

In spite of its abrupt start, chapter 9 is very closely linked to chapter 8. Indeed, it forms an all-important part of the section which runs from 8.1 to 11.1.

As we have seen, Paul taught in chapter 8 that – although somebody's 'knowledge' may satisfy him that he has the right eat to freely idol-meats – 'love' and consideration for a weaker brother will lead him to forego his rights.

We saw too that, at the close of the chapter, Paul directly applied to himself the principle of waiving one's right to eat meat. It's fascinating to trace the way in which, in chapter 8, he moved from speaking of 'we' and 'us' in vv.1-8; to 'you' and 'yours' in vv.9-12, and finally to 'I' and 'my' in v.13. But it has to be said that Paul's personal resolve in v.13 was wholly conditional – it was very much a case of *'if'* – and applied only in certain circumstances. Indeed, the situation he envisages there – of a brother's spiritual life being endangered because Paul ate meat of any kind – might well never have arisen – or if it did, only in certain places and at certain times. And so now, in chapter 9, Paul introduces other circumstances in which he applies this same principle to himself – of denying himself, of waiving his rights and curtailing his freedom for the sake of others. In our chapter, he demonstrates that, in fact, the whole of his ministry for God had been – and continued to be – conducted on this principle. This time the application of this principle certainly wasn't hypothetical – it was factual. The close link which I am suggesting between chapters 8 and 9 is confirmed by Paul's constant use of the word 'power' (right, authority) in the first section of chapter 9 – in which it occurs no less than six times – which word we met towards the end of chapter 8 (v.9) translated 'liberty'.¹

As we make our way through chapter 9, we'll find that there's *more than one thing* which Paul *possessed* – but which he chose not to *'use'*. First, to paraphrase vv.1-18, he says, 'As an apostle, *I have the right* to be supported and maintained at the expense of others. But – for the sake of others and the gospel – *I don't exercise this right*'. And second in vv.19-23, '*I have the freedom* (not now the 'right') to live as I please – to live as I wish. But – for the sake of the gospel and the salvation of others – *I don't exercise this freedom*'. Paul then concludes the chapter with a section, vv.24-27, about self-control – 'I have one grand and glorious object in view – to 'gain' men through the gospel – and to achieve that, I'm prepared to deny myself many things to which I would otherwise be entitled. Any man who strives for a prize must learn to exercise self control in legitimate things'.

The chapter opens with a very brief outline of the ground to be covered – 'Am I not an apostle?' – which provides the basis for his argument in vv.1-8 – and 'Am I not free?' – which provides the basis for his argument in vv.19-23. [Many of the earliest manuscripts reverse this order – in which case, Paul crosses his hands and expounds the two expressions in reverse order.]

I suspect that he deliberately chose to cite the example of his waiving his rights to support as an apostle – not only because this was related to the question of what he was able to *eat and drink*, v.4 – which was directly relevant to the subject in view throughout chapters 8 and 10 – but because his apostleship was under serious attack at Corinth. Evidently some at Corinth had several problems with Paul's claim to apostleship. *First*, there was Paul's message. 'Christ crucified' was far too simple for them – not in their eyes the kind of preaching to win general acceptance. *Second*, they found Paul's methods dull and unappealing. He didn't – and, indeed, he made it clear that he wouldn't – use the persuasive communication techniques and studied eloquence of the philosophers and wandering religious teachers of his day. And *third*, Paul didn't charge for his services. 'No one worth his salt would teach and preach for nothing', you can hear these man saying, 'after all, you get what you pay for!'

Clearly, the opening of the chapter isn't meant to be a *detailed* defence of Paul's office as an apostle – which he sets out, for instance, in his letter to the Galatians – there to establish the truth of the gospel which he preached – but he does take the opportunity here to briefly state his credentials. He will come back in his second letter to deal with the charges against him.

In the section down to v.18, first of all Paul *vindicates* his office as an apostle, vv.1-3 – secondly, he *establishes* his right to be supported as an apostle and *denies* that he has exercised that right, vv.4-15 – and, thirdly, he *explains* the ground of his glorying, vv.16-18.

