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A Theology of Weakness: Word Studies from the Greek Text of II Corinthians 12:9 in Context With Exegesis of Seven Select Passages of Scripture

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A THEOLOGY OF WEAKNESS:
WORD STUDIES FROM THE GREEK TEXT OF II CORINTHIANS 12:9
IN CONTEXT WITH EXEGESIS OF SEVEN SELECT PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE

by
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submitted in partial fulfillment
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INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

In his commentary on the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians, R. C. H. Lenski proposes that the verb teleō in II Corinthians 12:9 is mistranslated. Whereas most translations say, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness," Lenski believes that the last phrase should read, "for the power is brought to its finish in weakness."¹ It seems that he stands unsupported in this conviction, for my research uncovered no other commentator who suggested such an interpretation.

Statement of Thesis

It is my thesis that Lenski is right in his desire to preserve the usual rendering of the verb teleō. Etymological studies would suggest that its related verb, teleioō, is properly translated with the idea of perfection, but that teleō is always translated with connotations of finishing (with the one exception of its usage here).

Review of Related Literature

Many commentators seem to understand in this text the idea of God's power being brought to its finish in weakness because they realize that the result of weakness is God's power coming through the individual

¹R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937), p. 1302.

on behalf of others. But Lenski seems to be the only one who recognizes that this power comes through most easily when the individual is totally a tool in the hands of God, and that this kind of submission is possible only when, in weakness, the individual no longer attempts to work out of his own power. Consequently, his power is not in opposition to God's, so that the ultimate result is that God's power can come to an end on his life.

Design of the Investigation

In order to see these principles more clearly this presentation includes etymological studies of the nouns, power and weakness, and of the verbs, to bring to an end and to tabernacle (the Greek words dunamis, astheneia, teleō, and episkēnoō). On the basis of appearances of these major words, seven passages were chosen for exegetical studies of larger contexts. The passages selected are John 19:28-30, Revelation 7:9-17 and 21:1-6, II Timothy 4:6-8, I Corinthians 1:18-2:5, Hebrews 4:14-6:3, II Corinthians 4:7-5:5, and II Corinthians 11:30-12:10 and 13:1-11a. This sequence of Scripture selections develops the idea that weakness is the vehicle for God's power to be transmitted more effectively to others when power need no longer be exerted on the individual himself to make him a vessel fit to be used.

In the course of these studies, it became apparent that the theology of weakness as expressed by Paul in II Corinthians 12:9 actually hinges on another word choice - viz., the use of the prefixed verb, episkēnoō, to mean God's power tabernacling in an individual. It is my contention that Paul specifically chose this word (which occurs only here in the New Testament) to indicate that God's tabernacling in a human

being in this life is necessarily incomplete. No person is ever able to submit totally enough to allow God to have absolute sway in his life. Only in Jesus was such complete surrender to the will of the Father demonstrated. Only again at the end of time will the perfect tabernacling of God take place as it once did in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the theology presented in this study is a consideration of God's perfect tabernacling in the past and the future and His approaching-completion tabernacling in the present in the weakness of the believer. With this understanding of the resting of His power, the concept of His power being brought to its finish in weakness is more readily understood.

Basic Assumptions

The most significant basic assumption is the evangelical perspective with which this study was conducted. It is my belief that the Word of God is true and inspired and, consequently, that it is authoritative and instructive for the believer's life.

Underlying the entire project is the assumption that the translation of a text from Scripture ought to reflect as accurately as possible the original Greek. This principle is manifested by the preliminary work of translating all New Testament verses containing the key words of this study. It is also especially operative in the theological conclusions, which propose a different translation from the usual rendering of II Corinthians 12:9.

Etymological chapters are founded on the assumption that word usage in its context is the best medium through which the meaning of a passage can be known. Exegetical studies are built, furthermore, on the principle that Scripture is a unity of truth. Passages from one writer

can be used to interpret the words of another because it is believed that God is the Author of the whole.

Several assumptions about the nature of man and the character of God underlie this study's theological conclusions. Man is recognized as a sinner, often frustrated with the limitations of his weaknesses and unable to submit totally to the direction of God in his life. On the other side of the finitude of man, however, is the power of God. He is at work in history and makes available to human life a genuine source of spiritual power.

Definition of Terms

The key words to be used in this study are defined and discussed extensively in separate etymological chapters. The ideas of power (dunamis) and weakness (astheneia) and the verbs of bringing to an end (teleō - in contrast to teleioō) and tabernacling (episkēnoō) are considered in the first four chapters of this presentation. These are the major words carrying the meaning of II Corinthians 12:9, the focus verse of this study.

Delimitations of the Study

The most significant limitation of this study is to be found in the exegetical chapters which form Section II. Many more passages could have been chosen to illustrate the usage of the key words discussed in Section I, but out of all the possibilities seven sections were selected for several reasons.

First of all, passages were chosen because they contained in combination several of the key words or in isolation a significant appearance of one of them. Another consideration affecting their selection was

the desire to illustrate the past, present, and future tenses of God's tabernacling (episkēnoō). Finally, passages from the writings of John and from the Letter to the Hebrews were chosen to offer comparison with the use of terms by Paul, and selections from two other letters of Paul were included to enable the reader to see II Corinthians 12:9 within the larger context of his theology.

Each of the occurrences of dunamis, astheneia, teleō, teleioō, skēnoō, kataskēnoō, and episkēnoō was translated from the Greek and studied in its context as background and foundation for selection of subject matter. The results of this work, however, are not reported in this presentation other than as they are relevant to the exegetical and etymological chapters.

Another limitation imposed on this study in order to keep its length reasonable was the decision not to do etymological studies on the words for grace (charis) and for being sufficient (arkeō), which appear in the beginning of II Corinthians 12:9. The sufficiency of God's grace includes many ramifications beyond the scope of this study's focus. We will consider only the implications of sufficient grace for the relationship of God's power and human weakness.

Other limitations were imposed by my living at great distance from Western Evangelical Seminary. It was not possible for me to use the seminary library as extensively as I would have liked. Most of my research was conducted at Pacific Lutheran University and Dightman's Bible Book Store in Tacoma, Washington, and gathered from commentaries and other aids borrowed from the five Lutheran ministers with whom I work.

Limitations of time are related to my full-time employment on the pastoral staff of a Lutheran church in Olympia, Washington, but the

advantages gained from having Bible study groups against whom my ideas could be tested seem to outweigh the disadvantages of time limitations. The research has been conducted intensively since October of 1977, but the idea of the proposed translation of II Corinthians 12:9 has been part of my thinking and studying since 1973, when I first taught II Corinthians for a group of students in my campus ministry at Washington State University.

Many more texts could have been included and many more ideas explored in this presentation, but that which is included in these pages was chosen to focus on one particular goal. Etymological and exegetical considerations support the conclusion that II Corinthians 12:9 should be translated as follows:

And he said to me, "Sufficient to you is my grace, for my power in times of weakness is brought to the end." Accordingly, all the more gladly rather will I boast in my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ might tabernacle in me.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ETYMOLOGICAL CHAPTERS

The following chapters present etymological studies of the four key words of II Corinthians 12:9. The nouns, dunamis and astheneia, and the verbs, teleō and episkēnoō, appear in this verse as follows:

And he said to me, "Sufficient to you is my grace, for my power (dunamis) in times of weakness (astheneia) is brought to the end (teleō)." Accordingly, all the more gladly rather will I boast in my weaknesses (astheneia), in order that the power (dunamis) of Christ might tabernacle (episkēnoō) in me.

Two brief appendices present comparisons associated with the idea of God's tabernacling. Appendix 1 contrasts skēnoō with episkēnoō to show God's perfect and imperfect tabernacling. The second appendix relates the idea of tabernacling to the concept of finishing in a comparison of past, present, and future time.

I. ETYMOLOGICAL STUDIES

A. Power (dunamis)

Dunamis is the most complex of all the words considered in this study. This arises from cultural differences in the notion of power. We must begin with the early Greek pagan ideas and then turn to the Old Testament concept of power in order to place the New Testament word in its proper context. Finally, it is important to distinguish dunamis from other words for power or might in its actual usage in the New Testament.

The early Greeks saw power as a cosmic principle, and, as such, it became synonymous with the idea of God. This gave rise to several specific notions about man and his relationship to the world. The pagans perceived the latter as a manifestation of myriads of forces working in, by, and on it. In order to survive, man had to find means for participating in these forces; the development of magic was a natural consequence. We can understand, therefore, the constant struggles of the people as expressed in their myths about the relationships of men and various gods.

The world of the Old Testament was radically different primarily because of the Jewish understanding of the character of God. Walter Grundmann describes this uniqueness as follows:

The difference between the OT and the surrounding world is grounded in the distinctive relationship of the Godhead to history. As contrasted with the surrounding deities, which are essentially nature gods, the God of the OT is the God of history. The result

is that the personalistic character of the idea of God is decisive, and that it absorbs the underlying naturalistic elements. This gives us the further result that the important and predominant feature is not force or power but the will which this power must execute and therefore serve. This is everywhere the decisive feature. But it necessarily brings us into the sphere of history, of which nature is the framework or setting. The reason why this is the decisive feature in religious development is that Israel is determined at the very beginning of its history by a historical event kat' exochen, by the Exodus from Egypt and the deliverance at the Red Sea. The concepts of power constantly recur in this connexion.²

Jewish faith in a personal and caring God transformed the understanding of power, and the faith's centering in the Exodus event was a preparation, especially because it served as a type, for the New Testament centering of power in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is not merely a teacher or prophet imbued with significant power, according to the New Testament writers. Rather, "His existence is peculiarly determined by the power of God,"³ as Grundmann notes. Immediately at the beginning of His life, the stories about Him reveal an unusual power. The conception, the incarnation, His miracles - all these have a special character because of the concept of power which they entail. Once again we will consider Grundmann's perspective at length; he writes of Jesus' life as follows:

Jesus is not the only one in His day to work miracles. The Hellenistic and Jewish world is full of miraculous happenings and gods and miracle-workers. The miracles of Jesus are distinguished in three ways from those of the period. a. The NT miracles of Jesus have no connexion with magic, or with magic means and processes, like the majority of miracles outside the NT. The biblical concept of God forbids this. . . . b. The miracles are evoked by the powerful Word of Jesus, which has nothing to do with magic. On the contrary, He provokes defensive magic against Himself which He overcomes

²Walter Grundmann, "dunamai, . . . dunamis," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964) II, 291.

³Ibid., p. 302.

with His Word of power. In all His words He speaks "from the mouth of omnipotence," and thus overcomes the kingdom of demonic powers ruling in sickness, sin and death. This brings us to the heart of the NT view. The miracles of Jesus are part of the invading dominion of God which Jesus brings with His own person in proclamation and act. They are the dominion of God overcoming and expelling the sway of demons and Satan. Like the whole history of Jesus, His miracles are an eschatological event. . . . The history of Jesus is the history of Christ because the kingdom of God comes with Him. c. The miracles presuppose the faith of the One who performs them and also of the one on whom they are performed. They are thus accomplished in a wholly personal relationship. Jesus can do no miracles in Nazareth because faith is lacking (Mt. 13:58 and par.). The disciples cannot heal the boy because they do not have faith (Mk. 9:14ff). Hence there is no place for magic. It is not the knowledge of magic media and formulae, but the personal relationship between God and Jesus on the one side and Jesus and men on the other which works the miracle with no magical compulsion. In faith all things are possible and therefore there is all power: *πάντα δύναται τὸ πιστεύοντι* (Mk. 9:23 and par.). In this faith the believer shares in the rule of God and therefore, either actively or passively, experiences miraculous power. Here we have the uniqueness of NT miracles.⁴

Especially significant, furthermore, in the concept of power as it relates to the person of Jesus Christ is the focusing of the New Testament around the particular demonstration of power at the event of His death. Just as the deliverance through the Red Sea formed a focal point for Jewish faith, so the event of the cross has become the focus for New Testament belief. The fact that Christ was able to overcome death is seen as the most important manifestation of His power.

The resurrection is consequently recognized as the supreme miracle of the New Testament, and it gives credence to all the other miracles as proper manifestations of the inherent power. Christ's power is shown by them to be superior to that of the demons or other evil forces at work in the world, and this puts all power - the power of God, the power of demons and other allies of Satan, and the power of salvation - into

⁴Ibid., pp. 302-303.

proper perspective.⁵

Moreover, it is realized by the New Testament writers that the disciples who spread the Gospel are carrying on the saving work begun by Jesus and are, accordingly, given Christ's power to accomplish their work. Paul is especially careful to note the source of his power in I Corinthians 2:1-5, one of the main passages with which we will be concerned in the exegetical studies below (section II D). The relation of the apostle's power to Christ and to the Spirit is described by Grundmann as follows:

As an apostle he is not a teacher of wisdom; he is a witness, of the cross of Christ. Thus his apostleship is discharged *οὐκ ἐν πειθοῦς σοφίας λόγοις, ἀλλ' ἐν ἀποδείξει πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμεως, ἵνα ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν μὴ ᾖ ἐν σοφίᾳ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ' ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ*. The final sentence excludes the understanding of *δύναμις* as the power of miracles. As a witness of the cross of Christ he establishes his hearers on the *δύναμις θεοῦ* not on the *σοφία ἀνθρώπων* as he would do if he were a teacher of wisdom. This determines the form of his proclamation, which does not consist in dialectical eloquence (*ἐν πειθοῦς σοφίας λόγοις*) but *ἐν ἀποδείξει πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμεως* in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. *δύναμις* relates to the content of his preaching rather than the form. His preaching has the goal of exhibiting the presence of Christ in the Spirit, and therefore of exhibiting the saving power of God which is identical with Jesus Christ and which is the basis of the existence of believers - *ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ* is interchangeable with *ἐν πνεύματι* or *ἐν Χριστῷ*. *Χριστός*, *πνεῦμα*, and *δύναμις* belong inseparably together.⁶

Comments about the most particular possession of power on the part of the believer by means of weakness will be reserved for later. It is important to see at this point, however, that the passing on of Christ's power to His followers is a necessary part of their relation-

⁵ Alan Richardson, "Miracle, Wonder, Sign, Powers," A Theological Word Book of the Bible, ed. Alan Richardson (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1950), pp. 152-155.

⁶ TDNT, II, 312.

ship with Him. How that is most effectively accomplished is the subject of theological formulation below (section III).

The word dunamis is used 41 times in the New Testament to ascribe power to God. Although many of these instances are general acknowledgements of His might and do not need to be considered here, a few are worthy of our attention. First of all, in connection with the prophecies of Christ's being seated at the right hand of the Father, it is interesting to note that Jesus uses the word dunamis as a synonym for God. This is particularly significant for the thesis of this study that Jesus was the perfect vehicle for the perfect tabernacling of God among men in the past.

Luke uses the word dunamis much more extensively than the other Gospel writers. John never uses it at all, and Matthew and Mark choose it only in phrases of ascription to God and in connection with the right hand of power. Luke, on the other hand, sees the power of God in a special way in the conception of Christ by means of the Most High's overshadowing, and, consequently, he affirms that the Child would be called the Son of God in a unique way (Lk. 1:35). Furthermore, he notes that Jesus returned from the temptations in the wilderness by the power of the Spirit (4:14) and that it was by the power of the Lord upon Him that He was able to heal (5:17). Finally, in both Luke and Acts (24:49 and 1:8, respectively) he records the promise of the special pouring out of the power from above which the disciples were to receive after the ascension of Jesus.

