

2 COR. 10-13 FALSE TEACHERS IDENTIFIED; VISION OF THE THIRD HEAVEN



We are going to finish the last chapters of 2 Corinthians. There is vital information here about the identity of the false teachers infiltrating the Church. In his epistles, Paul shows he is one of the first who becomes aware that *a false Christianity* was spreading throughout the Gentile churches.

He warns, “Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you *by the meekness and gentleness of Christ*—who *in presence am lowly among you*, but being absent am bold toward you. But I beg you that when I am present I may not be bold with that confidence by which *I intend to be bold against some*, who *think of us as if we walked according to the flesh* [or carnally]. For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh” (2 Cor. 10:1-3).

Paul had the authority to act sternly against the false teachers, but decided to wait until he went there personally, it was too serious. He knew who were behind these attacks against him, and where those hostile attitudes came from—Satan.

He says: “For although we live in the natural realm, we don’t wage a military campaign employing human weapons, using manipulation to achieve our aims. Instead, our spiritual weapons are energized with divine power to effectively dismantle the defenses behind which people hide. We can demolish every deceptive fantasy that opposes God and break through every arrogant attitude that is raised up in defiance of the true knowledge of God. We capture, like prisoners of war, every thought and insist that it bow in obedience to the Anointed One. Since we are armed with such dynamic weaponry, we stand ready to punish any trace of rebellion, as soon as you choose complete obedience” (2 Cor. 10:4-6). So that warning was specifically directed at the false teachers—used by Satan—who sought to deceive the brethren with cunning arguments. Until Christ returns, there will always be a spiritual struggle between the followers of God’s truths and these deceitful workers of a pseudo-Christianity.

Paul warns the brethren of being deceived and says, “Do you look at things according to the outward appearance? If anyone is convinced in himself that he is Christ’s, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he is Christ’s, even so we are Christ’s. For even *if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for*

edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed—lest I seem to terrify you by letters. ‘For his letters,’ they say, ‘are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.’ Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such we will also be in deed when we are present” (2 Cor. 7:7-11).

He rebukes them for comparing each other instead of with Christ. He says, “For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere [area] which God appointed us—a sphere which especially includes you. For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ; not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men’s labors, but having hope, that as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere, to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man’s sphere of accomplishment. But ‘He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.’ For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends” (2 Cor. 10:8-18).

Now, **in Chapter 11**, Paul reveals the depth of the depravity of these teachers of a false Christianity that is being guided by Satan himself. *Believer’s Commentary* says, “Paul’s real estimate of these men, pent up so far in the Letter, at last bursts forth. He can contain himself no longer! He must call them what they are. Such are false apostles in the sense that they never were commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ. They either assumed the office themselves or had it conferred by other men.”

Paul warns them, “For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, *that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ*. But I fear, lest somehow, *as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ*. For if he [the false teacher] who comes preaches *another Jesus* whom we have not preached, or if you receive *a different spirit* which you have not received, or a

different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it! For I consider that I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles. Even though I am untrained in speech, yet I am not in knowledge. But we have been thoroughly manifested among you in all things...But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may *cut off* the opportunity from *those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast*. For such are *false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ*. And no wonder! For *Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness*, whose end will be according to *their works*" (2 Cor. 11:1-15).

Indeed, there were *two main groups of false teachers* that the Apostles had to battle (sometimes it's hard to tell which group is the one involved, for they share some common traits). On one extreme were the *radical Jewish Christians*, mainly with a *Pharisaic background*, that insisted the Gentile Christians should be circumcised and follow the ritual and oral law (Acts 15:5). Paul calls them "the circumcision party" (Tit. 1:10, ESV). That issue had been settled in the Jerusalem conference with its decree in Acts 15. Yet, some of these false teachers continued to pester Paul and the Gentile churches. It is unlikely this group is referred to here, *for their main topic of circumcision is never discussed* and it seems exaggerated to call them *Satan's "ministers."*

On the other extreme was another group of deceptive teachers, coming from satanic sects such as those led by Simon Magus and his successors. As Jude had warned, "*For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness...*" (Jude 4). Paul identifies this group in Thessalonica, saying, "*For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work*" (2 Thes. 2:7).