You will gather that I link v.3 to vv.1-2 rather than to what follows – and see **vv.1-3** as a section. In Paul's expression in v.3 – 'This is my answer to those who examine me' – he uses two words – 'answer' (better 'defence') and 'examine' (better 'put me on trial') – which – together with the word 'seal' which he used in v.2 – were well known legal expressions. According to Acts 22, Paul was to use the same word translated here as 'answer' in his opening remarks to the hostile Jewish crowd in Jerusalem who were all out to kill him, 'Men, brethren, and fathers, hear my *defence* which I make now unto you', v.1. In the opening three verses of our chapter, Paul is briefly outlining his 'defence' against those at Corinth who would interrogate and cross-question him – those who assumed the right to critically investigate his claims.² And his use of the present tense – 'those that do examine me' – suggests that these men were making a practice of doing just this.

His 'answer (his defence)' was twofold – *first*, he had personally 'seen Jesus our Lord' – and, *second*, he had been highly effective in his ministry as an apostle – which they, of all people – knew full well. Paul, he insists, possessed the qualification – as did every true apostle – of having seen the Lord Jesus after His resurrection. You couldn't be

an apostle without that. I note that, when selecting an apostolic replacement for Judas Iscariot, Peter spelt out the criterion plainly – ‘Of these men (Barsabas and Matthias) must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection ... the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles’, Acts 1.22, 26. Interestingly, Paul had seen the risen Lord – not only on Damascus Road, Acts 9.3,17 – and again after his return from Damascus to Jerusalem, 22.17 – but seemingly at Corinth itself – on that night when – following stiff opposition from the Jews – the Lord had said to him, ‘Be not afraid, but speak – for I am with you, and no man shall set on you to harm you’, Acts 18.9.³ Not, of course, that *seeing* the risen Jesus was the *only* qualification necessary for apostleship – or the 500 brethren mentioned in 15.6 would have all been apostles! But, along with Peter and the others, Paul had also been personally commissioned by the Lord – in his case on the Damascus Road. Indeed, it may well be that the very form of his question here, ‘Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?’ – rather than ‘Have I not seen Christ?’ or just ‘seen the Lord’ – recalled the question he had then asked, ‘who are you, *Lord?*’, and the mind-blowing answer he had received, ‘I am *Jesus*’, Acts 9.5.

The second arm of his defence was that, having been commissioned as an apostle, he had preached the risen Saviour in the demonstration of the Spirit and power. ‘Yet doubtless I am to you’, he claims – ‘at least, at any rate I am to you’ – because the Lord had been pleased in an unmistakable manner to stamp His seal of approval on His servant’s work – and *they* were that seal. A ‘seal’ being impressed onto a deed or other legal document as a proof of it’s genuineness and validity.⁴ The Corinthians should therefore have been the last folk on earth to dispute Paul’s apostleship – wasn’t he their spiritual ‘father’, having begotten them through the gospel, 4.15.

In **vv.4-14**, he asserts his right to live at the expense of the churches – but only, as we will see, that he might then show how he had relinquished his right. His claim to maintenance could be justified, he argued, on no less than seven separate grounds :

- The precedent set by the other apostles – notably by the Lord’s brothers and Cephas, vv.4-6.
- Examples drawn from ordinary, everyday life – the soldier, the vineyard-owner and the shepherd, v.7.
- The teaching of the word of God – the Old Testament scriptures, vv.8-10.
- Fairness – the repayment of a debt, v.11.
- The practice of other preachers and teachers, v.12.
- The God-ordained method of supporting God-appointed workers in Israel – both Levite and priest, v.13.
- The Lord’s express appointment – both in the case of both the original apostles and in the case of the seventy, v.14.

Vv.4-6. But if Paul *is* an apostle – and he has established this in vv.1-3 – then he has the right to be supported – in exactly the same way as did ‘the other apostles’, v.5 lit – and in particular (‘even’, ‘notably’) the brethren of the Lord, and Kyphas. Was it only Paul and Barnabas who were to be denied the right to eat and drink at the church’s expense? As I said earlier, it may be that Paul deliberately introduces the reference to food and drink because that corresponds well to the context of chapters 8 and 10 which deal in part with situations when one should waive one’s right to eat certain foods. It is worth stopping to note the reference to Barnabas – as Paul’s partner - coming as it does some time after the sharp exchange between the two men over John Mark – and their subsequent parting (‘separation’) from one another, Acts 15.39. There’s no evidence that Barnabas had ever been to Corinth but clearly his name was well known enough for the Corinthians to understand Paul’s reference. After all, Barnabas had been associated with the Christian church from the beginning – being mentioned as early as Acts 4. I note too that he was known by name at least to the church at Colosse – to a church which Paul himself had never visited, Col. 3.1; 4.10. I do wonder whether in now asserting Barnabas’s right to financial support, Paul might have had in mind that this ‘good man’⁵ had once sold his property and laid the proceeds ‘at the apostles’ feet’, Acts 4.36-37 – and, unlike in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, *all* of the proceeds.