Each of the letters of Peter uses the word dunamis once to speak of the power of God, and both times it is in the sense of His granting

to believers all that they need to be kept in a state of security and piety (I Peter 1:5 and II Pet. 1:3). The book of Revelation speaks of God's power six times - four times in connection with the songs and prayers of praise and thanksgiving that fill the heavens as God's kingdom is brought to its consummation (4:11, 7:12, 11:17, and 19:1) and twice in descriptions of that kingdom's realization and majesty (12:10 and 15:8).

Paul uses the term dunamis in his letters in a wide variety of ways. He writes of the power of God to save (Romans 1:16), to give hope (Ro. 15:13), to raise from death (I Corinthians 6:14 and II Cor. 13:4), to complete the work of faith (II Thessalonians 1:11), and to be at work in and through His people (Ro. 15:13; II Cor. 4:7 and 6:7; Ephesians 1:19, 3:7, and 3:20; I Thess. 1:5; and II Timothy 1:8).

Most especially, he uses the term to contrast the power of God with the wisdom and laws of men in the extended passage studied more intensively in section II D below. The word dunamis appears four times in II Corinthians 1:18-2:5 and refers each time to the power of God to save His people, not by their own efforts to believe, but by the accomplishment of His purposes.

The remaining 79 uses of dunamis in the New Testament can best be studied by groups. The Modern Concordance to the New Testament utilizes a set of categories that are very helpful for this purpose.⁷ Verses listed within each of the categories follow specific patterns of thought. For example, the categories about the angelic orders, both good and evil, demonstrate that the power of God is vastly superior to that of any other force. The angels, in II Peter 2:11, are declared to

⁷Michael Darton, ed., Modern Concordance to the New Testament (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), pp. 451-455.

possess greater strength and power than men and yet are seen to be reverent before the Lord and to refrain from actions displeasing to Him. The four verses describing powers of the angelic order (Ro. 8:38, I Cor. 15:24, Eph. 1:21, and I Pet. 3:22) all show that ultimately every power is rendered powerless before the Lord and must yield in obedience to Him.

Similarly, Luke 10:19, one of the passages in the category of evil powers, records Jesus' assurance to the disciples that they would have the authority to tread upon all the powers of the enemy. On the other hand, Revelation 13:2 pictures the power of the dragon being handed over to the beast in the last days.

The category of power possessed by persons lists seventeen instances in which God's people are assured that His power will be upon them to strengthen them (Eph. 3:16), to give them joy in the face of persecution (Col. 1:11), to give them authority of speech (Acts 4:33) and of ministry (Acts 6:8). Sometimes the word dunamis is used in verses of this category to show the weakness of man's power and to emphasize that though man's power be little, yet he can surmount obstacles and continue to live (II Cor. 1:8) and to refrain from denying God's name (Rev. 3:8).

One group of three parallel passages in the Synoptics speaks of the powers of heaven being shaken when the Son of Man comes in His glory and power (Mt. 24:29 and par.). Also, the category of the miraculous shows how such shaking of the existing powers already began to happen when Jesus came to earth and performed works of power that were signs of His deity and authority (e.g., Mt. 13:54). The early Church continued to perform such miracles in the name of Jesus and, acting in His stead, to authenticate the testimony of the Church (e.g., Acts 8:13).

The category listing passages which speak of power in general

includes the verses from Scripture which speak of the power of the kingdom of God (e.g., I Cor. 4:20) and the power of life in the age to come (e.g., Heb. 6:5). Power experienced in this life, therefore, is seen to be but anticipation of the greater power to come. This eschatological expectation is heightened by such statements from Jesus as this one recorded in Mark 9:1: "Some shall not taste death until they have seen the kingdom come in power."

It was because of Jesus' presence at one time in a certain place that the kingdom was ushered in (note the relation to the tabernacling of God as sketched in section I D below). It is because of His continued presence among His people now that the kingdom is still being ushered in with some of its power (e.g., Acts 4:7ff.).

The final category to be considered is the focus of all the rest - verses that speak of the power of Jesus. In this group are seventeen which describe the power of Christ's appearance as God and man. Included in the midst of these is Paul's delight in his weakness which makes it possible for the power of Christ to tabernacle in him (II Corinthians 12:9, which is discussed more thoroughly in section II G below).

Other verses of this category serve to deepen our understanding of the nature of this power which is to tabernacle in man's weakness. Seven of these speak of the power and great glory with which Christ will come again on the clouds of heaven and of the power which went out from Jesus as He conducted His ministry of healing (Mt. 24:30, Mk. 5:30 and 13:26, and Luke 4:36, 6:19, 8:46, and 21:27). Peter's speech to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:38) includes his comment that God had anointed Jesus with power and the Holy Spirit so that He might perform His ministry of healing and of freeing those tyrannized.

The writer to the Hebrews emphasizes that all things are maintained by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3), while Revelation 5:12 records the song of those who acknowledge the worthiness of the Lamb that was slain to receive power. Peter declares that he has made known to those who receive his letter that Christ had come with power (II Pet. 1:16).

Six times in Paul's letters the term dunamis is used to refer to the power of Jesus. In Romans 1:4 he proclaims that He was set forth as the Son of God in power, and in I Corinthians 5:4 he asserts that it is in that power that God's people meet together. Philippians 3:10 speaks of the power of His resurrection, while II Thessalonians 1:7 looks forward to His coming appearance from heaven with His angels of power. Finally, Colossians 1:29 stresses that Paul's work and intensity were due to the energy of Christ operative in him in power. These verses reinforce the paradox of II Corinthians 12:9 that it is in the times of weakness that the power of Christ is most fully known. How that is possible is the subject of more detailed discussion below.

B. Weakness (astheneia)

An integral part of understanding how the power of God is brought to its finish in us is the realization of the ways that the word astheneia is used in the Scriptures. In II Corinthians 12:9, Paul declares that he will all the more gladly boast in his weaknesses, because in them the power of God is tabernacled upon him.

The specific form, astheneia, one of a group of words derived from asthenēs, occurs 24 times in the New Testament. Fifteen of these occurrences use the term in the larger sense of weakness - i.e., that the person is helpless or unable because of weakness to do what he or she would like to do. These fifteen appearances will be considered more thoroughly below.

The other nine usages refer more specifically to physical illness. Seven of these appear in the Gospels and Acts (Mt. 8:17; Lik. 6:15, 8:2, and 13:12; John 5:5 and 11:4; and Acts 28:9) and set the scenes for the healing ministries of Jesus and of Paul. Paul, then, uses the term in Galatians 4:18 to refer to the time when he first preached to the people there in his state of "weakness of flesh." Finally, in his first letter to Timothy (5:23), he encourages the younger pastor to take wine because of his stomach problems and frequent weaknesses.

According to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, this first meaning of physical weakness gave rise to the deeper New Testament interpretation of the term to signify weakness in the comprehensive sense of the whole man. Gustav Stählin notes the frequent declara-

tion that man as a whole is an asthenēs zōon - i.e., "a weak living being - and he points out the saying of Jesus in Matthew 26:41, in which the asthenēs of the flesh is contrasted to the prothumon of the spirit. In Romans 6:19, Paul speaks especially of the religious and moral weakness of the flesh (sarx). Thus, the words, anthrōpos, sarx, and astheneia, are used correlatively.⁸

The other uses of astheneia in this larger sense are highly instructive for our purposes. Seen together they emphasize the sense of "want of strength," which is the literal interpretation of the word, taken from a, signifying negation, and sthenos, meaning strength. Vine stresses this definition, "indicating inability to produce results," when he defines the word astheneia as "infirmity."⁹

Both physical and spiritual inability are the result of astheneia as the term is used in the New Testament. In Luke 13:11, a woman who is described as having a spirit of weakness is, consequently, not able to straighten up. Spiritually, Paul points out that we do not even know how to pray as we ought because of our weakness, in which we need the Holy Spirit's aid (Ro. 8:26). Paul looks eagerly for the changing of this weakness; in the great resurrection chapter of II Corinthians, he rejoices that the body which is sown in weakness will be raised in power, even as its dishonor will be changed to glory (15:43). His seven other uses of the term astheneia speak of himself and Jesus and will be con-

⁸Gustav Stählin, "asthenēs, astheneia. . . ,"Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), I, 491.

⁹W. E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1940), I, 257.

sidered more extensively below.

The writer to the Hebrews uses the term astheneia four times, once in relation to Jesus and three times in reference to men. In the latter instances, he proclaims the fact that the law appoints men beset by their weakness to be high priests so that they are able to be gentle with the ignorant and straying (5:2). Later he contrasts with the weakness of men the high priesthood of Jesus, Who in His Sonship was perfected forever (7:28). Finally, in the great catalog of faith in the eleventh chapter, the epistle writer records the fact that men of faith fled from the sword and were strengthened from weakness (11:34).

A topic for more extensive discussion later in this study is the one reference relating astheneia to Jesus in the book of Hebrews. Its author exults in the fact that in His priesthood Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because He has been tempted in every way as we are (4:15). The character of His weakness and, consequently, of His perfect availability for the tabernacling of God - as contrasted with God's imperfect tabernacling in us - is the subject of an expanded discussion below (section II E).

The apostle Paul speaks of his astheneia right away at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthians as he reminds them of the weakness, fear, and much trembling with which he had first come to them (I Cor. 2:3). This concept of his weakness, thereupon, becomes a theme in his relationship with the church at Corinth, especially as he defends his ministry in the second letter.

The word astheneia is used six times in II Corinthians 11:30-13:11a, which serves as a primary passage in this study (see section II G below). Three times Paul boasts in his weakness (11:30, 12:5, and 12:9), and

once he speaks of his delight in the times of weakness, mistreatment, and persecution (12:10). The focus for all these instances is his declaration that in the times of weakness God's power is brought to its finish (12:9). The reason for such being possible is then given in 13:4 where he proclaims this great fact of the Gospel: that in His weakness Christ was crucified, but that by means of God's power He continues to live.

In reference to the last verse cited above, Vine stresses Christ's physical sufferings, to which He voluntarily submitted.¹⁰ This willingness will be seen later to have bearing on the perfection with which God could tabernacle among His people in the person of His Son. Through His astheneia, Christ gave Himself up to death. Such a totality of weakness, of perfect submission to the will of the Father (as frequently recorded in the Gospel of John) makes possible the perfection of the tabernacling.

The paradox of man's weakness consequently becoming the vehicle for the empowering of God is noted by Stählin in his article on astheneia in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. He writes as follows:

The opp. of the ἀσθένεια of the σάρξ is the δύναμις of the πνεῦμα which συναντιλαμβάνεται τῇ ἀσθενείᾳ ἡμῶν (R. 8:26). Yet ἀσθενεία is not merely the opposite pole but in the Christian sphere can also be the place where the divine δύναμις is revealed on earth, as in 2 C. 12:9: ἡ... δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελῶται, "the power is fully expressed in weakness." The acts of God's election relate to the weak (1 C. 1:27: τὰ ἀσθενῆ τῶν κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεὸς ἵνα κατασχύρῃ τὰ ἰσχυρά). Thus Christ, to whom 2 C. 13:3: οὐκ ἀσθενέει ἀλλὰ δυνατεῖ, properly refers, became weak as a man (Hb. 5:2: καὶ αὐτὸς περικελευτὴ ἀσθενείαν; 2 C. 13:4: καὶ γὰρ ἐσταυρώθη ἐξ ἀσθενείας). Those who are in Christ share the same weakness . . . : καὶ γὰρ ἡμεῖς ἀσθενούμεεν ἐν αὐτῷ. This is the ἀσθενεὶς τοῦ θεοῦ of which Paul says in 1 C. 1:25

¹⁰Vine, IV, 205.

that it is ἰσχυρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων. Thus, along the basic line of the NT paradox, weakness as a form of manifestation of the divine on earth is a mark of honour for the Christian. For he can say: ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατὸς εἰμι (2 C. 12:10). His weakness is a reason for boasting (2 C. 11:30; 12:5, 9): ἡδίστα οὖν μᾶλλον καυχῆσθαι ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις) and for joy (2 C. 12:10; 13:9: χαίρομεν γὰρ ὅταν ἡμεῖς ἀσθενῶμεν).¹¹

The recognition of this paradox and a more precise definition of the relation between the weakness itself and that for which it is a vehicle is the focus of further discussion below.

¹¹TDNT, I, 491-492.

C. Finishing (teleō) as opposed to Perfecting (teleioō)

The most important etymological consideration for the purposes of this study concerns the verb teleō, which is usually translated, "to fulfill" or "to bring to an end." Only in the instance of II Corinthians 12:9 is this verb translated, "to make perfect," which is the usual rendering for the related verb teleioō. Analysis of the families of both verbs and of other possible choices for the verb in II Corinthians 12:9 has led me to the conclusion that it would be more accurate to translate teleō as "to bring to its completion" in that verse. Such an interpretation gives rise, consequently, to formulation of a theological perspective concerning the nature of God's power operative through the weakness of men.

Vine points out the distinction between teleō and teleioō when he compares Revelation to Hebrews in his definitions of the two. The latter, which stresses the concept of making perfect, is one of the chief features in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where it occurs nine times. Teleō, on the other hand, as used frequently in the Book of Revelation, means "to finish, to bring to an end," and often signifies not merely to terminate a thing, but, beyond that, "to carry out a thing to the full."¹²

Teleioō is related to the following words in its family: teleios (perfect), teleiōs (end, perfectly), teleiōsis (fulfillment, perfection), teleiōteros (perfect), teleiōtēs (perfection, perfectness), teleiōtēs

¹²Vine, I. 22-23.

(finisher), and telesphoreō (perfection). In contrast, the verb teleō is related chiefly to the noun telos, which means the end, and to the prefixed verbs apoteleō, meaning "to do, finish, perform," and epiteleō, meaning "to accomplish, complete, do, finish."

It is easy to see the close association between the verbs teleō and teleioō since, as R. Gregor Smith points out in the Theological Word Book, "perfect" has usually been vaguely understood to mean the last state in a progression.¹³ This is also the emphasis of Robert Newton Flew in his article on perfection and teleios in the Handbook of Christian Theology.¹⁴

The focus of teleioō, however, seems to be on the completing of perfection in the sense of wholeness, which does not make sense when applied to the strength of God. God's power is already whole and perfect; therefore, it seems significant that Paul did not choose this verb, teleioō, for II Corinthians 12:9. Perhaps we err, then, when we imply such a meaning by our translation, "made perfect," for the verb teleō.

The sense of perfection is most clearly seen when we look at the use of the adjective form, teleios, in the Letter of James. Using this adjective four times in the first chapter, he stresses both the process in men which leads them to perfection (twice in James 1:4) and the fact of the perfection that already exists in the gifts and in the law of God (1:17 and 25). Paul uses the adjective with the same purpose in I Corin-

¹³R. Gregor Smith, "Perfect," Theological Word Book, ed. Alan Richardson (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1960), p. 167.

¹⁴Robert Newton Flew, "Perfect - Perfection," Handbook of Christian Theology, eds. Marvin Halverson and Arthur A. Cohen (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1958), pp. 263-268.

thains 13:10, Ephesians 4:13, and Colossians 1:28 and 4:12 - verses which speak of the perfect coming and the perfect manhood or maturity which is the goal of the Christian life. According to Flew, such perfection is recognized as unattainable till the end of this earthly life.¹⁵

The verb teleioō, which means "to bring to this state of teleios," is used 23 times in the New Testament. Nine times in Hebrews it is used either negatively, to deny that sacrifices or the law can cause perfection to happen, or positively, to stress the process of suffering by which Jesus was perfected. The verb also announces the promise that man is to be perfected by God's work within him, based on the perfect sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 2:10, 5:9, 7:19 and 28, 9:9, 10:1, and 14, 11:40, and 12:23).

