there is no noted "second" visit to Corinth. Instead, there is the note that Paul intended to come, but decided not to because of the sorrow such a visit would bring (2 Corinthians 2:1). Therefore, some commentators take the word *erchomai* as "I am coming." It is a verse of intent. Thus it would read, "This is the third time I have intended to come to you."

Either way, whether through an actual series of visits, or through his intended visits, Paul had indirectly "come" to them through his letters. He now intends to come again in person. This will occur after his letter is received and digested by the Corinthians.

After his initial words comes another curious item. It is a quote found several times in the Old Testament. He says, "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established." One such OT reference is Deuteronomy 17:6 -

"Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness."

Jesus cites the precept as well in Matthew 18:16 -

"And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

Though those are Old Testament references (Jesus spoke those words under the law to Israel), Paul uses them as well. This shows that it is as much a part of natural revelation as it is a precept found under the law.

Having said that, the intent of Paul's words is taken by various scholars in several ways. First, is he tying his "third visit" to the "three witnesses?" Are they the "attestations to truths which he preaches" (Pulpit Commentary)? If this is the case, then this "turns the judge into a prosecutor, and makes him appeal to his own reiteration of his charges as evidence of their truth" (Charles Ellicott).

Others say that this is referring to his visit, but that it is a petition for the Corinthians to not take action prior to his arrival. Bengel's Gnomon says, "Therefore in this matter the apostle thought of depending not on an immediate revelation, but on the testimony of men; and he does not command the culprits to be cast out of the Church before his arrival."

Another scholar, Lightfoot, makes the supposition that he refers to Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus. They went on behalf of Paul and were witnesses to them of his purpose. They had the information concerning the events at Corinth and had transmitted them to Paul. This seems less likely because this would make Paul a fourth witness when he arrived at Corinth to determine what was going on. As he cites the precept "two or three" then why would he actually mean four without stating it as such? Further, it ignores Titus' visit and report as well.

Finally, Albert Barnes notes that "he anticipated that there would be necessity for the administration of discipline there, but that he would feel himself under obligation in administering it to adhere to the reasonable maxim of the Jewish Law. No one should be condemned or punished where there was not at least two or three witnesses to prove the offence. But where there were, discipline would be administered according to the nature of the crime."

This seems reasonable as well, but why would Paul reinsert Jewish law which was annulled in the New Covenant? He is particularly adamant that the law is fulfilled in Christ and thus set aside; it is "nailed to the cross" (Colossians 2:14).

What seems the most likely option is that Paul is, in fact, tying the statement that this is his third visit in with the "two or three" witnesses as a point of natural revelation which the law only confirms. He has visited and written to the Corinthians and he will visit again. If there is still sin which has not been repented of in the church, he will deal with it based on his past warnings and admonishments.

Life application: Let us carefully evaluate each verse of the Bible. It is acceptable in verses like the one we are looking at to say, "I think the most likely option is..." However, we should never get so bull-headed about it that we refuse to consider other options as well. There is one ultimate meaning, it is true, but maybe we have misevaluated the verse from the start. Let us take care to always consider that we don't know it all and so let us be willing to be open to correction as we grow in knowledge and in doctrine.

I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare— 2 Corinthians 13:2

Paul had already warned the Corinthians concerning their lack of repentance. Specifically, he says this in 1 Corinthians 4:21, but it is implied throughout 1 Corinthians 5 as well. He had warned them and he now gives them another

advanced warning. His words, "...and foretell as if I were present the second time" are translated differently based on whether one believes Paul had made two visits or just one so far.

The way the NKJV (cited here) translates it, only one prior visit is presupposed. However, some other translations state it this way - "I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time..." (NIV). Either way concerning this issue though, he now says, "...and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to the rest, that if I come again, I will not spare."

Paul doesn't question their salvation, but he does question their right to continue in sin without correction. He will not tolerate it within the body and so he will take decisive action to correct any such failings to bring one's actions in line with the salvation they profess.

Life application: When one comes to Christ, he should go through a process of giving up on the sin which exists in his life. This naturally comes after salvation. One does not get himself well in order to go to the doctor. Rather the doctor cures them. We call on Christ and then have to follow His instructions concerning the cure which He has provided. Repentance necessarily follows salvation. If it does not, then the individual is to be corrected through the means available to the church.

...since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. 2 Corinthians 13:3

Paul just said that he would not spare "those who had sinned before." In other words, those who had sinned and were continuing in sin would be shown that Paul was capable of rooting them out and disciplining them. Understanding this, he now says, "...since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me." The Greek is literally, "...of the Christ that speaks in me." Vincent's Word Studies notes that it is, "An experimental proof of what kind of a being the Christ who speaks in me is."

They had challenged him by holding to the words of the false apostles, they had challenged him in their words concerning his ability to present himself as a leader, and they had implied that there was weakness in him. But he was ready to come and give "a proof of Christ speaking" in him. As an apostle, the power of Christ was there to give him words. It was a guarantee from Christ to His apostles and Paul was relying on that, knowing that it was so.

In this power of "Christ speaking in me," he notes that it "is not weak toward you, but mighty in you." A better translation of this is "among you" rather than "in you." Again, Vincent's notes, "He is speaking, not of Christ as He dwells in them, but as He works with reference to them (εἰς) and among their number, inflicting punishment for their sin."