I wonder also whether the decision by Paul and Barnabas to refuse any practical support was linked in some way to their unique mission to the gentiles. The Jews would have readily understood that those engaged in religious service should be maintained by the offerings of the believing community – see for example the reference to the priest’s and Levites in v.13 – and were therefore most unlikely to misunderstand a preachers’ motives if he accepted financial support.⁶ But, by way of contrast, the gentiles were accustomed to being exploited and sponged on by greedy and grasping wandering preachers and philosophers. I find that a century later Justin Martyr has occasion to write of one such – I quote, ‘who was called a Peripatetic, and as *he* fancied, shrewd. And this man, after having entertained me for the first few days, *requested me to settle the fee*, in order that our contact might not be *unprofitable*. For this reason I abandoned him, believing him to be no philosopher at all’.

Paul makes it clear that he and Barnabas had every right to impose themselves as a burden on the church – and that in the relatively expensive manner of married men. According to Acts 18, throughout his 18 month stay at Corinth, Paul had pursued his trade as a tent-maker – as he had previously done at Thessalonica – concerning which he wrote, ‘neither did we eat any man’s bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you’ – and as he would later do at Ephesus – concerning which he reminded the elders of the church, ‘you yourselves know, that these hands have ministered to my necessities, and to them that were with me’.⁷ Paul makes it clear here that both he and Barnabas had every right – as the other apostles – to spare themselves the hardships of manual toil.

V.7. Paul next made his appeal to three illustrations of natural justice – each drawn from ordinary, everyday life. First, to that of the soldier, who didn't served at his own 'charges' – at his own expense – the word translated 'charges' originally referring to rations of cooked meat and later to military pay. Second, Paul appeals to the case of the vineyard owner - who plants his vineyard for fruit – not for fun. And, third, to that of the shepherd (the word 'feeds' meaning 'shepherds, tends') who expects to have his share of the milk from the flock. The point Paul makes is that in each case the worker laboured in the expectation of his due reward – and, if Paul thought in terms of the soldier's ration of cooked meat, in each case *it was the right to eat and drink*.

Vv.8-10. 'Say I these things as a man?', he asks – literally 'according to man' – that is, from a merely human point of view.⁸ No, not at all! For Paul is able to appeal to the law of Moses for confirmation.⁹ Here is a good lesson for all preachers and Bible teachers – no matter how apt, illustrations drawn from human affairs aren't sufficient in themselves – they should be supported by scripture. The ox separates the grain from the husk of the corn either – as here, by treading out the corn – or by dragging a threshing sledge over it. But, either way, God required that the ox must receive its sustenance as result of its labour – 'You shall *not* muzzle the ox'. And we note that yet again Paul directs the Corinthians to a case involving food – this time food for the oxen.

Not that this was written only for the benefit of the oxen, Paul adds. It was said 'altogether' – that is, 'undoubtedly, certainly, of course' – 'because of us'.¹⁰ Yes, of course, God cares for the oxen too – the quote from Deut. 25.4 itself proves this.¹¹ Paul's point is that Deut. 25 establishes a wide and far-reaching principle – to the end that both the man who ploughs and the man who threshes (same word as 'treads out the corn', v.9) should labour in the firm knowledge that all those who contribute to the harvest can expect to share in the fruit of the harvest.¹² Indeed, he is saying that the biblical teaching about the ox establishes a principle which applies to all agricultural service – which in turn applies to spiritual service.

V.11 continues the agricultural and farming imagery from vv.9-10. But here Paul deploys an entirely separate argument. This time he is appealing to the Corinthians' sense of fair play, gratitude and indebtedness. The gist of this argument is well illustrated by what he later said to the churches at Rome – using the very same vocabulary – 'It has pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem. It hath pleased them verily – and *their debtors they are*. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their *spiritual* things, they ought to minister unto them in *carnal* things (ie things needed for the body)', Rom. 15.26-27. 'If we sow spiritual things *among you* – if we bestow eternal blessings of infinite value *on you*', Paul is saying, 'then surely it's no great shakes if we reap some material benefits *from you*'. This would be no more than a very small – and altogether reasonable – token of your thanks.