John also uses the verb nine times - five times in the Gospel and four times in his first epistle. Especially significant is the fact that four of those Gospel usages relate to Christ perfectly completing the work which the Father gave Him to do (John 4:34, 5:38, 17:4, and 19:28). The remaining instance speaks of the coming perfection of His disciples, as Jesus prays for it in His high-priestly prayer (17:23). All of the occurrences in the epistle speak of the love of God being perfected in persons by means of their obedience to God's Word and by their love for one another (I John 2:5 and 4:12, 17, and 18).

The three appearances of teleioō in Luke are each unique - which gives us a glimpse at the wide variety of meanings assigned to this verb (in contrast to teleō) as will be noted below). In Luke 2:43 the verb is used to speak of the completion of the day, whereas in Luke 13:32 Jesus

¹⁵Flew, p. 267.

chooses the verb to announce His anticipation of Himself being perfected on the third day. In Acts 20:14 Luke records Paul's words to his friends as he encourages them not to worry about his life as long as he is able to finish his course.

We have already seen the importance of the adjective teleios in the letter of James. In 2:22 he uses the related verb teleioō to stress that faith is perfected by means of the works which result from it.

Paul uses the verb teleioō only once, and that is to emphasize that he has not reached the state of perfection implied by the verb. Rather, he continues to run his course and to discipline himself in order to press on toward the mark of the upward calling of Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:12). Because he chooses the verb teleioō in this instance - and this instance only - we must pay more attention to the significance of his choice of teleō instead for expression of his idea in II Corinthians 12:9.

As noted above, the verb teleioō can sometimes mean the same as teleō, or "to be completed"; the verb is used in a wide variety of contexts and interpretations. It seems, however, that the obverse is not true; teleō does not take on the elaborated meanings of teleioō. Teleō seems to be much more limited in its translation. Out of 28 instances of its use in the New Testament, 25 times it is translated "finished." Of the three that remain, two appearances of the verb are related to taxes (Mt. 17:24 and Ro. 13:6); both occurrences reflect a common idiom, "to complete the taxes," corresponding to our word pay. The only instance remaining is the one in II Corinthians 12:9, which has always been rendered, "to make perfect." It is my contention that this instance should not be excepted. Rather, the verb teleō here should be given the usual

translation, "to finish." Such a rendering would allow us to develop more clearly an understanding of the concept of God's power at work in our weakness.

Mark is the only Gospel writer not to use the verb teleō. Matthew uses it six times, and in five of these the verb appears in a phrase marking the end of a section of teaching. An expression such as "when Jesus had finished (teleō) these sayings" leads the reader each time into the following narrative section of the Gospel (Mt. 7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, and 26:1). By these formulae Matthew divides his book into five discourses, seemingly to correspond to the five books of Moses, with whom Jesus is always compared as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophetic type. Matthew's other use of the verb occurs in the prophecy of Jesus to His disciples that they would not have finished (going to) all the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes again (10:23).

All four of Luke's uses of the verb teleō speak of Jesus or His family completing what was necessary to fulfill the prophecies concerning Himself. In Luke 2:39, Mary and Joseph are recorded to have finished all things required by the law of the Lord relating to the birth of their son. Then in 12:50, Jesus declares that He is hard pressed until the baptism which is commanded of Him is finished. In both 18:31 and 22:37 He tells the disciples that all that is written of Him, especially in the prophets, must be fulfilled. Similarly, in the book of Acts, Luke records Paul's speech (to the Jewish leaders of the synagogue at Antioch) wherein he declares that Jesus fulfilled all the things written concerning Him (Acts 13:29).

John's use of the verb teleō in his Gospel account is especially significant since it occurs only twice and both times close together in

the narrative of the end of Christ's life. In John 19:28, the apostle notes that Jesus knew that all things had now been completed. All that He had been sent to do by the Father, Whose perfect will He had continually chosen, had been finished. Therefore, with the triumphant cry of the verb teleō in the passive perfect tense, Jesus shouted that it had been finished, and, laying His head down to rest, He handed over His spirit (John 19:30). (See especially Appendices 1 and 2 and section II A below.)

John also chooses the verb teleō in the book of Revelation eight times. Each time the verb announces that some other dimension of the last days has been completed. In 10:7, God's secret plan is finished. In 11:7, the testimony of the faithful is finished. God's wrath is completed in seven last blows (15:1), and no one is able to enter the temple until these blows are finished (15:8). The end of the reign of the beast is said to occur when the words of God will be completed (17:17), and what will happen at the completion of the thousand years is recorded in 20:3, 5, and 7.

The only minor epistle writer to use the verb teleō is James. In 2:8 he encourages his readers by the observation that they were doing well if they were fulfilling the royal law to love their neighbors as themselves. Of course, it can readily be observed that this is one law that can never be thoroughly finished until the end of life.

Paul uses teleō three times other than in II Corinthians 12:9, and each time the emphasis is on fulfillment. In Romans 2:27 he speaks of those who, though uncircumcized, yet are fulfilling the law, and in Galatians 5:16 he exhorts his readers to walk by the Spirit and not (using a double negative) to fulfill the desires of their flesh. Finally,

in II Timothy 4:7 he begins his farewell to his spiritual son with the assurance that as he faces the certainty of death, he knows that he has fought the good fight and finished his course.

Because these three cases are so clearly interpreted to mean "to finish," it seems that Paul would have chosen the verb teleō in II Corinthians 12:9 only if he meant to signify such a "bringing to an end." It seems inconsistent to translate the verb teleō as "to make perfect" both in the context of the letter itself and of Paul's writings in general and in the context of New Testament semantics as a whole.

With the exception of II Corinthians 12:9 as it is commonly understood, this survey of the uses of the verb seems to point out a very precise definition for the various forms of teleō. All the instances speak of finishing, of being brought to an end, whether that be in the fulfillment of prophecy or in the finishing of one's course in life. This unanimity would seem to lead to the implication that the verb in II Corinthians 12:9 should also be translated "to be brought to the finish." This, in turn, would lead to the concept that God's power, rather than flowering in weakness, has accomplished its purposes at that time. When His people in their weakness come to the point of yielding totally, of giving up all efforts to live by their own power and ability, then God no longer has to exert power on them. Then, at last, He is freed to work through them on behalf of others. This idea is developed more thoroughly in the exegetical chapters and theological formulations below.

Gerhard Delling would not agree with my conclusion. In his article on the telos family in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, he comments on the variety of the nuances of the verb teleō in the New Testament. Specifically, he emphasizes that "the power which is real

power "comes to perfection" in weakness. . . ."16

On the contrary, aside from the particular idiomatic use of the verb in the phrase meaning to pay taxes, it does not seem to me that the verb's usage differs in meaning from one time to the next. As itemized above, each appearance of the verb stresses the fact of finishing, of ending a certain assignment which had been prophesied or which was necessary for God's purposes to be accomplished. This seems to be the appropriate rendering in II Corinthians 12:9, so that emphasis can be placed on the bringing to an end of God's power on the individual. The result is freedom for God's power to work instead through that person. Even as Christ's resurrection was the joyful result of the finishing of His death on the cross and the completion of His work of atonement for sin, so the action of God through His people is made possible when in weakness the individual becomes a yielded tool in His hands.

¹⁶Gerhard Delling, "telos, teleō, . . . teleioō. . .," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), VIII, p. 59.

D. Tabernacling (episkēnoō)

A very important key to the theological formulations in section III of this study lies in an etymological consideration of the verb episkēnoō, which occurs in the second sentence of II Corinthians 12:9. The verb is used only here in the entire New Testament, but other forms of the basic verb, skēnoō, the uses of the related noun, skēnē, and the frequent occurrence of these words in the Septuagint facilitate intensive study of the specialized form which occurs in II Corinthians 12:9.

Paul could have used one of many other terms for the idea of resting or dwelling, the concepts with which episkēnoō is translated in most English versions. Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words lists the following other New Testament verbs translated "to dwell": oikeō, katoikeō, katoikizō, enoikeō, perioikeō, sunoiikeō, enkatoikeō, menō, skēnoō, kataskēnoō, embateuō, kathēmai, kathizō, and astateō.¹⁷ These verbs are understood by Vine to signify the concept of rest: anapauō, katapauō, episkēnoō, kataskēnoō, hēsuchazō, and epanapauō.¹⁸ That Paul chose the rare verb episkēnoō, which is used nowhere else in the New Testament, emphasizes the uniqueness with which II Corinthians 12:9 must be understood.

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament gives extensive background information useful in understanding that uniqueness. First

¹⁷Vine, I, 344-346.

¹⁸Ibid., III, 288-289.

of all, the noun skēnē provides the basis for consideration of the verb. This noun, which occurs about 435 times in the Septuagint, was used consistently to translate the Hebrew word for tabernacle. Because of the developments in the Hebrew faith, the idea of "tabernacle" began to lose the sense of transitoriness associated with the tent that it was and to become more often used figuratively or poetically to indicate God's dwelling - not that He lives in a tent, but that He dwells in the heavenly pattern after which the earthly tabernacle was modelled. (This is the idea developed so carefully in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews.) Wilhelm Michaelis, writer of the article on the skēnē family concludes as follows:

At most one can only expect that in bibl. Gk. σκηνη and the whole group should under LXX influence assume the character of a ref. to what is fixed and constant even though this is opposed to the original sense of "tent."¹⁹

The noun form skēnē, used twenty times in the New Testament, carries with it this connotation of God's habitation among men. Nine other derivations used in the New Testament speak of tents, tabernacles, and tent-makers. Most significant for this study are the ten appearances of forms of the verb skēnoō, which means "to pitch one's tent," "to encamp," or "to tabernacle." To these ten forms, many utilizing special prefixes, we now turn in order to perceive the distinctiveness of episkēnoō.

Five times the basic verb skēnoō appears in the New Testament, and all of these usages occur in the writings of the apostle John. Two times in Revelation the verb speaks of the tabernacling of those who

¹⁹ Wilhelm Michaelis, "skēnē, . . . skēnoō, episkēnoō, kataskēnoō . . . ," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), VII, 372.

dwell in the heavens (12:12 and 13:6), and twice it refers to the tabernacling of God among men at the end of time (7:15 and 21:3). The context of 7:15 describes God as sitting on His throne and, therefore, must mean that God's dwelling among the redeemed will be a permanent residing with them, rather than in a divine tabernacle in heaven. The parallel promise in Revelation 21:3 does not speak of a tent either, but rather is, as Michaelis points out, a figure of speech for "His abiding and gracious presence."²⁰ He notes that this graphic picture in Revelation is connected with the strong image of God's shekinah, the glory so prominent in the Old Testament, particularly in relation to the tabernacle in Exodus and Ezekiel.

Because of the usual usage of the skēnē group of words in the New Testament to denote lasting presence, Michaelis comments that it is insufficient to think that the use of skēnoō in John 1:14 means merely the Word's earthly stay, somewhat as an episode between His pre-existence and post-resurrection assumption of the position as exalted Lord. Rather, he notes as follows:

. . . it would appear that ἔσκηνώσεν ἐν ἡμῖν in Jn. 1:14 does not refer to the temporary and transitory element in the earthly existence of the Logos but is designed to show that this is the presence of the Eternal in time.²¹

This comment gives rise to the possibility of the perfectly/imperfectly comparison discussed below in Appendix 1.

The verb kataskēnoō appears four times in the New Testament. Three of these occurrences in the Synoptics are parallel passages which speak of the birds of heaven coming to tabernacle in the branches of the mus-

²⁰Ibid., p. 385.

²¹Ibid., p. 386.

tard tree (Mt. 13:32, Mk. 4:32, and Lk. 13:19). The emphasis on staying is accentuated by the use in these passages of the Greek present tense infinitive of kataskēnoō, as opposed to the aorist infinitive used for the verb erchomai.

The fourth use of the verb occurs in a quotation of David's words in Psalm 16, as used by Peter in his Pentecost speech to the assembled crowd (Acts 2:26). David speaks of the Lord's presence and notes that, because the Lord is by him, he will not be troubled. Instead, he will be glad, and his tongue will celebrate. Even though mortal, he will rest (kataskēnoō) in hope. As Peter uses this quotation, he is referring to the eternal hope made possible by the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, just as in the uses of skēnoō in Revelation and in the Gospel of John, the verb connotes a divine permanence.

The use of episkēnoō in II Corinthians 12:9 is a unique occurrence of a form of skēnoō that does not deal with such an eternal presence. Here, instead, the verb is used in the context of the earthly life and Paul's particular experience of God's presence at work within his weakness. The verb episkēnoō does not occur in the Septuagint, Philo, or Josephus, so much of our interpretation must remain speculative. Michaelis' conclusions, however, are instructive. He notes the following:

In terms of etymology and general use one can hardly speak of a descent of Christ's power. This idea would arise at most only if the *δύναμις* of the exalted Christ were thought to be resident above. But this presupposition obviously does not lie behind ἐπισκενῶω, which is horizontally orientated rather than vertically. For here ἐπὶ τίνα means "to" rather than "upon." Hence it is better to speak of an entry of the power of Christ, of its taking up residence in the apostle.²²

²²Ibid., pp. 386-387.

This translation of epi as "to" supports the observation that as it is used in Scripture the preposition bears implicitly in itself the concept of motion towards something. It seems to me that, because epi is used to connote immediate proximity to things, or motion that comes close to something,²³ Paul chose the verb with this prefix to emphasize that the resting of God's power is at best a proximate thing (see Appendix 1 below).

Finally, Michaelis reaches the following conclusion about this appearance of episkēnoō in II Corinthians 12:9:

Since the word is so rare one may ask what caused Paul to use it. There is much to be said for the view that he took the preposition ἐπί which is construed with σκηνοῶ in Rev. 7:15 . . . and combined it with the verb, that he thus started with the idea of gracious presence which is so strongly linked with σκηνοῶ or the whole group, and that he was trying to say that in his experience Christ's strength came to abide in him precisely in his weaknesses.²⁴

This conclusion seems to support the contention of this thesis - i.e., that power, in abiding, no longer has to exert itself on the believer. Then at last it is freed, by the weakness of the yielded Christian to tabernacle in him and, consequently, to work through him on behalf of others.

²³William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 287-288.

²⁴TDNT, VII, 387.

E. Brief Appendices

Appendix 1: Tabernacling Perfectly/Imperfectly

It is interesting to compare the uses of the skēnoō group on the basis of the totality of God's fulfillment of His purposes as He tabernacles among men. Three major tenses of time are involved in the New Testament occurrences of these verb forms, but the only instance of the present tense is in Paul's use of episkēnoō in II Corinthians 12:9. This usage, furthermore, is the only one in which it can be seen that God's tabernacling cannot, by virtue of the fact of man's sinfulness, be completed.

The only past tense use of skēnoō is found in John 1:14. In this instance, God is recorded to have tabernacled among men in the person of His Son, the Logos. Jesus lived, as the rest of the Gospel of John declares, totally according to the will and purposes of His Father, and He made manifest all that the Father is and does. He was the perfect tabernacling of God in the flesh so that men could behold the glory of the Father, "full of grace and truth."

The instances of the verb in Revelation refer to the future tabernacling of God among men. This will take place at the last day with the coming of the new heavens and the new earth. Again it will be a perfect tabernacling because all that is evil will have been defeated, and all that is imperfect will have passed away.