The power of Christ in Paul was capable of being displayed among them for the correction of their failings. He would use that power in order to execute exactly that.

Life application: We now have the word of God written down so that we have on record the power of Christ which Paul possessed. It is our standard and our authority to execute discipline within the church. The power that Paul speaks of concerning himself is an apostolic authority which is no longer needed in individuals. The reason is that this power has been defined in the pages of Scripture. Let us be careful to hold to the Bible as the rule and guide for our doctrine and practice within the faith.

For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you. 2 Corinthians 13:4

Paul now draws a comparison to his ("we" meaning he and the apostles) life in Christ and Christ's life in the flesh. In verse 12:9, he said concerning the words of Jesus to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." This explains what is on Paul's mind here in the analogy he is making.

He begins with "For though He was crucified in weakness..." This is speaking of the weak, even fragile human nature which Christ possessed. Paul refers to it elsewhere, such as in Philippians 2 -

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross." Philippians 2:5-8

It was in this weak, human condition that He was crucified. Despite being able to call on all the powers of heaven and earth to rescue Him, He condescended to allow the creatures He created to crucify Him. Paul is drawing the same comparison. Though apostles, and possessing the apostolic gifts of signs, miracles, and wonders, they still came humbly to those they ministered to. In Paul's case, he refrained from even accepting any assistance from them; something he could have otherwise expected. This is evidenced by the words, "For we are also weak in Him."

"Yet He lives by the power of God" is speaking of Christ now - raised to His position within the Godhead and alive forevermore. He has all authority "in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18) at His disposal. It is in this state that He now and forevermore will exist. Paul's analogy to this is found in the words, "but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you." Again, this is speaking of his (and the others with him, thus "we") apostolic power.

His words are addressed to all of those in Corinth, but they are specifically referring "to those who have sinned before" (verse 13:2). This is why he then said, "that if I come again I will not spare— since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you" (verses 13:2, 3).

Paul was ready to use his power as an apostle to ensure that the church, for which Christ died in weakness, would live by the power of His resurrection.

Life application: Again, as has been explained many times, there is no longer a need for an apostolic ministry which displays power among the churches. The Bible testifies to the ministry of the apostles and thus it is our sign that God was able to establish His church and how He did it. Because of this, we have no need for such signs today. Don't be led astray by false apostles who are really just cheap magicians. Instead, look to God's word to understand the power of God in Christ.

Examine yourselves *as to* whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified. 2 Corinthians 13:5

Paul now takes the time to turn around the Corinthian's accusations concerning his true apostleship and have them reflect on their own status. In both instances of the word "yourselves," it is placed in the emphatic position. This stems from their challenge of Christ speaking in Paul from verse 3. As Charles Ellicott restates this, "You seek a test of my power. Apply a test to yourselves. Try yourselves whether you are living and moving in that faith in Christ which you profess."

He is asking them to look into their own consciences and determine what is going on there. However, Vincent's Word Studies says that rather than "examine" yourselves, it should read "try" yourselves. He notes, "Examination does not necessarily imply a practical test. It may be merely from curiosity. Trial implies a definite intent to ascertain their spiritual condition."

Paul's admonition for them to check whether they are "in the faith" is followed up by a second admonition which is to "Test yourselves." This word, *dokimazete*, has more force than the word for "examine." It is a word which is used when proving metals through heat to determine their purity. Once they have "tried" or "examined" themselves, they can now go a step further and "prove" what they have tested.

In the theology of the Bible, and supported by the words of Paul, faith is what saves. In order to know if one is in *the* faith, they have to try and prove *their* faith. Albert Barnes wisely notes that "it is remarkable, that while a child has no doubt that he loves a parent, or a husband a wife, or a friend a friend, almost all Christians are in very great doubt about their attachment to the Redeemer and to the great principles of religion."

Why should this be? It is because we fail our Lord; it is because we spend our time challenging the faith of others instead of tending to our own faith; and it is because we become unsure about the God that we cannot see. This is what the Corinthians had done. They had learned to trust the false apostles, with their externals on prominent display, and they had stopped trusting in Christ in themselves, the hope of glory.

Instead of this, Paul turns their possession of faith into a question, "Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" He is asking if they are sure they have trusted Christ and Him alone for their salvation. If they are trusting in their deeds for righteousness before God, then they will have failed the test. Thus Paul's final words, "...unless indeed you are disqualified."

The KJV says, "...except ye be reprobates." This translation is unfortunate. The word "reprobate" gives the Calvinistic concept of one who is a moral miniscule who is destined for hell. This is not the intent of these words. Rather, the Weymouth translation gives a good sense of what Paul intends by saying, "...unless you are insincere?" Other translations say something like, "...unless you fail the test." In that instance, the words "fail the test" mean to fail the test of sincere faith.

In this verse, Paul is speaking less of works to prove one's salvation than that of true faith which can endure times of testing. It is unfortunate that so many Christians find it necessary to add to the concept of being saved "by grace through faith" by claiming that deeds are necessary for saving faith. The only deeds that should be accomplished are those deeds which are "of faith."

To understand this, Hebrews 11 gives a long list of such deeds by stating something like, "By faith, this person did this or that." The things they did proved their faith through an internal process, not an external one.

Life application: To be saved one must have faith in the gospel. Our righteousness is based on the works of Christ, not in our own deeds.