V.12. Other preachers and teachers had taken their 'share' of support from the Corinthians. Not – I take it – now the other apostles as in v.5. We discover from Paul's second letter that there were those who he described as 'devouring' the Corinthians – who were sponging on them – exploiting them for personal gain¹³ – and that with far less claim than this 'wise master builder' who had once laid the foundation of the church. In contrast to such men, Paul says, 'we' – he and Barnabas – have 'suffered' – have 'endured' all things – which he had spelt out in a little more detail back in chapter 4– 'To the present hour we both hunger and thirst. We are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. We labour, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless – being persecuted, we endure – being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now', vv.11-13.¹⁴

And we endure all this, Paul says, 'lest we hinder the gospel of Christ' – the word 'hinder' meaning literally 'cut in' – obstruct a road to arrest the advance of others – for example, the advance of a pursuing army. Barnabas and Paul were determined at all costs to avoid placing any obstacle in the way of the gospel's progress. They had made up their mind that *they* would suffer loss before *the gospel* would.

V.13. Paul now refers to the divinely-ordained method of supporting the official religious personnel in Israel – both those who 'worked at sacred things' – that is the Levites, maintained out of the nation's tithes – and 'those who attended the altar – that is, the priests, who were authorised to 'partake of the altar' – for, with the exception of the burnt offering, part of each of the offerings was given to the priests.¹⁵ And we might just remember that Barnabas himself was a Levite, Acts 4. 36!

V.14. 'Even so' – the same Lord who had once, in the law, required the support of the religious personnel in Israel, had more recently appointed that those who proclaimed the gospel should 'live of the gospel'. Indeed, He had done so at least twice – once in the case of the original apostolic band, Matt. 10.10 – and once in the case of the 70, Luke 10.7. So, in much the same way that the Lord had Himself been supported in His ministry, Luke 8.1-3, He expected those who preached in His name likewise to be supported by those who benefited from their labours. I note that – alone among the seven arguments which Paul makes – this – the last – takes the form – not of a question – but of an assertion. The Lord Himself has spoken on the subject – and there all argument ends!

V.15. 'I' – emphatic – compare the 'we' of v.12 – 'have used' – perfect tense – that is, this is my settled practice – this is the rule I always follow. And he hastens to add, 'Neither have I written .. that it might be done'. Paul is quick to guard himself against any misunderstanding – he'll not have it thought even for one moment that he's hinting for

support. This isn't some backhanded request or subtle bid for funds. And so he breaks in with his impassioned protest – literally – 'for it is better for me to die than – no man is going to make my boast – my glorying – empty'.

Paul proceeds to explain the ground of this 'boasting/glorying' in **vv.16-18**.

In a nutshell, his ground of boasting lies – not in that he preaches the gospel – but in that he makes no charge for his preaching. A man has nothing to boast in if he only does what he's compelled to do. And Paul had been *appointed* a preacher of the gospel – had been made a steward of the gospel. To that extent, he was a conscript and not a volunteer! For him to preach the gospel was only for him to perform his duty – to discharge his stewardship. But then he *wasn't* compelled to preach that gospel '*free of charge*' – to preach it without looking for any financial support. This was a matter of his own personal choice and conviction – he did it of his own accord. And this was the ground of his boasting.

I find the reference to boasting – to glorying – interesting. It looks as though the Corinthians had been so dazzled by Greek culture – which, among other things, looked down its nose on all forms of manual labour – that – instead of being grateful to Paul for his self-sacrifice on their behalf – they regarded his physical toil as altogether beneath the dignity of a true apostle of Christ. And they despised him for it – which, in his second letter, drew from him the protest, 'Have I committed an offence in abasing myself that ye might be exalted, because I have preached to you the gospel of God freely?'.¹⁶ 'Far from being ashamed that I work with my own hands to maintain myself', Paul is saying, 'this is my boast'.

As far as I can see, the references to 'reward' in vv.17-18 can be interpreted in one of two ways. On the one hand, we might expand the question at the opening of v.18 to mean, 'What then is the ground – the basis – for me receiving a reward?' – that is, a reward in the future – presumably at the judgement seat of Christ. In which case, Paul would be saying something like, 'In working with my own hands to maintain myself – I go beyond the mere discharge of my stewardship. In so doing, I enter the realm of voluntary service – I am doing something above and beyond my duty – and for this I am entitled to receive a proper reward from the Lord one day'.