In II Corinthians 12:9, however, episkēnoō is used in the context

of God's imperfect tabernacling among imperfect men by means of their weakness. It seems that the addition of the preposition epi implies the movement toward the perfection that He desires. Furthermore, its relation to the concept of weakness would imply that the more men acknowledge their weakness and live according to it (i.e., in fuller reliance upon the strength of God instead of on their own), the closer to perfection God's tabernacling can become. Thus, until the final perfection of the Revelation pictures can be realized, the present tense of God's tabernacling takes place as much as is possible in this life through the weakness of committed Christians yielded to God's action within their lives.

Appendix 2: The Relation of Tabernacling to Finishing
in Past, Present, and Future

It is also interesting to note that all the major uses of skēnoō forms according to tense are accompanied in the New Testament by forms of teleō rather than teleioō. Thus, we have the following comparison:

in the past tense - in the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as the Word "tabernacled among men," and He completes His work with the cry, "tetelestai!"

in the future tense - in the book of Revelation, God is described as "tabernacling" Himself among men at the telos or end of things. Eight times the verb teleō occurs in the book of Revelation - each time referring to the occasions when various dimensions of the final days are brought to their completion.

in the present tense - in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes himself in his weakness and proclaims that God's power is brought to its finish (teleō) when he is weak. Therefore, he glories in the fact of his weakness because he sees that due to its very presence God is able to "tabernacle" in him in a unique way.

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXEGETICAL CHAPTERS

The following seven chapters present exegetical studies of select portions of Scripture especially chosen as larger contexts for deeper understanding of the words considered in the etymological studies above. Passages to be discussed are John 19:28-30, Revelation 7:9-17 and 21:1-6, II Timothy 4:6-8, I Corinthians 1:18-2:5, Hebrews 4:14-6:3, II Corinthians 4:7-5:5, and II Corinthians 11:30-13:11a. The goal around which these chapters focus is to validate the opinion that II Corinthians 12:9 is better understood and contributes more effectively to a theology of weakness if it is translated as follows:

And He said to me, "Sufficient to you is my grace, for my power in times of weakness is brought to the end." Accordingly, all the more gladly rather will I boast in my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ might tabernacle in me.

For purposes of limitation, we will discuss in detail only those verses which pertain more directly to the subject of this study, as indicated especially by the appearance of the four words considered previously. Furthermore, summary of the implications of the interpretations offered in these seven chapters will be reserved for comment in the theological formulation section of this study (section III below).

II. EXEGETICAL STUDIES

A. John 19:28-30

We begin our exegetical studies by looking at Jesus, for in Him the Word of God tabernacled perfectly among men (John 1:14). John's account of His death enables us to reflect more deeply upon the significance of the "finishing" of Christ's work on our behalf. The apostle's eyewitness account in John 19:28-30 also offers a comparison of the two verbs, teleō and teleioō, which both appear in verse 28.

Because Jesus throughly completed all the purposes of God, His work could become the basis on which the present and future tabernacling can happen (see exegetical studies which follow). John's narrative of Christ's fifth and sixth words from the cross and the context in which they occur may be translated as follows:

19:28. After this, Jesus, knowing that now all things were completed, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled says, "I thirst."

v. 29. A vessel was tying (there), full of common wine. Accordingly, they brought to His mouth a sponge filled with the wine-vinegar and wrapped around a hyssop (branch).

v. 30. Then, when He had taken the wine, Jesus said, "It has been finished!" and, laying down His head to rest, He handed over the spirit.

The fact of Jesus' suffering from thirst during His crucifixion, a matter which does not seem to be of major significance, turns out to be, upon deeper investigation, a concern bearing many implications. First of all, His cry, "I thirst," reveals the fact of His humanity.

Albert Barnes reminds us that thirst was one of the most distressing things about the crucifixion process. Wounds inflicted became highly inflamed and caused a raging fever, which leads to an unquenchable thirst.¹ The suffering from the fever, furthermore, was augmented by the loss of body fluids through bleeding and perspiration.² Though Jesus had at first refused the drugged wine offered to Him (because He wanted to be fully conscious throughout the ordeal), now He manifests the reality of His experience of human pain by asking for a drink.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that Jesus did not ask for a drink until after all other needs had been met - e.g., after He had arranged for the care of His mother. He did not ask for a drink until just before He died, though He must have suffered intense thirst throughout His time on the cross. This would suggest that He asked for a drink in order to utter clearly and distinctly His final shout of triumph.³

A third significance in Christ's request for a drink is the deep allusion it makes to His sacrificial work. As Arno Gaebelein realizes, the torments of hell are represented in Scripture by violent thirst - as in the example of the rich man who begged for a drop of water from Lazarus. Gaebelein proclaims that, were it not for the suffering of Christ, we would all be condemned to such torments of everlasting thirst.⁴ In-

¹ Albert Barnes, Luke and John, ed. Robert Frew, Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 372.

² Herschel Hobbs, A Study Guide Commentary: John (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965), p. 91.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Arno C. Gaebelein, The Gospel of John: A Complete Analytical Exposition (2nd ed.; Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1965), p. 370.

Fourth, Christ's call for a drink raises the question of His fulfillment of the Scriptures and His consciousness of that task. Donald Grey Barnhouse makes the following suggestion concerning fulfillment:

I think there is evidence that the Lord spent all of His time on the cross, those six hours, with the Scriptures. . . . When the Lord had checked, rechecked and double-checked the Law - everything was accomplished, the Prophets - everything was accomplished, the Writings - everything was accomplished, and Psalms - the last thing that had to be accomplished was, "They gave me vinegar to drink."⁵

We have no way, of course, to discover to what extent this speculation is true, other than to observe the quotation that Jesus cried from Psalm 22:1. On the other side, however, Marcus Dods warns against the misconception that Jesus felt thirsty and proclaimed it with the intention of fulfilling the Scriptures, which would be a spurious fulfillment. Rather, having seen that everything else had been attended to ("after this"), He was free to attend to His own physical sensations. Then, in His complaint and the response to it, the Gospel writer sees a fulfillment of Psalm 69:22.⁶

Perhaps a balance between these two opinions is reached in this comment by Manford Gutzke in his Plain Talk on John:

John emphasizes that Jesus was careful in His conduct to do all things in fulfillment of what the Scriptures predicted. This implies that He was concerned that our confidence in Himself and in His mission might be strengthened by His actions and experiences.⁷

⁵Donald Grey Barnhouse, The Love Life: A Study in the Gospel of John - A Bible Commentary for Laymen (Glendale, California: Regal Books Division of G/L Publications, 1973), pp. 280-281.

⁶Marcus Dods, The Gospel of St. John, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, The Expositor's Greek Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, [n.d.]), p. 858.

⁷Manford George Gutzke, Plain Talk on John (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968), p. 193.

The significance of this issue for this study is that Jesus did indeed fulfill all that had been foretold of Him in the Scriptures and that He was conscious of His own fulfillment. However, He did not do things only so that fulfillment could take place. Rather, the natural expressions and freely chosen actions that arose out of the circumstances and situations attending His death followed the pattern foreseen and foreplanned by God. Vernon McGee declares that 28 prophecies were fulfilled just in the time that Christ was on the cross. He notes especially such sections from the Old Testament as Psalm 22, Genesis 22, Isaiah 53, and Leviticus 16.⁸ Similarly, Arthur Pink comments especially upon the fulfillment of such ideas as the intensity of His suffering and the perfect submission to the Father's will that were foretold in Psalm 32:4 and Lamentations 1:13.⁹

As Leon Morris concludes, "these fulfillments are brought forward as ground for faith."¹⁰ The Apostle John has declared the particular purpose of his Gospel to be a recording of such things so that his readers might believe and have eternal life (see John 20:31).

This consideration of the meaning of Christ's statement, "I thirst," in light of the fulfillment of Scripture leads to the deeper question of the whole issue of the completion that took place in the entire event of the crucifixion. This issue will be explored more th-

⁸J. Vernon McGee, John: Vol. II, ch. 11-21 (Pasadena, California: Thru the Bible Books, 1976), p. 320.

⁹Arthur W. Pink, Exposition of the Gospel of John (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1945), III, 242-244.

¹⁰Leon Morris, Studies in the Fourth Gospel (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), p. 225.

roughly in connection with John 19:30, but it is anticipated by the comment, in verse 28, that Jesus spoke in order that the Scriptures might be brought to their perfection (teleioō).

This is the only place in the New Testament where the verb teleioō is chosen to speak of the Scriptures being fulfilled. That word choice indicates that the fulfillment of which John speaks involves many dimensions. R. C. H. Lenski describes the meaning of the two verbs, teleō and teleioō, and their relationship in John 19:28 in these words:

We must see the difference between the synonymous verbs τελέω and τελειόω. The former means to bring to a τέλος, to a close; to finish by adding the last stroke, with nothing more to add. The latter means to bring to the goal, to reach successfully the mark that was set. The former refers only to the last thing; the latter to everything including the last, as constituting a successful accomplishment, a long great work all done. . . . "In order that the Scripture might be accomplished" is used only here, and means something far grander, namely that the entire Scriptures in all that they present concerning the earthly work of Jesus have now been turned into actuality - the work mapped out by Scripture is now a work actually accomplished. Nor can we say, as some have tried to do, that at least one thing more must be added, namely the actual death of Jesus; for death is here now, it is included in the finish and in the accomplishment - Jesus is dying even now. John tells us that Jesus knows he is there, and describes this last act.¹¹

Lenski's distinction between the finish and the accomplishment provides a good medium for the delineation of the two verbs.

B. F. Westcott speaks also of the significance of the verb teleioō and clarifies its distinction from the verb teleō as follows:

It appears to mark, not the isolated fulfilling of a particular trait in the scriptural picture, but the perfect completion of the whole prophetic image. This utterance of physical suffering was the last thing required that Messiah might be "made perfect" (Hebr. ii. 10, v. 7ff.), and so the ideal of prophecy "made perfect" in Him. Or, to express the same thought otherwise, that "work" which Christ

¹¹R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1931), pp. 1278-1279.

came to "make perfect" (ch. iv. 34, xvii. 4) was written in Scripture, and by the realization of the work the Scripture was "perfected." Thus under different aspects of this word and of that which it implies, prophecy, and the earthly work of Christ, and Christ Himself, were "made perfect."¹²

Several dimensions of this total accomplishment of the Scriptures can be noted briefly. Not only were specific passages fulfilled by certain actions (such as the echo of Psalm 42:2, Psalm 63:1 and Psalm 69:21 in Christ's thirsting), but also Christ's own statements about His obedience and perfect submission to the will of the Father (as in John 4:36, 5:36, and 17:4) are seen to be thoroughly accomplished.¹³ Furthermore, the whole design of God for the salvation of men is accomplished by Christ's atoning death, and, again, the total revelation of God's character is seen in the crowning act of love made manifest on the cross.¹⁴

We must also look more specifically at the verb teleō since it occurs both in verse 28 and again in verse 30 in Christ's victorious cry at the moment of death. Insight into the use of this verb for our interpretation of II Corinthians 12:9 is given by the following explanation of its occurrence in the Gospel of John:

All was now finished. . . . The "all" means all that the Father had given the Son to do: "God had handed over all things to him" (xiii 3; also iii 35, xv 15). Here and in vs. 30 the verb employed is telein, "to bring to an end." It has the connotation of completion as well as that of simple ending. . . . We are surely to relate telein to the telos of xiii 1: "he now showed his love for them to the very end." In the remainder of the crucifixion scene we shall

¹²B. F. Westcott, The Gospel According to St. John (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 278.

¹³Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, The Fourth Gospel, ed. Francis Noel Davey (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), p. 531.

¹⁴C. K. Barrett, The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text (London: S. P. C. K., 1956, p. 459.

see that John related the finishing of Jesus' work and life to the completion of God's preordained plan given in Scripture. It is interesting that Acts xiii 29 uses the verb telein for the accomplishment of Scripture through the death of Jesus: "They asked Pilate to have him killed; and when they had accomplished all that was written of him, . . ." Telein appears also in the Lucan account of the Last Supper in reference to the disciples' possessing a sword: "I tell you that the Scripture must be accomplished in me, . . . for what is written about me has its accomplishment (telos)." (Luke xxii 37; see also xviii 31; Rev. xvii 17). . . . Ricca . . . does here an attempt to relate the crucifixion to "the beginning" mentioned in the Prologue: in between the beginning (John i 1) and the end (xix 28, 30) took place the career of the Word become flesh. Ricca also suggests a connection with v 17 where Jesus says, "My Father is at work even till now, and so I am at work too." The work is now finished, and the Sabbath that begins after Jesus' death (xix 31) is the Sabbath of eternal rest. . . Finally, because of the frequent parallelism between Jesus and Moses in the Fourth Gospel, we may call attention to Exod xi 33: "So Moses completed the work" - a reference to the completion of the Tabernacle. . . .¹⁵

Especially significant in this extended quotation is Brown's recognition of the important correlation of finishing with the idea of tabernacling (see Appendix 2 above). The whole distinction between teleō and teleioō, finally, might be summarized in the concept that the act that has finished Christ's work (teleō) is that which brings the Scripture as a whole to its complete fulfillment (teleioō).¹⁶

It is not necessary for the purposes of this study to consider in any depth John 19:29, nor to settle the debate that arises over the question of the hyssop branch (whether it was really hyssop or a javelin upon which the sponge was raised). All that is necessary for our reflection is the realization that the sponge was raised, and, Christ's lips having been moistened, He was able to cry out with a great shout His fi-

¹⁵Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi), gen. eds. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 907-908.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 929.

nal declaration of victory.

It is imperative that we understand the full impact of that cry, "Tetelestai!" which is recorded in John 19:30. As Arthur Pink declares, "Eternity will be needed to make manifest all that it contains,"¹⁷ but some of its dimensions can be noted for our purposes here. Leon Morris sees this word, tetelestai, as the key word of the Fourth Gospel, for throughout its account the story of Christ's death is regarded as eschatological fact.¹⁸

Manford Gutzke plunges us into the immensity of this word when he sketches some of the dimensions involved by this statement:

Finished! The whole program God had begun with His people before creation; the atonement which had been planned from before the foundation of the world. Finished! Redemption from sin and the new life in Christ. Finished! The gift of eternal life, the assurance of the place prepared for us when this life is over. All this confirmed as Jesus said, "It is finished!"¹⁹

The greatness of the ideas involved, the depth of the theology in this word, are truly incomprehensible!

Marcus Dods emphasizes that this cry was "not the gasp of a worn out life," but that it was deliberately the victorious shout coming from Christ's awareness that His work was finished, that God's purposes were all accomplished, "that all had now been done that could be done to make God known to man, and to identify Him with men."²⁰ God's finished work,

¹⁷Pink, p. 245.

¹⁸Leon Morris, The Gospel According to John, gen. ed. F. F. Bruce, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 815.

¹⁹Gutzke, p. 193.

²⁰Dods, p. 859.

therefore, can become the basis for all of that which man is in Him.

The specific form of the verb teleō in this verse means a "state of permanency." Consequently, since the verb itself signifies bringing a thing to its intended end or goal, the cry, "tetelestai," literally means "It is finished and stands finished."²¹ The crucifixion and redemptive work of Jesus will never again be required.