In Revelation, in that first era of the apostolic Church, Christ commends the true apostles for *unmasking these false apostles*, saying: "I know your works...and *that you cannot bear those who are evil*. And *you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars and...you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*" (Rev. 2:2, 6). Clearly, this is said, not about the Judaizing group but the second and diabolical one!

"The intruders, who originated from Palestine, are, therefore, not 'Judaizers,' but Palestinian opponents of the Pauline mission and apostolic dignity. They joined themselves with the Gnostic opposition against Paul recognizable in 1 Cor." (*Introduction to the New Testament*, Kummel, p. 209).

As our booklet, "This is the United Church of God" explains, "Only a few decades after Jesus Christ ascended to heaven following His crucifixion and resurrection, the Church began to change. Heretical teachers started reinterpreting Scripture to suit their own ideas. In the centuries that followed, greater divisions arose over doctrine. As a result, the message preached by Christ and His apostles became subtly transformed. As time passed, this altered message came to be almost exclusively about the person of Jesus, at the cost of neglecting the vital heart and core of His teachings.

"Among a growing number of people, a distorted and in some ways fictionalized account of the Messenger of the Kingdom replaced the original message He brought. This transformation was well under way even in the days of the apostles, when Paul denounced those who were teaching 'another Jesus' and 'a different gospel' (2 Cor. 11:3-4)..."

"What followed was a proliferation of groups and teachers calling themselves Christian, but whose traditions and teachings did not originate with Christ and His apostles. Some chose to retain many of the pagan traditions they had formerly practiced and began blending those beliefs and practices with their newly acquired belief that eternal life was accessible through Jesus Christ. *Some simply fell prey to a growing deception that involved 'false apostles [and] deceitful workers' who 'transform[ed] themselves into apostles of Christ' but in reality were, however unwittingly, ministers of Satan the devil* (2 Cor 11:13-15)" (pp. 34-35). It therefore appears it was *mainly this second group* that Paul denounces as being Satan's "ministers."

Next, Paul continues to identify these false apostles. He says: "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I" (2 Cor. 11:22). These false teachers boasted of having letters of recommendation of questionable origin. Paul considered these letters fraudulent (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2) and now felt compelled to defend his own credentials—by his own labors in Christ. He asks:

"Are they ministers of Christ? [as some claimed]—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one" (2 Cor. 11:24). In Deut. 25:1–3, it says, "Forty blows he may give him and no more" The rabbis chose 39 stripes not to mistakenly exceed the limit of forty.

Paul continues: "Three times I was beaten with rods" (2 Cor. 11:25). This was done by Roman authorities, although Paul was a Roman citizen, the mob sometimes prevailed—as in Philippi (Acts 16:23). "Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I spent adrift at sea" (2 Cor. 11:25). Sea travel in those days was more dangerous than traveling by land. In Acts 27, Paul endured another shipwreck.

And that was not all Paul went through. He says: "I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?" (2 Cor. 11:26–29). Paul showed he had enough "credentials" for no one to doubt his apostleship.

Paul then reveals another incredible "credential" God bestowed upon him—a vision of heaven: "It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come 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 whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to *the third heaven*. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or

hears from me. And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor. 12:1–10).

Here's the only mention in the Bible of a "third heaven." Of the three heavens in the Bible, the first is the sky, *our atmosphere*, where birds fly. The second is *outer space* and the third is *the place* where God the Father, Christ and the angels, dwell.

Notice also that Paul calls this a vision, he really didn't go up bodily to the third heaven, but the vision was so vivid it looked real. God granted this vision to encourage Paul as he went through so many trials. It wasn't the only time (Acts 18:9–10).

Paul then warns them, "For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; lest, *when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced*" (2 Cor. 12:20–21).

Then, in Chapter 13, Paul prepares them for his coming, "This will be the third time I am coming to you. By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established. 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—since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you" (2 Cor. 13:1–3).

He asks, "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 Cor. 13:5). That is something we should constantly do.

Then he ends with a warm farewell.