On the other hand, we can take the question at the opening of v.18 as it stands. In which case Paul would be saying something like, 'In working with my own hands to maintain myself – I can make known the gospel without cost to others – and this in itself is reward enough for me'.

Without wishing to be dogmatic, I favour the second. And I note that the word translated 'reward' often carries the idea of 'wages' or 'hire' – as, for instance, in the Lord's words, 'the labourer is worthy of his hire', referred to in v.14. Paul may well then be playing on the word 'wages' and saying something like, 'The only 'pay' I ever want for my preaching consists in the joy and pleasure of refusing to accept any 'pay' from those that hear and believe my preaching!'

V.18 concludes, 'that I abuse not my right in the gospel'. And here again there may well be a play on words. Remember that Paul had spoken in both v.12 and v.15 of his decision not to 'use' his right to financial support. Without denying that right to others – but given his own convictions on the matter – for Paul to have accepted payment from those to whom he preached – would have been for him – not to 'use' but to 'abuse' his right.¹⁷

Vv.19-23. He was personally 'free' from the control of any man or group of men, v.1. Paul was no slave – indeed, not only was he freeborn – he was a Roman citizen. But here in v.19 he is saying that he chose to use his freedom *from all* to willingly enslave himself *to all*. His overriding concern lay with the welfare and the salvation of others – and he therefore waived his right to live as he pleased that he might 'gain' some. We should note the sevenfold 'that I might' in this short section – six times 'that I might *gain*' and once, in v.23, 'that I might *save*' – which after all is what he meant by gaining people.

It seems likely to me that Paul's opponents at Corinth had picked up on the different approaches he adopted with different groups of people – and charged him with being fickle and inconsistent in his service for the Lord – that both in his preaching and in his practice he was as changeable as the wind. But Paul makes it clear that he is entirely innocent of the charge – his varied approaches and methods sprang from one single goal – which he consistently pursued – to win people to Jesus.

We know – from his courageous action reported in Gal. 2 - when he confronted the apostle Peter at Antioch – that Paul wasn't the sort of man to yield on matters affecting the truth and content of the gospel. We know too – from comments he made in Gal. 5 and 6 – that neither was he the sort of man to change his message to escape the offence of the cross and avoid persecution.¹⁸ And we know from chapters 1-2 of our letter that, under no circumstances, was he prepared to become 'as the wise' to the wise of this world.

But here he makes it equally clear that he was always ready to adapt and accommodate himself – always ready to make all possible concessions – to differences of culture, custom and way of life – whether these related to *race* ('to the Jews'), *religion* ('to men under the law' or 'to men outside the law') or *conscience* ('to the weak').

I don't need to say much about this section – it is largely self-explanatory.

'To the Jews', **v.20** – it should be sufficient to cite just one of several examples in the book of Acts – the circumcision of Timothy at Lystra.¹⁹

'To them that are under the law', **v.20**. The expression 'under the law' went wider than 'Jews' in that it included proselytes as well as Jews.²⁰

'To them that are without law', **v.21**. 'Them that are without law' was how the Jews spoke of the gentiles. But, having said that for the sake of such, he 'became as those without law', Paul evidently felt that he needed to clarify what he said so as to make it clear that he didn't mean that he was willing to become 'lawless' and unruly. We need to know – when Paul says that he was 'under the law to Christ' – he doesn't use the expression translated 'under the law' which he had in v.20. Here uses a word which means literally that he is 'in-lawed to Christ' – which as I understand it has nothing to do with the law of Moses – and means that the apostle saw himself as brought under the rule and authority of the Lord Jesus, as being subject to His will.

'To the weak', **v.22** – this directly relevant, of course, to the case of eating idol meats addressed in chapter 8. As he had made clear at the end of that chapter, Paul ever stood ready to abstain from food for the sake of the weak who would be stumbled if he ate.

In summary, Paul says he was 'made' – lit. 'I have become' – the tense indicating, 'I became and I continue to become' – 'all to all in order that by all ('by all means', that is) ... I might save some'. It is striking that he will use much the same words to draw the whole section about idol-meats to its conclusion, 'I please all in all (things), not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they be saved', 10.33.