This very word used in the same form in which Jesus cried it from the cross was used in His times to mark promisory notes as "paid."²² Thus, it indicates that the price for man's redemption has been paid in full. Also, the verb was sometimes used to indicate completion of a religious rite or sacrifice. Therefore, its meaning could possibly be, "The sacrifice is complete!"²³

Rudolf Bultmann especially recognizes the complexity of meaning involved in Christ's final cry. In his definition of the word and his explanation of its use in this verse, he emphasizes the commissioning that is inherent. He writes the following:

ΤΕΤΕΛΕΣΤΑΙ therefore does not simply mean, "It is at an end," still less, "It is endured," but rather, "It is brought to an end," namely the work that has been commissioned. . . . It is necessary to understand πάντα, in accordance with 3.35; 5.20; 13.3; 15.15; 17.7; for all that the Father has "given," "shown" etc. to the Son is nothing less than his work which he accomplishes. . . . So now everything as happened that had to happen; the work of Jesus is completed; he has carried out that which his Father had commanded him (10.18; 15.10; 14.31). After he had received the drink of vinegar he says, "It is accomplished!" (v. 30); he bows his head and

²¹Hobbs, p. 91.

²²Ibid.

²³A. M. Hunter, The Gospel According to John, gen. eds. P. R. Ackroyd, A. R. C. Leaney, J. W. Packer, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1965), p. 179.

diea.²⁴

Elsewhere Bultmann relates the occurrence of teleō in John 19:30 to the use of eis telos in 13:1 and defines the consummation of Christ's work as showing the disciples His love right to the very end, to the consummation, which is the hour of God's glorification.²⁵ Thus, Christ's death was not only an act of love in itself, but moreover the necessary end of the work of love He had begun.

Other commentators offer other lists of what exactly was finished when Jesus Christ proclaimed that it was. J. Oswald Sanders presents this summary:

The cry "It is finished!" was the triumphant pæan of the Victor. What did it signify? (1) His suffering was ended; (2) revelation was completed; (3) shadows became substance; (4) the Father's will was fulfilled; (5) Satan was defeated; and (6) redemption was accomplished. He could now summon His servant death and dismiss His spirit.²⁶

Albert Barnes speaks of the ending of the sufferings and agonies, of the work "long contemplated, long promised, long expected by prophets and saints," of toils, persecutions, mockeries, the pangs necessary for the redemption of man.²⁷ Matthew Henry lists the fulfilling of the counsels of the Father and of the types and prophecies of the Old Testament, the abolishing of the ceremonial law, the coming of the substance and the

²⁴Rudolf Bultmann, The Gospel of John: A Commentary, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, gen. eds. R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 674-675.

²⁵Ibid., p. 487.

²⁶J. Oswald Sanders, 105 Days with John (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), p. 178.

²⁷Barnes, p. 312.

passing away of the shadows, the ending of transgression and the initiation of everlasting righteousness.²⁸

All these comments serve only to give us a glimpse of all that is involved in the "finishing" of Christ's work on the cross. As Westcott observes, the absence of a particular subject encourages the reader of John to remember many different works which were now brought to an end. He invites comparison with Luke 18:31, Luke 22:37, and St. Paul's phrase in II Timothy 4:7 (see section II C below).²⁹

Raymond Brown refers his readers to Revelation 16:17 for the comparison of the obedience of the angel in pouring out the final bowl of God's wrath to the victory of Christ's obedient fulfillment of the Father's will. The same phrase, "It is done," announces that what God has decreed has been accomplished.³⁰

Edwyn Hoskyns takes his readers back into the Old Testament to observe the messianic interpretation of Psalm 22 as it applies to Jesus. The Psalm, which begins, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?," continues with a description of the sufferings of the man of God, and ends with an eschatological cry of victory³¹ and the expression, "that He hath done."³²

Finally, Gaebeléin notes the significance of the shout in Christ's

²⁸Matthew Henry, Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible Chicago: Moody Press, [n.d.], p. 803.

²⁹Westcott, pp. 277-278.

³⁰Brown, p. 931.

³¹Hoskyns, p. 531.

³²Gaebeléin, p. 372.

work of redemption. He mentions Christ's greeting of His disciples with a shout of joy, the fact that He went up with a shout, and the promise in I Thessalonians 4:16-18 that He will come back with a shout. Gaebelén speaks of the word tetelestai as "glorious . . . inexhaustible and unquenchable!" and concludes as follows:

No saint is able to measure the depths of this triumphant shout. It means that His great sacrificial work, the sin-bearing, was now finished. All that needed to be done to satisfy the righteousness of God and to vindicate His holiness was finished; peace was now made in the blood of His cross; all that God in His eternal counsel had purposed was finished; prophecies and types relating to His matchless atoning work were finished. Yes, all was finished to reach down to man in his deepest degradation and to save him to the uttermost, so that the lost, the guilty, the hell-deserving sinner becomes, trusting in Him, a child of God and an heir of glory. All is finished to put on the side of the believer every spiritual blessing which an infinite God is able to bestow. But all these statements we have made are but the A. B. C. of the meaning of this great utterance of the Lamb of God.³³

The foregoing lengthy discussion of the occurrence of tetelestai in John 19:30 lays the basis for understanding the use of the same verb in II Corinthians 12:9. It is because of the thoroughness with which Christ finished all that the Father had given Him to do that man is able to rest in His grace.

That rest is made apparent for the believer in the final words of John 19:30, wherein the apostle speaks of Christ's actions in death. Even in the moment of death, Jesus remains the subject of an active verb.³⁴ His life is not taken from Him, but He gives it up of His own accord (see John 10:18). Though He seemed to be broken, Christ knew that He was victorious. William Barclay explains that, in saying that Jesus leaned

³³Ibid., p. 371.

³⁴Barrett, p. 460.

back His head and gave up His spirit, John chose the word which might be used for "settling back upon a pillow." Barclay concludes, "For Jesus the strife was over and the battle was won; and even on the Cross he knew the joy of victory and rest of the man who has completed his task and can lean back, content and at peace."³⁵

It is interesting to note that this same verb was used by Jesus in Matthew 8:20 (and in the parallel account in Luke 9:58) to say that He had no place to lay His head.³⁶ The resting place which He did not find on earth, He received in connection with the Father's perfect will on the cross. This is in keeping with the apostle's comment that "He came to His own and His own received Him not" (John 1:11).³⁷

Arthur Pink sees in this verb the majestic bearing that caused the centurion to react with belief (as recorded in Matthew 27:54). He describes Jesus not as an impotent sufferer, but as one who "consciously, calmly, reverently bowed His head."³⁸

It is not necessary for our purposes to consider the question of to whom Christ handed over His spirit. Some commentators say that He handed it over to His Father, while others believe that He bowed His head to His mother and John at the foot of the cross and gave His Spirit to them.³⁹ The significant dimension that is important for the interpreta-

³⁵William Barclay, The Gospel of John, The Daily Study Bible Series (Rev. ed.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 301.

³⁶Morris, The Gospel According to John, p. 815.

³⁷Merrill C. Tenney, John, the Gospel of Belief: An Analytic Study of the Text (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), p. 268.

³⁸Pink, p. 246.

³⁹E.g., Hoskyns, p. 532.

tion of this study is that Jesus was in complete control as He completed His work. The giving up of His spirit points to a voluntary act of will.⁴⁰

Jesus had thoroughly finished the work for which He was sent. How that finishing is brought into the life of the believer in his weakness is the subject of the following exegetical chapters. The glories spoken of in this chapter cannot very well be summarized, but Donald Grey Barnhouse offers this prayer, which focuses on resting as a response to the message of John 19:28-30:

How we rejoice in what Christ Jesus did for us in dying upon the cross and we pray Thee, O Lord, that whoever has a special need of Thee - and that means each one of us - that we can come resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art, that we can begin to find out the greatness of Thy loving heart. Thou hast bid us gaze upon Thee, and Thy beauty fills our souls, for by Thy transforming power Thou hast made us whole. May we rest in Thee. . . . Amen.⁴¹

⁴⁰Morris, Studies in the Fourth Gospel, p. 299

⁴¹Barnhouse, p. 284.

B. Revelation 7:9-17 and 21:1-6

In contrast with the Gospel of John, which shows God's perfect tabernacling in the past through the person of Jesus Christ, the book of Revelation looks forward to God's future tabernacling at the end of time. Closely related to the tabernacling is the frequent use of the idea of "finishing" with many appearances of the verb teleō. This contrasts dramatically with the book of Hebrews (see the fifth exegetical chapter below), which utilizes frequently the verb teleioō and stresses the idea of "perfection."

Two sections from Revelation will be considered in this discussion. Both of them picture the fact of God's tabernacling over His people, and each of them contains another one of the key terms of this study. Revelation 7:9-17 uses both the verb skēnoō and the noun dunamis, and Revelation 21:1-6 contains the verb skēnoō and the concept of the end in the noun telos, from which the verb teleō is derived. These passages may be translated as follows:

7:9. After this I looked, and, behold, a great crowd, which no one was able to count, from all ethnic groups and nations and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, having been dressed in white robes and (holding) palms in their hands.

v. 10. And they are crying out in a loud voice, "Salvation be to our God, to the One Who dwells upon the throne and the Lamb."

v. 11. And all the angels stood around the throne, and the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell before the throne on their faces and revered God,

v. 12. Saying, "Amen! The praise and the glory and the wisdom and the thankfulness and the honor and the power and the strength

(be) to our God forever. Amen!"

v. 13. And one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are the ones clothed in white robes and from where so they come?"

v. 14. And I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming from the great persecution, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

v. 15. Because of this they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple, and the One Who sits/dwells on the throne will tabernacle upon them.

v. 16. They will not hunger any longer nor will they thirst any more nor will the sun light upon them nor any heat,

v. 17. For the Lamb Who is in the center of the throne will tend them, and He will lead them to fountains of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

21:1. And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had departed, and the sea was no longer.

v. 2. And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

v. 3. And I heard a great voice from the throne speaking, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He shall tabernacle with them, and they will be His people, and He will be God with them.

v. 4. And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will be no longer, nor grief, nor crying, nor pain any more, (because) the first disappeared."

v. 5. And the One Who sits upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He says, "Write, because these words are faithful and true."

v. 6. And He said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the thirsty a drink from the spring of living water."

The verb teleō plays an important part in the events following the section of Revelation to be considered in detail now. In chapters 15, 17, and 20, various dimensions of God's wrath, His judgment, and the destruction of evil are seen to be completed. Consequently, chapter 7

seems to be giving a brief preview of what the new heaven and the new earth will be like after all evil is done away with and only good remains to rule. The chapter is much paralleled in chapter 14, wherein Satan wages terrible tribulation, but God brings His people safely through it all to His Kingdom. Though the setting of the vision in chapter 7 is not explicitly stated, the language of verses 15-17 suggests that what is being pictured is the consummated Kingdom of God after His throne has descended from heaven to dwell with men (see 22:3).⁴²

The palm trees and white robes add to the atmosphere of consummation because they are signs of victory and joy.⁴³ In this setting the triumph of the elect is announced (7:9-12) and then the main details that symbolize their happiness are mentioned (7:13-17).⁴⁴

The song that occurs in verse 10 is not primarily one of gratitude for deliverance; it goes much deeper than that. It emphasizes the praise that is due to God because of the greatness of the salvation He has wrought.⁴⁵ G. B. Caird proposes, therefore, that the word soteria should be translated victory rather than salvation.⁴⁶

⁴²George Eldon Ladd, A Commentary on the Revelation of John (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p. 118.

⁴³Archibald Thomas Robertson, The General Epistles and the Revelation of John, Vol. VI, Word Pictures in the New Testament (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1933), p. 351.

⁴⁴Jean-Louis D'Aragon, "The Apocalypse," The New Testament and Topical Articles, eds. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Raymond E. Brown, Vol. II, The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 478.

⁴⁵Ladd, p. 119.

⁴⁶G. B. Caird, A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine, gen. ed. Henry Chadwick, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 100.

William Barclay helps to widen the horizons of our praise by describing the deliverance in larger terms. He says that the salvation for which the loud voice is crying is not merely a deliverance of escape, but rather one of conquest. It is not the sort of deliverance which saves a person from trouble, but rather one which brings the individual triumphantly through it. "It does not make life easy," says Barclay, "but it certainly makes life great."⁴⁷

This concept is significant in connection with this study's thesis that the power of God is brought to its finish in man's weakness. The Christian has not been delivered from having any troubles in his earthly life, but in the midst of those troubles, the power of God is brought to its finish because of his weakness. This is the deliverance that man can enjoy: deliverance from himself and from the need to rely on his own resources in the midst of tribulation (cf. verses 13 and 14).

In verse 12 the song of praise is expanded. All the angels and living creatures join in with the voice to praise God. The song is doubly sealed with an "AMEN" at the beginning and again at the end, and it includes seven attributes to show the completeness of God's character.⁴⁸

The term dunamis, meaning "power," is the sixth attribute mentioned. The fact that each of the attributes is prefaced by the Greek article η emphasizes the totality of the elements described. The singers of these praises are not referring to just any ordinary blessing, but

⁴⁷William Barclay, The Revelation of John, The Daily Study Bible Series (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II, 32.

⁴⁸Massyngberde J. Ford, Revelation, gen. eds. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975), p. 119.

they mean specifically the blessing which is above all others.⁴⁹

William Barclay defines the use of the term dunamis in this series by these words:

They ascribe power to God. God's arm is never shortened and His power never grows less. And the wonder is that the power of God is used in love for men. There is no helplessness in God; God works His purposes out throughout the ages, and in the end His will will be done, and His kingdom will come.⁵⁰

This is the power which comes to an end in the weakness of men. His purpose has been accomplished when man is yielded in weakness.

A sense of this power pervades the rest of the chapter. According to Barclay, the washing of their robes in the blood of the Lamb brings to mind the power of that blood to cleanse and the cost with which its power was secured and made available to those persecuted.⁵¹ Then the power appears again in verse 15, for the concept of "tabernacling over" (rather than the "in" of John 1:14) connotes a sense of power or protection, according to Ford.⁵²

In verses 15 through 17, "eternal tokens of God's goodness"⁵³ are described to comfort the Christians. They are reminded by John of their safety and of God's sheltering. All of these blessings - the shep-

⁴⁹Leon Morris, The Revelation of St. John, gen. ed. R. V. G. Tasker, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 117.

⁵⁰Barclay, Revelation, II, 34.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 39.

⁵²Ford, p. 119.

⁵³Julian Price Love, The First, Second, and Third Letters of John, the Letter of Jude, the Revelation to John, Vol. XXV, Layman's Bible Commentary, ed. Balmer H. Kelly (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 71.

herding of the Lamb, the living water, the fact of no tears, and especially the statement that "God will shelter them with His presence" - sound like the consummated kingdom which appears when the throne of God comes down to dwell with men (in chapters 21 and 22).⁵⁴

The verb skēnoō, as it appears in verse 15, brings with it many connotations, and these connotations are doubly emphasized by the context of the verb's use. James Moffatt comments on one element of this context as follows:

Note the singular tenderness of the oxymoron - he that sitteth on the throne (the majestic almighty God) shall overshadow them with a presence of brooding, intimate care; followed by ποιμαίνει here (as opposed to ii.²⁷) in its literal sense of tender shepherding on the part of Jesus.⁵⁵

This same combination of power and care, of strength and tenderness, characterizes the tabernacling of God's presence in man's weakness, as recorded in II Corinthians 12:9.