Vv.24-27. There can be no doubt that this section is directly linked to what has gone before – not least because in this section Paul is still concerned, among other things, with self-control and one's denial of legitimate things. But in fact the section's main links are with what follows. That Paul has now reached a new stage in his argument is borne out by the absence of any conjunction at the opening of 9.24 – whereas chapter 10 commences with a connecting 'for'. As I see it, the whole section from 9.24 to 10.14 sounds a very serious warning against complacency and self-confidence – before, in 10.15 Paul picks up the subject-matter of chapter 8 and deals directly again with the subject of eating idol food.

V.24. Paul begins with an allusion to the then-famous Isthmia games, held every two years in honour of the Greek god Poseidon on the sea coast about nine miles north of Corinth. Held under the patronage of the city of Corinth, the Isthmia Games attracted thousands of competitors and visitors from all over the empire and, among the many Greek games, ranked second in prestige only to the ancient Olympics.

Paul had been in Corinth during the Games held in the Spring of A.D. 51. From what I can tell, there were no permanent facilities for visitors to the Games until the 2nd Century A.D. Those who came needed therefore to stay in tents. Although I have no way of proving it, I suspect that these Games afforded Paul ample opportunity – not only to share the gospel with the vast crowds of spectators which came – but – along with Aquila and Priscilla – to ply his trade of tent-maker to support himself, Acts 18.1-3.

I take it that Paul saw the Christian life as corresponding to two distinct phases in the athlete's life – both of which involved the keeping of strict rules – first, the athlete's preparation and training, vv. 25, 27 – and second, the athlete's actual participation and competing, vv. 24, 26.

As not all who run receive the prize – only 'one' – to win an event required tremendous effort and determination. 'So run', he says, to the Corinthians – that is, with the same degree of commitment and determination.

V.25. But to win an event required tremendous self control ('temperate', KJV). The contestant who wins must be willing to pay the price for winning – and the thing which most sets a winning athlete apart from the rest is his self-control. Every aspect of his life is subject to rigid discipline – that he may win the prize.

All competitors in the Greek games were required to undergo the most severe training – indeed every candidate was required to swear that he spent 10 months in training and that he wouldn't violate any of the regulations.²¹ Among other things, his training required him to follow a carefully prescribed diet of rather unpleasant and unappetising food. He was required to abstain from all wine, luxury foods and delicacies. Throughout their training, that is, the competitors had to deny themselves foods which were otherwise perfectly legitimate. No cream cakes for them! In their case, self-control was all about waiving their rights and entitlements and curbing their lawful freedom. Do you get the point, Corinthians?

And all for what?, Paul asks. To win a 'corruptible' crown. I can't be dogmatic about the exact nature of the crown – or wreath – which Paul had in mind. What I know is that, although the crowns at Olympus were made of olive leaves, those at Isthmia were made of either pine leaves or – more often – of withered celery leaves. Yes, withered celery leaves!²² I was fascinated to learn that the crowns granted to the victors at the Nemean games – held about 12 miles *southwest* of Corinth – were made from *fresh* celery leaves.²³ Paul's likely allusion to the Isthmia crown of

withered celery throws into even sharper relief his intended contrast between the corruptible crown of the Greek games – available to only one contestant in each race – and the incorruptible crown available to every triumphant Christian.

Paul point then is clear and simple – if heathen athletes exercise extreme self-denial in the hope that they might obtain a ‘corruptible crown’ – how much more should the Christian be willing to exercise self-denial and self-control to obtain an incorruptible crown – an eternal and unfading crown of glory, 1 Pet. 5.4?

V.26. Again, as in chapter 8, we note Paul’s progression from ‘you’ (v.24) and ‘we’ (v.25) to ‘I’ and ‘my’ in vv.26-27.

Paul insists that – with his eye firmly on the incorruptible crown²⁴ – he doesn’t waste any energy – that there isn’t anything random or haphazard about his service for Christ – that he runs as someone who knows where he’s going and fights as someone one who knows where his opponent is! As the Christian athlete, he doesn’t run ‘uncertainly’ – ‘unclearly’ – aimlessly – and as the Christian boxer, he doesn’t play around ‘shadow-fighting’²⁵ – punching the empty air. He was determined that there will be no wasted blows. The apostle insists then that he has one fixed, overriding purpose in life – to which all else is subservient. As he put it in Philipians 3 – ‘this one thing I do – I press toward the goal for the prize’, Phil. 3.13-14 – which in the context of 1 Corinthians 9 here means to be a blessing to others – by all possible means to save as many as possible and to be approved by Christ. Hmm. It’s very sobering –even terrifying – thought that my epitaph might be ‘Here lies Malcolm Horlock – who spent his entire Christian life beating the air – always busy but accomplishing nothing’.

V.27. Paul ends the section by making reference to his body. This, he says, he treated most severely, making it his slave and treating it as his slave. It wasn’t that he saw his physical body as the seat of sin but he knew it to be the vehicle and channel through which sin operated and acted. It does seem that even Paul had to do battle with the love of ease and needed to be hard on himself if he was going to obtain the crown.

The expression ‘I keep under’ (ie my body) is literally ‘I strike under the eye’ – so as to give a black eye or to disfigure the face. Clearly – whatever Paul means by this – he is using the word metaphorically. It may be that he still has in mind the image of the boxer as in the end of v.26 – in which case he is saying, ‘I pommel *my* body – not, like the boxer – my opponent’s! And it would then be worth us noting that, in the Greek games, boxers were equipped – not with boxing gloves – but with what was called the ‘*cestus*’ – a fearsome weapon consisting of thongs or bands of leather – loaded with lead and iron – which were tied round the hands and which were frequently covered with knots and even nails.

I suspect, however, that – when using the word here – Paul is alluding rather to the rigid self-control and strict athletic exercises performed by the contestants in the games.²⁶ I take Paul to be saying that, in his case, keeping himself spiritually fit meant subjecting his body to the harshness and severity of his apostolic ministry – including I guess regularly fasting, 2 Cor. 11.27.

The word ‘castaway’ at the end of v.27 gives entirely the wrong impression. The word which Paul uses refers to someone who fails a test - to someone who – following trial – isn’t approved – in the context here, one who is disqualified and gets no crown.

This possibility of disqualification has nothing at all to do with the loss of salvation – any more than a competitor who failed to observe all the rules in the Games – and thereby lost a crown - stood to lose his Greek citizenship. It has everything to do with the loss of reward – of losing the ‘prize’, v. 24.

Paul is saying that he exercised strict self-discipline for fear that otherwise he might disqualified on the ground that he had failed to fulfil the necessary conditions. He has in mind the scrutiny of the competitors at the close of a contest – when, if the victor is proven not to have kept all the rules, he forfeits the prize. In Paul’s case, such an outcome would be the more galling because – as he says – he wasn’t only a contestant – he was one who ‘preached to others’ – that is, he was also a ‘herald’ (a different word to the words translated ‘preach’ in vv. 14 and 16 – being ‘announce’ and ‘evangelise’ respectively) – in effect he was also the one who summoned the contestants and who announced the rules of the contest.

Paul clearly took very seriously the possibility that he might yet be disqualified. We know that one of his greatest concerns throughout his Christian life was that he might finish his race well – as he expressed it to the elders of Ephesus, ‘Now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: save that the Holy Ghost witnesses in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear to myself, *so that I might finish my course with joy*’.²⁷

So there you have it – the example of Paul – a man willing to waive his rights for the sake – both of weak Christians, chapter 8, and of non-Christians, chapter 9. The example of a man willing to bend over backwards that believers might go on and unbelievers might be saved.

I know its jumping the gun a bit - but oh for the grace to imitate such a man – even as he did Christ, 11.1.

Footnotes

¹ See 1 Cor. 9.4-6, 12 (twice), 18.

² Note the use of the word in Luke 23.14; Acts 4.9; 12.19; 28.18.

³ That this experience is described by Luke as a 'vision' doesn't mean that it was a dream – or in the mind only. See the use of the same word in Matt. 17.9 and Acts 7.31.

⁴ See, by way of example, 1 Kings 21.8; Rev.5.1.

⁵ Acts 11.24.

⁶ Note that the Lord Jesus taught that 'the labourer is worthy of his food' in the context of the apostles being sent out to 'the lost sheep of the house of *Israel*', Matt. 10.10. for that reason they would not then need any financial resources of their own, v.9. Compare also the sending of the 70 (72?), Luke 10.4,7; and the conventional Jewish greeting which they carried, v.4. The ministry of the other apostles was directed to 'the circumcision' but that of Paul and Barnabas to the gentiles, Gal. 2.1, 7-9 (lit.); cf. Rom. 15.11.13; 15.16.