J. Massyngberde Ford describes more clearly how the word for tabernacle became associated more specifically with the presence of God than with the physical tent, the name of which gives root to the verb skēnoō. He writes thus:

The deity responds by tabernacling over them (vs. 15). The use of "tabernacle" continues the Exodus motif which runs through Revelation, e.g., in the sealing and in the washing of robes. Redemption, as Deutero-Isaiah shows, will be like a second Exodus when God will dwell with His people. The Greek verb skenosei, "tabernacle," suggests the shekinah, the rabbinic term for divine presence or residence . . . the "Glory of the Majesty of the Lord"⁵⁶

⁵⁴Ladd, p. 119.

⁵⁵James Moffatt, The Revelation of St. John the Divine, Vol. V, The Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, [n.d.]), p. 400.

⁵⁶Ford, p. 128.

To hear the word skēnōsei, therefore, would evoke in the Jewish listener memories of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. The phrase in Revelation 7:15 could thus be translated, "He will make His Shekinah to dwell with them," with the "Shekinah" being taken to mean "the immediate presence of God."⁵⁷ Thomas Kepler adds that, consequently, Shekinah is taken everywhere to signify "the guardian of His faithful followers."⁵⁸

James Moffatt emphasizes that, in contrast to John 1:14, the use of skēnoō in Revelation 7:15 reflects a Christian fulfillment of the Jewish anticipation (as in Zechariah 2:10f., for example) that "the Shekinah would return in the era of final bliss."⁵⁹ C. Anderson Scott adds that its use reminds readers of God's presence in the cloud in Leviticus 16:2 and the brightness of His glory as revealed in Ezekiel 10:3-4.⁶⁰

Wilfrid J. Harrington notes another connection implied by the verb skēnoō, and that is with the Feast of Tabernacles. He says of the saints that "in their heavenly Feast of Tabernacles there is no need for the martyrs to construct their own booths: God himself will be their tabernacle."⁶¹

Archibald Thomas Robertson brings all these connotations together in the following notational summary of the meaning of this passage:

⁵⁷Morris, Revelation, p. 118.

⁵⁸Thomas S. Kepler, The Book of Revelation: A Commentary for Laymen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 99.

⁵⁹Moffatt, p. 400.

⁶⁰C. Anderson Scott, ed., Revelation, gen. ed. Walter F. Adeney, The Century Bible (New York: Henry Frowde, [n.d.]), p. 196.

⁶¹Wilfrid J. Harrington, Understanding the Apocalypse (Washington: Corpus Books, 1969), p. 132.

Shall spread his tabernacle over them (skenosei ep' autous). Future (change of tense from present in latreuousin) active of skenoo, old verb from skenos (tent, tabernacle), used in John 1:14 of the earthly life of Christ, elsewhere in N. T. only in Rev. (7:14; 12:12; 13:6; 21:3). In 12:12 and 13:6 of those who dwell in tents; here of God spreading his tent "over" (ep' autous) the redeemed in heaven, in 21:3 of God tabernacling "with" (met' auton) the redeemed, in both instances a picture of sacred fellowship, and "the further idea of God's Presence as a protection from all fear of evil" (Swete) like the overshadowing of Israel by the Shekinah and a possible allusion also to the tents (skenai) of the feast of tabernacles and to the tent of meeting where God met Moses (Ex. 33:7-11).⁶²

One idea remains for consideration, and that is the response of God's creation to His tabernacling. The Jerome Biblical Commentary emphasizes this dimension of the tabernacling as follows:

As the angels (4:8ff.), so the elect living in the intimacy of God are represented as ceaselessly celebrating in a celestial liturgy (21:5; 22:5). The whole of God's people shares in this worship, and not just priests alone.⁶³

Vernard Eller expands upon that emphasis as he notes its significance in the writings of John and for Christians today. He explains thus:

The first and most basic element in John's description is, "God will dwell with them." This invariably is the primary thing with John, this closeness of personal relationship between men and God. . . . May it be so for us as it was for John.⁶⁴

William Barclay emphasizes the same point, but by reference to the Jewish perceptions, in this statement:

So, then, the word skenoun always turned the thoughts of a Jew to the word shechinah, and to say that God dwelt in any place was to say that the glory of God was there. . . .

So, in this passage no Jew would hear the word skenoun without

⁶²Robertson, pp. 353-354.

⁶³D'Aragon, p. 478.

⁶⁴Vernard Eller, The Most Revealing Book of the Bible: Making Sense out of Revelation (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), p. 104.

thinking of the word shechinah; and the real meaning of the passage is that God would cause His glory to cover around His blessed ones. They would serve and live in the very sheen and radiance of the glory of God. . . .

It can be so on earth. . . .⁶⁵

The applicability of this description to both the Christians who first read John's words of encouragement as well as to the Christians of all ages is underlined by the ambiguity of the verb tenses in this chapter. Sometimes the martyrdom is pictured in past verb tenses with the heavenly triumph noted in the present, and at other times the martyrdom is spoken of in the present tense with the eternal bliss put off to the future. G. B. Caird responds to this ambiguity of tenses with this observation:

Either John is culpably inconsistent, or he is fully aware of the temporal ambiguity which besets all attempts to relate time and eternity, and has taken his own highly Semitic way of ensuring against any possible oversimplification.⁶⁶

His observation allows us to relate the use of skēnoō in the book of Revelation to the use of episkēnoō in II Corinthians 12:9 in order to see more clearly the meaning of God's tabernacling in His people when they are weak - e.g., in the midst of their triumph through martyrdom.

Only a few verses in the Revelation 21 section translated above need to be considered in this chapter to observe the connection of God's tabernacling and His finishing. First, however, it is important to picture the scene. John speaks of seeing the new heaven and the new earth because the old had departed. As Martin Kiddle emphasizes, the old heaven had to pass away because it had been a symbol of the distance or re-

⁶⁵Barclay, Revelation, II, 44.

⁶⁶Caird, p. 103.

moteness of God.⁶⁷ Such an understanding increases the impact of verse 3 and St. John's use of the term skēnoō, which stresses the presence of God.

Hanns Lilje points out another significant aspect of Revelation 21:1 for this study when he speaks of the unity of the theme in Scripture of the "new creation." He notes that the real content of the Christian life and the constant purpose God has for the world and for men all bear witness to the unity of this theme. This concept ties together especially well the other two verses to be considered in depth here because verse 3 shows how the promise in Isaiah 7:14 of "God with us" is fulfilled in His tabernacling among His people. Similarly, verse 6 stresses that God is the Finisher of faith (telos) in that He fulfills all His promises concerning the new creation.⁶⁸ The words skēnoō and telos are seen more clearly in their relationship to each other as they are observed within the framework of this unifying principle of Scripture.

The word kainos is a significant choice in Revelation 21:1 because it suggests "fresh life rising from the decay and wreck of the old world."⁶⁹ It is the same word that is used in II Corinthians 5:17, when Paul speaks of the new creaturehood that is possible for anyone who is "in Christ." The term serves, thus, to emphasize here that the goal of

⁶⁷Martin Kiddle, The Revelation of St. John, ed. James Moffatt, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1940), pp. 411-412.

⁶⁸Hanns Lilje, The Last Book of the Bible: The Meaning of the Revelation of St. John, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), pp. 257-262.

⁶⁹Wilbur M. Smith, "Revelation," ed. Everett F. Harrison, The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Moody Monthly ed.; New York: The Iversen-Norman Associates, 1971), p. 1098.

God is not judgment, but new creation.⁷⁰

Vernard Eller comments on this new creation by recognizing that when the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven (verse 2), the distinction between heaven and earth is lost. This realization emphasizes the point of the next verse, that in the picture of God's dwelling with men elements of heaven and some that are earthly are mixed together with no way to extricate the two.⁷¹ The consequent impression leads to a deeper understanding of the fact of God's presence among His people in the final perfect tabernacling.

The New Testament frequently utilizes the conception of the heavenly Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God, as the true homeland of the saints, as the dwelling place of men made perfect (e.g., Heb. 12:22, Gal. 4:26, and Phil. 3:20). In this vision from Revelation 21 all these pictures are brought together.⁷²

C. H. Little is emphasizing somewhat the same thing when he declares that it is the presence of God which makes the city holy. The result is that there are no longer any separations or divisions between the people and God, but only the closest union and communion, "a holy fellowship which God Himself initiates and continues to all eternity."⁷³

Verse 3 really provides the focus for this chapter. The noun

⁷⁰Mathias Rissi, The Future of the World: An Exegetical Study of Revelation 19:11-22:15, No. 23, Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series (Naperville, Illinois: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., [n.d.]), p. 59.

⁷¹R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1943), p. 616.

⁷²Ladd, p. 276.

⁷³C. H. Little, Explanation of the Book of Revelation (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 214-215.

skēnē, which is also used in the verse in its verb form, signifies the "real tabernacle," the one mentioned in Hebrews 8:2 and 9:11. As James Moffatt declares, "The whole meaning and value of the new Jerusalem lies in the presence of God . . . with men which it guarantees."⁷⁴

George Eldon Ladd traces how the concept of tabernacle has found fuller realization through the Scriptures when he points out that the Old Testament experience of God's dwelling in the tabernacle and then the temple became incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ, according to John 1:14 (where the same Greek root is used in the form eskenosen). Then, in the Church age, God has inhabited His Church, which is called the dwelling place (Ephesians 2:22), but this is only a dwelling in Spirit, which is not apprehended by sight, but only in faith (II Cor. 5:17). In the consummation of God's tabernacling, all is changed, and His people can see His face (Rev. 22:4).⁷⁵

William Barclay summarizes even more clearly the differences between these experiences of the presence of God according to the time in which they occur. He writes as follows:

Here is the promise of fellowship with God with all its precious consequences. . . . God is to make His dwellingplace with men. . . .

Here in this world and amidst the things of time our realization and experience of the presence of God is a spasmodic, a fleeting, a transitory thing, which comes and goes, at the mercy of our own changes and the chances and changes of life. But life in heaven will be nothing other than life permanently in the presence of God. . . .

In the new age and in the time to come the glory of God is not to be a nebulous and a transitory thing, but a thing which abides permanently and for ever with the people of God.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Moffatt, Expositor's, p. 480.

⁷⁵Ladd, p. 277.

⁷⁶Barclay, Revelation, II, 259-260.

Many commentators dealing with this passage from Revelation note various Old and New Testament types which are to be fulfilled in this final, "finishing" tabernacling of God. For example, Martin Kiddle calls this dwelling of God with His own "the supreme, immeasurable reward, embracing and overshadowing all others." He refers his readers to Ezekiel 48:35, where, in the concluding verse of the book of that prophet, it is announced that the new name of the city from henceforth should be, "The Lord is there."⁷⁷

Again, the Wycliffe Bible Commentary relates the concept of God meeting with His people to the promise of Leviticus 26:11ff., where the Holy of Holies is designated as the place for such a meeting.⁷⁸ The transcendence and unapproachability of the Holy of Holies makes the contrasting imminence of God meeting with His people even richer.

Other commentators see in this verse a true regaining of Paradise lost. The longed-for renewal of the Garden of Eden is recognized in the restoration of God's dwelling in that garden with men - as in the original fellowship of Genesis 2:15-22.⁷⁹ T. F. Glasson speaks of this as follows:

This is the fulfillment of God's age-long purpose. In a sense it is a theme that runs through the Bible. In the beginning communion between man and God was lost and man hid from God (Gen. 3:8). But God asked, "Where art thou?" (3:9) and through the ages he has been seeking his lost children and endeavouring in one way and another, supremely in Jesus Christ, to repair the broken relationship.⁸⁰

⁷⁷Kiddle, p. 413.

⁷⁸Smith, Wycliffe, p. 1099.

⁷⁹Love, p. 120.

⁸⁰T. F. Glasson, The Revelation of John, eds. F. R. Ackroyd, A. R. C. Leaney, and J. W. Packer, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1965), p. 116.

C. Anderson Scott shows how this dwelling is a fulfillment of Hebrews 8:2 and 9:11 and a marked advancement over the prophecies of Ezekiel 37:27, Zechariah 8:8, and Jeremiah 31:39, in its "dematerializing of the religious hope" which he declares to be in "full accordance with the teaching of Jesus."⁸¹ Robertson adds the idea of God now being Immanuel in fact, even as it was true of Christ (Mt. 1:21).⁸² In this summary statement, the Jerome Biblical Commentary ties all of these references together with the section from Revelation previously studied above:

This is the fulfillment of the prophecies that foretold the intimate union of God with the chosen people in the era of salvation (Lev. 26:11f.; Jer. 31:33f.; Ez. 37:26-28; Zech. 2:14f.; 8:8). The intimacy that the first man enjoyed in Paradise and that Israel experienced in desert and Temple is now granted to all members of the People of God, forever (7:15-17).⁸³

G. B. Caird adds a completely new dimension to this realization of the threading of the concept of God's presence throughout the Scriptures when he describes the use of the term skēnē, which is regularly used in the Septuagint for the Hebrew word mishken or tent. He builds on this symbol of God's abiding presence in the midst of Israel as follows:

John has thus chosen to use a term which implies that the promise of God's presence has already had constant fulfillments in the past whenever Israel has been true to her calling. Yet he cannot mean literally that the tent is to be restored. . . .

In the Targums Shekinta was one of the three terms (along with Memra, word, and Yeqara, glory) regularly used as reverential insulators to prevent the sacred name of God from too close verbal contact with men. When the Old Testament writers say that God spoke

⁸¹Scott, p. 288.

⁸²Robertson, p. 467.

⁸³D'Aragon, Jerome, p. 491.

to men, dwelt with men, appeared to men, the Targums tend to say that the Memra spoke, the Shekinta dwelt, and the Yeqara appeared. . . . In John 1:14 the apostle included all three Targumic insulators in one sentence: "The word (Memra) became flesh and dwelt (Shekinta) among us, and we beheld his glory (Yeqara).⁸⁴

One final reference links us again to the subject of this study. Thomas Kepler notes, besides the customary Hebrews, John, Ezekiel, and Zechariah texts, the relation of Revelation 21:3 with II Corinthians 6:16, which describes Christians as the temple of the living God.⁸⁵ This present-day eschatological anticipation of the final consummation of God's tabernacling among His people takes place in our weakness, according to II Corinthians 12:9.

Revelation 21:4 need not be considered here in depth other than to note that it adds to the impression of the permanence of the new tabernacling because it stresses that all five tragic aspects of human life - tears, death, mourning, crying out, and pain - will then be forever over.⁸⁶ Similarly, verse 5 need not be discussed at length other than to recognize the way in which it emphasizes the "finishing" quality of the book of Revelation. Mathias Rissi perceives that in the solemn introduction and through the mention of God's voice (an unusual occurrence in the book) it is manifested that this is the high point of the whole book. At the time of God's announcing the end (telos), the fullness of all the secrets of God (as first mentioned in 10:7) has been reached.⁸⁷

As noted above, the renovation wrought in principle (II Cor. 5

⁸⁴Caird, pp. 263-264.

⁸⁵Kepler, p. 207.

⁸⁶Smith, Wycliffe, p. 1100.

⁸⁷Rissi, pp. 54-55.

17 - and also Ro. 8:21) awaits its consummation. In Revelation 21:6 that consummation is announced. When God declares, "they are done," He means that all things spoken to John have been fulfilled. When He calls Himself the beginning and the end, it connotes the satisfaction of man's deepest need.⁸⁸ R. C. H. Lenski says that the beginning and the end signify "all God's saving work from inception to consummation."⁸⁹ This is important for the purposes of this study since the emphasis on the "finishing" of God's power in weakness is that His work is done when men are yielded to His presence most fully.