⁷ Acts 18. 2-3, 11, 18; 20.34; 2 Thess. 3.8-9.

⁸ See also 1 Cor. 3.3; 15.32.

⁹ Note Paul's view of the divine inspiration of the law – it is 'the law of *Moses*', v.9, but it is a question of *God's* 'care', v.9, and what *God* 'says', v.10. To the apostle, the law of Moses was the voice of God.

¹⁰ See the use of the same word in Luke 4.23; Acts 21.22; 28.4 – also translated 'by all means' in v.22 of this chapter (1 Cor. 9).

¹¹ By way of example see Numb. 20.8, 11; Psa. 147.9; Jonah 4.11; Matt. 6.26. But, as often in the Bible, Paul here puts the absolute for the relative – see other cases, such as Hos. 6.6; Luke 14.26.

¹² Compare 2 Tim. 2.6.

¹³ 2 Cor. 11.20; 12.13-16.

¹⁴ Paul's claim in vv.12 and 15 very much echoes Nehemiah's great 'so did not I', Neh. 5.15 – also spoken in the context of being chargeable to one's brethren in having food and drink provided at their expense.

¹⁵ Lev.10.12–15, Numb. 18.20-24; Deut. 18.1-4.

¹⁶ , 2 Cor. 11.7.

¹⁷ We know that the apostle liked this particular wordplay – compare 'those who use the world, as not abusing it', 7.31.

¹⁸ Gal. 5.11; 6.12.

¹⁹ Acts 16.3; compare 18.18; 21.26; 23.6; 26.4-6,22,27. And it's worth noting that Paul circumcised Timothy immediately following the so-called 'Council at Jerusalem' (which met to decide the issue of the circumcision of gentiles – at which time, Titus – the test-case – 'being a Greek' – wasn't 'compelled to be circumcised', Gal. 2.3) and while Paul was carrying the decree from Jerusalem which officially freed the gentiles from the yoke of the law. He circumcised Timothy 'because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they all knew that his father was a Greek' – and that Timothy would not therefore have been circumcised even though his mother was a Jewess, v.1. Wherever Paul travelled, he first preached in the Jewish synagogues. If one of his fellow preachers had been uncircumcised, it would have aroused Jewish prejudices and probably shut their ears to the gospel. And then again, Timothy was by parenthood half-Jew and had been brought up to know the Old Testament from a child.

²⁰ Compare Paul's words, 'I testify again to every man that is circumcised (as a full proselyte would be), that he is a debtor to do the whole law', Gal. 5.3. We should note also that Paul added at 1 Cor. 9.20 the important qualification 'not being myself under the law' – which is in all the early manuscripts except the so-called Western Text – and which he expanded later in Rom. 6.14; 7.4, 6.

²¹ Compare 2 Tim. 2.5.

²² Archaeologists have uncovered a stone head at Isthmia carved with a crown of pine leaves – and a mosaic of an athlete at Corinth with a crown of withered celery leaves.

²³ 'Paul and the Pagan Cults at Isthmia', O Broneer, HTR 44 (1971) page 186 – quoted in 'Church and Gentile Cults in Corinth', Mark Harding, Grace Theological Journal, Vol. 10, Fall of 1989, page 214.

²⁴ 'I *accordingly* so run', 1 Cor. 9.26 lit.

²⁵ Technically known as the 'skiamacia'.

²⁶ Compare the metaphorical use of the word in Luke 18.5 – where it is translated 'weary'.

²⁷ Acts 20.22-24; cf. 2 Tim. 4.7.

1 CORINTHIANS 9

Paul vindicates his office as an apostle, **vv.1-3**.

Paul establishes his right to be supported but denies that he has exercised that right, **vv.4-15**. His right to maintenance justified on seven grounds :

- The precedent set by the other apostles, vv.4-6;
- Examples drawn from ordinary, everyday life, v.7;
- The teaching of the scriptures, vv.8-10;
- Fairness – the repayment of a debt, v.11;
- The practice of other preachers and teachers, v.12;
- The divinely chosen method of supporting religious workers in Israel, v.13;
- The Lord's express appointment, v.14.

Paul explains the ground of his glorying, **vv.16-18**.

Paul chooses to use his freedom from all to voluntarily enslave himself to all – that he might save some, **vv.19-23**.

Paul draws an illustration from the Greek games to sound a warning against complacency and self-confidence, **vv.24-27**.