William Barclay links God's declaration to a similar one in Isaiah 44:6 and defines the word translated "beginning" (arche) as "source," and the word telos as not simply the end in point of time or as the last of a series, but as the "goal," the consummation in which things come to their completing, their finishing.⁹⁰ Robertson adds that this corresponds to the use of telos in Romans 11:36 and Ephesians 4:6, where all of life is declared to find its beginning and ending in God.⁹¹

Finally, the future consummation of the end of God's work must be seen in relation to the past and present tense experiences of that completion. Julian Price Love summarizes this point as follows:

Even as the dying Christ could exclaim on his triumphant cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30), so God the Father here says of all the work of redemption, "It is done!" It is especially thrilling to note John's reference to "the fountain of the water of life," since he had pictured as one of the most terrible of the results of judg-

⁸⁸Ladd, p. 278.

⁸⁹Lenski, Revelation, p. 622.

⁹⁰Barclay, Revelation, II, 262.

⁹¹Robertson, p. 467.

ment that the fountains had been turned to blood (16:4). In that scene of the judgment, the bowls of wrath, the last expiring breath of doom had been proclaimed when the seventh angel emptied his bowl upon the air and a great voice had uttered these same words, "It is done!" (16:17). What then was proclaimed in judgment is here uttered in mellow tones of triumph.⁹²

Love does not mention, however, the present tense of God's finishing process, and that is the finishing with which we are concerned in this study - viz., the "being brought to its end" which happens to God's power in the weakness of the believer. Since man can never be completely yielded and totally weak before God, he awaits the consummation of the ending, which is pictured in Revelation 21, with eager anticipation.

⁹²Love, pp. 120-121.

C. II Timothy 4:6-8

In II Timothy 4:6-8 Paul describes the ending of his life and his contentment with its "finishing." To look intensely at the three verses surrounding the use of teleō will enable us to see the finality of the word and thereby better to understand why Paul chose it rather than teleioō for his purposes in II Corinthians 12:9. This passage to be studied in this chapter may be translated as follows:

4:6. For I already am being poured out, and the time of my departure has come pressing in.

v. 7. I have struggled the noble struggle; I have finished the course; I have maintained the faith.

v. 8. For the rest, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will give to me as a reward in that day - and not only to me, but also to all those who have loved His epiphany.

Paul's attitude in writing these words to Timothy must be carefully understood. He is not recording a death wish by them, nor is his message one of gloom and despair. Furthermore, he is not making any comment about his own readiness to die.⁹³ Rather, he is merely stating the fact that he is about to die, and he records that fact with joy in order to inspire his beloved Timothy to have the same attitude and assurance.⁹⁴

⁹³Albert Barnes, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, ed. Robert Frew, Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 246.

⁹⁴R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937), p. 858.

Paul uses two images in verse 6 to present his attitude towards his imminent death. First, he describes it as "an act of worship."⁹⁵ He uses the picture of the Jewish liturgical custom of pouring out a drink offering of wine at the foot of the altar as the preliminary ritual of the daily offering at the Temple (as noted in Exodus 29:40 and Numbers 28:7).⁹⁶

Paul's whole life had been a sacrifice; he had freely outpoured his "order, genius, culture, devotion."⁹⁷ Now he specifically means that "his martyrdom pays homage to God and is of value for the salvation of souls."⁹⁸ The verb that is used here is otherwise used only once in the New Testament (see Phil. 2:17), and in that occurrence also Paul's emphasis is that his pouring out of himself is for the purpose of the strengthening of his readers' faith. He does not see his own death as a sacrifice of atonement (that distinction is very important for the thesis of this study), but he does recognize that his death is a "sacrifice of acknowledgement to the grace of God and his truth,"⁹⁹ which is useful for the growth of other believers in their faith.

⁹⁵ Ronald A. Ward, Commentary on I and II Timothy and Titus (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1974), p. 210.

⁹⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, gen. ed. Henry Chadwick, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1963), p. 208.

⁹⁷ E. M. Blaiklock, The Pastoral Epistles: A Study Guide Commentary to the Epistles of I and II Timothy and Titus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), p. 120.

⁹⁸ George A. Denzer, "The Pastoral Letters," The New Testament and Topical Articles, eds. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Raymond E. Brown, Vol. II, The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 359.

⁹⁹ Matthew Henry, p. 946.

The second image which Paul uses to state the fact of his imminent death is that of a departure. The word he chooses is loaded with several connotations according to various vocations. To the farmer, the word describes the unyoking of an ox; to the warrior, it speaks of unloosing the cords and stakes in order to strike one's tent and, consequently, to be free to march on after the battle has been won. To the seaman, the word brings the release associated with the unmooring of a ship, and to the prisoner, the term signifies release from captivity. Finally, the connotation of the word for the philosopher is that of the unravelling of a knotty problem.¹⁰⁰ These graphic pictures increase our sensitivity to the freedom and exhilaration of Paul's recognition that his time was at hand and, consequently, the concept of "finishing" in verse 7 becomes more decisive.

Verse 6 is triumphant! Paul glories in the purposes of his death and so prepares Timothy for the review of his life which follows in verse 7. There three parallel clauses, using images from the stadium (a picture used extensively by Paul in I Corinthians 9:24ff.), illustrate the satisfaction with which Paul faces his death.¹⁰¹

As R. C. H. Lenski points out, the direct objects in each of the three phrases are placed forward for emphasis. The result is that Paul's mood is seen to be triumphant. "There is no regret, no sadness but only uplift, holy satisfaction, triumphant hope on the eve of final realiza-

¹⁰⁰ Guy H. King, To My Son: An Expositional Study of II Timothy (Port Washington, Penn.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1944), pp. 114-115.

¹⁰¹ Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, The Pastoral Epistles, trans. Philip Buttolph and Adela Yarbro, Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 121.

tion.¹⁰²

The first of these images is often misunderstood to describe a battle or conflict. A much more accurate interpretation, according to Lenski, is that of a noble contest.¹⁰³ The Wycliffe Bible Commentary summarizes the impact of this figure and introduces the other two figures of the verse as follows:

For Paul it was more than a grim and momentous battle; it was a contest, a race that demanded all the enthusiasm of a fervent, consecrated spirit. . . . To have fought the good fight implies having won. This fits Paul's figure well, and adds irony: though he appears to be conquered and to be about to die a felon's death, yet he had conquered, for he has finished the course Jesus set before him; he has kept the faith by committing it to faithful men and establishing churches.¹⁰⁴

The image that particularly concerns us is the second one, which utilizes the verb teleō, again not as a boast on Paul's part, but merely to state a fact. What had been Paul's purpose in life, to "accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus" (Acts 20: 24), has now become a retrospect.¹⁰⁵ Paul's goal had been to complete his course with no regrets, to end as well as he had begun, and now he is at the finishing.¹⁰⁶ As Ronald Ward reminds us, "a man does not go on

¹⁰² Lenski, Timothy, p. 859

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 860.

¹⁰⁴ Wilbur B. Wallis, "I and II Timothy, Titus," ed. Everett F. Harrison, The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Moody Monthly ed.; New York: The Iverson-Norman Associates, 1971), p. 880.

¹⁰⁵ Newport J. D. White, The First and Second Epistles to Timothy and the Epistle to Titus, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, The Expositor's Greek Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 178.

¹⁰⁶ Homer A. Kent, Jr., The Pastoral Epistles: Studies in I and II Timothy and Titus (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 297.

running when he has breasted the tape."¹⁰⁷ Paul is saying that the race is over for him; he has not fallen by the wayside because he has not run aimlessly. Donald Guthrie adds an important insight when he comments upon the significance that Paul "makes no claim to have won the race, but is content to have stayed the course."¹⁰⁸ The metaphor is, consequently, especially suited to express the idea of endurance in the Christian life. William Barclay elaborates upon this idea as follows:

I have finished the race. It is easy to begin but hard to finish. The one thing necessary for life is staying-power, and that is what so many people lack. It was suggested to a certain very famous man that his biography should be written while he was still alive. He absolutely refused to give permission, and his reason was: "I have seen so many men fall out on the last lap." It is easy to wreck a noble life or a fine record by some closing folly. But it was Paul's claim that he had finished the race. There is a deep satisfaction in reaching the goal.¹⁰⁹

The emphasis, then, in Paul's words to Timothy is not that his work was being brought to a halt just at the time when he had reached a pinnacle of effectiveness. Rather, he rejoices that he had not wavered in pursuing his assignment. Some commentators feel the need to postulate at this point that someone other than Paul is describing the apostle in these terms,¹¹⁰ but it does not seem to me to be necessary to avoid his

¹⁰⁷Ward, p. 211.

¹⁰⁸Donald Guthrie, The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary, gen. ed. R. V. G. Tasker, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 169.

¹⁰⁹William Barclay, The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, The Daily Study Bible Series (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 210.

¹¹⁰E.g., Fred D. Gealy, Intro. and exegesis, The First and Second Epistles to Timothy and The Epistle to Titus, Morgan P. Noyes, exposition, Vol. XI, The Interpreter's Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 511.

authorship of these words about himself. Certainly in context it is apparent that his boasting is always in the Lord - especially as that is seen in the major passage of this study (see section II G below).

The picture of racing in Hebrews 12:1 offers a useful comparison. Therein the anonymous writer speaks of keeping one's weight down, of keeping the limbs free from encumbrance, of keeping the eyes right (by fixing them on Jesus), of keeping the race going.¹¹¹ These are the sorts of things that Paul can say he has brought to the finish.

An interesting possibility is raised by the speculation that the word for course might mean a lap in the race. This interpretation fits in well with the next figure of the verse since the gospel that is entrusted to the believer is best kept by passing it on to others (according to II Timothy 2:2). The Wycliffe Bible Commentary proposes this idea in these words:

The word may mean a lap in a race. Paul may be thinking of the transmission of the faith through the centuries as a relay race; he has successfully finished his course and passed on the faith to others. The figure of the relay race seems to fit the following verse, for not Paul only, but the whole "team" will receive the prize.¹¹²

This interpretation also is in keeping with the perfect verb tenses used in this verse, for they are seen to imply that something is finally finished, the consequences of which will continue to abide.¹¹³ Because Paul has been faithful in completing his ministry, the faith remains unshaken.

It is not necessary for the purposes of this study to consider at length the meaning of the phrase, "I have kept the faith," but it is

¹¹¹King, pp. 120-121.

¹¹²Wallis, Wycliffe, p. 880.

¹¹³Blaiklock, p. 120.

important to put all the clauses of this seventh verse into a proper perspective of what is accomplished by God and what constitutes the "finishing" of the apostle. Harold J. Berry outlines this distinction as follows:

Although Paul knew the "rest" of faith, which comes to one who realizes what he has in Jesus Christ, he did not decrease the amount of energy he was expending in getting out the gospel to others and in suffering for the cause of the gospel.

We cannot strive to be accepted by God, because we are accepted by Him only on the basis of faith (II Cor. 5:9). However, once we have placed our faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and in all the resources He makes available for daily living, there is a conflict which follows as we expend our energies to win and to teach others.¹¹⁴

This distinction is particularly important for this study since its thesis is that only in man's weakness can Christ really bring to completion the work that He must do on His people in order to conform them to His will. Paul rejoices in the finishing (teleō) of his work as an apostle. How much more must Christ rejoice when He can finish exerting power on us because our weakness yields to His perfect work!

Holmes Rolston puts all this into perspective and introduces the relationship of these ideas to the hope of the crown of righteousness (v. 8) in these words:

. . . he knows that he is very close to the end of the road. He can look back upon his earthly pilgrimage as finished. He has fought the good fight. In the great struggle between good and evil he has given the full impact of his mature life in the cause of Jesus Christ. Life in any event is a struggle. But it makes a lot of difference whether one fights on the right or the wrong side. Paul has finished his course. Underlying the passage as a whole there is the idea of a race that is to be run on a course that has been laid out by the Lord. Paul has kept the faith. He has remained consistently loyal to the great insights which have come to him from his Christian faith. His understanding of life has been tested at many places. But he has remained obedient to the heavenly vision which was given to him on the road to Damascus. . . . As verse 7 looks back on life, verse 8

¹¹⁴Harold J. Berry. Gems from the Original (Lincoln, Nebraska: Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1972), p. 149.

looks forward to the future, which for Paul is bright with hope. As the runner who has completed his course, he expects to receive from the Lord his reward, the crown of righteousness. This involves for him both acceptance with God and the experience of being "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29).¹¹⁵

It is the hope of the crown of righteousness, mentioned in verse 8, which has enabled Paul to persevere in finishing his course. The tense of the verb is significant, for the crown is not being laid up now, nor is it about to be laid up, but, as Lenski notes, it "has been laid up long ago, ever since Paul stepped into the noble contest and race. . . . The thought of that crown has ever kept his courage high, his hope triumphant."¹¹⁶

Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann perceive even more deeply the assurance of this expression in the following explanation of Paul's word choice:

"It is reserved for" (*ἀποκείται*) is an expression which has almost become technical in edicts of commendation, in which recognition was bestowed on someone by oriental kings. It is perhaps originally connected with the fact that the names of those who received such honors were entered in the annals of the state.¹¹⁷ This expression is reminiscent of the terminology of martyrdom.

The distinction in this study between what is the work of God and what is man's is kept clear by the realization that the crown of righteousness in verse 8 does not refer to any crown that might belong to those who are righteous. Instead, the expression refers to the crown

¹¹⁵Holmes Rolston, The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Thessalonians, the First and Second Letters of Paul to Timothy, the Letter of Paul to Titus, the Letter of Paul to Philemon, Vol. XXIII, The Layman's Bible Commentary, ed. Balmer H. Kelly (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 112.

¹¹⁶Lenski, Timothy, p. 862.

¹¹⁷Dibelius and Conzelmann, p. 121.

of perfect righteousness which is God's gift. In other words, it implies the completion of salvation.¹¹⁸

Paul mentions this crown not in "selfish exaltation," but as a means for encouraging Timothy "to live as Paul has lived, to serve as he has served, and to regard death as he regards it. . . ."¹¹⁹ In other words, the joy that Paul experiences as he faces his own imminent death is available to everyone who similarly finishes the race in total dependence upon the Lord.

Those who receive the crown, those who experience the satisfaction of the finishing of the race, are those who have loved Christ's appearing (cf. Phil. 3:20). Again, the perfect tense is used for the verb "to love," which implies that the believers who will receive the crown are those who have dwelt in love, in the hope of seeing Christ.¹²⁰ They have "set their love upon" His coming and have steadfastly maintained their hope for His appearing.¹²¹

This conclusion to Paul's comments about his forthcoming martyrdom is particularly significant for this study since it brings together the various uses of the word teleō. Paul can rejoice in his finishing of his work as an apostle because he realizes that all of his efforts were based on the finishing work of God through him. He knows that it is the love for Christ's appearing, the waiting for His presence that constitutes the

¹¹⁸ Sir Robert Falconer, The Pastoral Epistles (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 96.

¹¹⁹ Charles R. Erdman, The Pastoral Epistles of Paul (I and II Timothy, Titus): An Exposition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1923), p. 131.

¹²⁰ Falconer, p. 96.

¹²¹ Wallis, Wycliffe, p. 881.

power for service. Consequently, he looks forward to his death, the point of perfect weakness, when God's power on him can finally come to its perfect rest.

D. I Corinthians 1:18-2:5

In our exegetical study of John we have seen God's perfect tabernacling in the past. And we have anticipated the future in our consideration of Revelation and II Timothy. Now we turn to the present and discover in I Corinthians 1:18-2:5 its profound picture of the concepts of weakness and strength. In this passage, also, Paul indirectly demonstrates the principle of God's resting power on the yielded Christian life. This section may be translated as follows:

1:18. For the word of the cross is, on the one hand, foolishness to those who are perishing and, on the other hand, power of God to us who are being saved.

v. 19. For it has been written, "I will bring to nought the wisdom of the learned ones, and the intelligence of the intelligent ones I will set aside."

v. 20. Where the learned? Where the scribes? Where the disputants of this age? Has not God shown to be foolish the wisdom of the world?

v. 21. For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through (its) wisdom, God was well pleased through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who believe.

v. 22. And since Jews ask a sign and Gentiles seek wisdom,

v. 23. But we are announcing Christ, as crucified, (He is) on the one hand a trap (scandal/stumbling block) to Jews and, on the other hand, foolishness to Gentiles,

v. 24. But to those called, both Jews and Gentiles, (He is) Christ, power of God and wisdom of God,

v. 25. Because the foolishness of God is more learned than men and the weakness of God stronger than men.

v. 26. For take heed to your call, brothers, that not many (were) learned according to flesh, not many powerful, not many well born,

v. 27. But God chose out the foolish of the world in order that He might continue to dishonor the learned, and God chose out the weak of the world in order that He might continue to put to shame the strong,

v. 28. And God chose out the low of the world and the ones treated with scorn, the ones not being, that He might render ineffective those being,

v. 29. In order that each body might not boast before God.

v. 30. But from Him you are in Christ Jesus, Who has become wisdom for us from God and justice and holiness and a redeemer,

v. 31. In order that, in the manner it has been written: "The one who boasts, let him boast in the Lord."

5:1. And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come with prominence of word or wisdom of announcing the mystery of God,

v. 2. For I decided not to know among you anything except Jesus Christ and Him as crucified.

v. 3. And I in weakness and in fear and in much trembling approached you (face to face).

v. 4. Even my word and my message (were) not in persuasion of wisdom, but in manifestation of spirit and power,

v. 5. In order that your faith might not be in wisdom of men, but in power of God.

Thomas Aquinas' comment that men regard as foolishness whatever surpasses their understanding¹²² is applicable to the message of this section of I Corinthians. Paul speaks at length about the inability of those not being saved to comprehend the message of the cross. He shows how the world's concepts of power and wisdom are not appropriate to the reality of existence.

It is the word of the cross that is focal. In The Interpreter's

¹²²Richard Kugelman, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," The New Testament and Topical Articles, eds. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Raymond E. Brown, Vol. II, The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 257.

Bible John Short describes its significance as follows:

It is the expression of the highest aspect of the spirit known and experienced by men, and also of the greatest uplifting and redeeming power in the universe, viz., the power of vicarious suffering. . . .

The meaning of the cross as envisaged by Paul is most certainly the supreme expression of the power of God. There God in Christ is exerting himself to the utmost, and at great cost, to bridge the gulf created between him and man by man's sin. No other power in the world had done it: none other has been able to do it. As one theologian has put it, "The atonement was a task fit for the energy of God." Such a reconciliation lies far beyond the power of man.¹²³

Many commentators note that it is surprising to find the idea of foolishness contrasted in I Corinthians 1:18 not with the word for wisdom, but with the word for power. It must be recognized, C. K. Barrett says, that this is where Paul's understanding of the Gospel begins (as in Romans 1:16).¹²⁴

Leon Morris adds that the word of the cross is not "simply good advice to men, telling them what they should do. Nor is it a message about God's power. It is God's power."¹²⁵ It is a practical vindication, G. G. Findlay proclaims, rather than a false theory. He notes, furthermore, that because the Gospel is such a power (dunamis), it is, therefore, the truest wisdom (sophia). Those who are saved are the Gospel's apology. He asserts that the double use of the verb estin emphasizes the actuality of the contrasted results - foolishness to those perishing as

¹²³ John Short, exposition, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Clarence T. Craig, intro. and exegesis, Vol. X, The Interpreter's Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 27.

¹²⁴ C. K. Barrett, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, gen. ed. Henry Chadwick, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1968), p. 52.

¹²⁵ Leon Morris, The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary, gen. ed. R. V. G. Tasker, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), p. 43.

opposed to power for those saved.¹²⁶ Clarence T. Craig summarizes these comments as follows:

In the eyes of the world the cross was a symbol of weakness and futility. But the power of God is measured by a different standard. Believers are saved, not by some new intellectual truth, but by the apprehension of a new power.¹²⁷

It is important, however, in defining this power to note that it is different from the omnipotent power and almightiness of God, His creative power which ordered the universe by fiat. That power, R. C. H. Lenski notes, is not able to save sinners. If it could, Christ's suffering and death on the cross would not have been necessary. Rather, the power of the cross proclaimed by Paul in I Corinthians 1:18ff. is that of God's grace "which alone reaches sinners."¹²⁸

Albert Barnes comments in his Notes on the efficacy of the power of the word of the cross as follows:

When the gospel, however, or the preaching of the cross, is spoken of as effectual or powerful, it must be understood of all the agencies which are connected with it: and does not refer to simple, abstract propositions, but to the truth as it comes attended with the influences which God sends down to accompany it. It includes, therefore, the promised agency of the Holy Spirit, without which it would not be effectual. But the agency of the Spirit is designed to give efficacy to that which is really adapted to produce the effects, and not to act in an arbitrary manner. All the effects of the gospel on the soul - in regeneration, repentance, faith, sanctification; - in hope, love, joy, peace, patience, temperance, purity, and devotedness to God, are only such as the gospel

¹²⁶ G. G. Findlay, St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, Vol. II, The Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 767.

¹²⁷ Clarence T. Craig, intro. and exegesis, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, John Short, exposition, Vol. X, The Interpreter's Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), pp. 27-28.

¹²⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937), p. 54.

is fitted to produce. It has a set of truths and promises just adapted to each of these effects . . . and adapted to produce just these results. The Holy Spirit secures their influence in the mind. . . .¹²⁹

This comment has been quoted at length because it emphasizes a basic principle of this study - viz., that God's system of working through men is really fitted to save them and to use them. It is when men are perfectly yielded to His plan (which, of course, can never totally happen in this life) that God's power no longer has to be exerted on the believer, but can be totally working through the individual for others.

Understanding the meaning of the cross and realizing its power, in spite of the world's conception of it as foolishness, the Christian is forced to make a choice also for himself. To speak of the foolishness of the cross, Alan Redpath asserts, does not mean that the Christian has to scrap his brains, but it does mean that the person who wants the power of the cross needs to choose the crucified life.¹³⁰

Ralph P. Martin asserts that "as the suffering, lowly Christ portrays God's strength-in-weakness, so it is with those who belong to Him."¹³¹ However, Redpath mourns, in the choosing between the two principles, "the tragedy today is that very largely the church has chosen its own wisdom and lost its power."¹³² In these words, he invites God's peo-

¹²⁹ Albert Barnes, I Corinthians, ed. Robert Frew, Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 14.

¹³⁰ Alan Redpath, The Royal Route to Heaven: Studies in First Corinthians (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1960), p. 31.

¹³¹ Ralph P. Martin, I Corinthians - Galatians, Scripture Union Bible Study Book (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 7.

¹³² Redpath, p. 29.

ple to apply this section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians to their own lives and to recognize their weakness:

"We have this treasure in earthen vessels," says Paul, "that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us" (II Corinthians 4:7). These earthen vessels are helpless and weak in themselves, and in the battle of life we must stand "by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness, on the right hand and on the left" (II Corinthians 6:7). In other words, we must recognize our own weakness, even glory in it, that the power of God may rest upon us. . . .

The principle here is as true today as it was then. First there must be a life willing to efface itself, to retreat from its imagined cleverness and wisdom, from its own efforts to stand against the pressure. There rests upon such a life the anointing of the Spirit of God, with this tremendous result that faith shall stand, not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.¹³³

This is the principle that is the focus of this study: that as God's people learn to understand their own weakness, God no longer has to exert power upon them to get them to be yielded. Then His power can be brought to its finish on their lives; rather, it can be used more effectually through them on behalf of others.

It is not necessary for the purposes of this study to comment extensively on I Corinthians 1:19-23, with the exception of noting the participle construction in verse 23. The Wycliffe Bible Commentary mentions that the word crucified occurs without the article and concludes that this construction strongly emphasizes the way in which Paul preached Christ - i.e., as crucified. "A Christ without a cross could not save," it is observed.¹³⁴ This is significant for the purposes of this study since Christ's cry from the cross that "It has been finished" utilizes

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 34-35.

¹³⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "I Corinthians," ed. Everett F. Harrison, The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Moody Monthly ed.; New York: The Iverson-Norman Associates, 1971), p. 592.

the same verb that Paul chooses to record the finishing of God's power when His servants are weak.

The word for power which is a subject of this study occurs again in I Corinthians 1:24. Because at this point its context emphasizes its meaning as "effectiveness in achieving purposes," the implication is that those who would know Christ as the power of God would have to know what His purposes were.¹³⁵

The message here, as in Romans 1:16, is that the power of preaching Christ lies in the fact that it calls to faith.¹³⁶ Lenski adds that this is not the subjective opinion of those who are called, but the objective fact of their calling, which is supported by their experience of Christ as the caller.¹³⁷ As Leon Morris points out, the concept of "calling" in Paul's writings usually carries with it the thought of effectual calling - that the call has been heard and obeyed. He concludes, "Men called like this know that the crucified Christ means power."¹³⁸

This is an important dimension of the concept of power because it stresses the primacy of God's action in faith. Man can only believe because God has called him.¹³⁹ God's power to save is brought to its end - i.e., it had accomplished its task - when a person responds in be-

¹³⁵Short, Interpreter's, p. 32.

¹³⁶F. W. Grosheide, Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, gen. ed. F. F. Bruce, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), p. 49.

¹³⁷Lenski, I Corinthians, p. 68.

¹³⁸Morris, I Corinthians, p. 46.

¹³⁹Kugelman, Jerome, p. 257.

lief.

Verse 24 is tied to 25 by four uses of the genitive, "of God," a construction which emphasizes triumphantly that God's people "preach as power and wisdom One who wears in the world the aspect of utter powerlessness and folly."¹⁴⁰ Findlay notes that the word moron has replaced the word moria, which was used in the preceding verses, and then he comments that this word and asthenes are concrete terms denoting "the foolish weak policy of God embodied in the cross."¹⁴¹ Lenski adds that the use of the neuter form to asthenes tou theou, rather than of the abstract astheneia ("God's weakness"), gives the meaning of "the thing that is weak on God's part." The thing that is referred to is seen in context to be the crucifixion of Christ (as expressed also in II Cor. 13:4). However, contrary to the expectations of those who would view Christ crucified as folly, Lenski concludes with these words:

And yet this foolish and this weak thing outranks, absolutely outdoes all the wisdom and the power of men, not only the wisdom and the power they actually possess, but also all that they conceive in their minds.¹⁴²

Both the concept of weakness and a theology of power in weakness are made more clear by this contrast in I Corinthians 1:24-25. C. K. Barrett summarizes this glorious contradiction as follows:

If Christ crucified is power and wisdom this is so only in a paradoxical sense, for he certainly does not represent a divine act of coercion or a formulated system of theology, metaphysics, or ethics. This paradox Paul underlines [in verse 25, which Barrett then quotes]. What God has done in Christ crucified is a direct contradiction of human ideas of wisdom and power, yet it achieved what hu-

¹⁴⁰Findlay, p. 770.

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 771.

¹⁴²Lenski, I Corinthians, p. 70.

man wisdom and power fail to achieve. It does convey the truth about God (and man), and it does deliver man from his bondage. . . .¹⁴³

In the midst of this contradiction, Christians are urged in verse 26 to consider their call. James Robinson Boise observes that the word calling can be seen in two different dimensions - viz., that of the calling to share in the kingdom of God and that of one's position in the world.¹⁴⁴ Both dimensions have a bearing on how one handles the paradox of weakness and strength.

Similarly, the phrase "not many" moves in two directions. First, it emphasizes that, in general, the members of the Corinthian church were not outstanding persons. Leon Morris describes the situation in this way:

Rather He chooses those who have little to commend them from the worldly standpoint. These He transforms, and uses as His instruments for the effecting of His purpose. His power works miracles in the most hopeless material.¹⁴⁵

On the other hand, as John Rice points out, though there were not many of noble heritage in the history of God's people, there are a few! He mentions such names as Moses, Paul, Torrey, Machen, and others, but then he notes that "Moses must come to failure in Egypt and keep sheep in the desert until he is eighty." And again he reminds us that "Paul must have a thorn in the flesh if he will be most used."¹⁴⁶ The point is

¹⁴³Barrett, I Corinthians, p. 56.

¹⁴⁴James Robinson Boise, Notes, Critical and Explanatory, on the Greek Text of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, the Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, ed. Nathan E. Wood (Philadelphia: T. Griffith and Rowland Press, 1896), p. 151.

¹⁴⁵Morris, I Corinthians, p. 47.

¹⁴⁶John Rice, The Church of God at Corinth (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1973), p. 28.

that those who were of noble heritage had to be shaped so that their worldly position did not interfere with their calling.

John Short brings these two sides of the calling together in his reference to the beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3). He rephrases it thus: "Blessed are the humble-minded, the teachable ones, for God's Spirit can reign in their hearts," and then concludes, "Given a humble, teachable, and obedient heart in which to rest and through which to work, there is 'a love divine, all loves excelling,' and nothing can ever stay its redeeming work."¹⁴⁷ For the topic of this study we could substitute the word tabernacle for the word rest in that last line and have an excellent summary of how God's power is brought to its finish in the weakness of men.

Verses 27 and 28 continue the message of verse 26 by repeating the same three terms and adding a fourth. Increased emphasis is added by several elements of style. First, Paul reverses the subject and predicate in each of the three clauses in order to stress the types of persons chosen. Simultaneously, the verb is highlighted because of its position after its object. Then, the verb is in the middle voice, to stress that God chose these persons for Himself, and in the aorist tense, to show that it was a definite past action.¹⁴⁸ Finally, the phrase exaloxato ho theos occurs three times to give solemn assurance that God had indeed so called such people. Furthermore, the objects of God's saving choice and the means by which they were brought to salvation match each other. For example, by means of the foolish and the weak, the foolish and the weak

¹⁴⁷Short, Interpreter's, pp. 33 and 34.

¹⁴⁸Lenski, I Corinthians, p. 78.

are saved.¹⁴⁹

The phrase tou kosmou also occurs three times in these verses. Findlay calls its form a partative genitive and describes its significance as follows:

. . . out of all the world contained, God chose its (actually) foolish, weak, base things - making "faex urbis lux orbis." In this God acted deliberately, pursuing the course maintained through previous ages. . . .¹⁵⁰

The first set of terms describes a class of persons, whereas the next two relate to worldly forces and institutions, but the message for all is the same - that God would confound the scornful world. Not only will it be robbed of its glory, but these verses add that its lauded ones will lose their very power and being.¹⁵¹

This impression is heightened by the addition of the fourth term in verse 28. Not only does God choose the lowly, the poor, the slaves, but also He uses the nonentities, in order to "destroy . . . the pretensions of all who account themselves as something."¹⁵² His desire is for His people to be yielded and open to His tabernacling. Lenski declares that "God can work only where there is nothing. God can enter only where the place is not already filled."¹⁵³ In other words, He can tabernacle only where a life is open to Him.

John Schmidt takes that perception further and applies it to the

¹⁴⁹Findlay, p. 772.

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Kugelman, Jerome, p. 257.

¹⁵³Lenski, I Corinthians, p. 79.

whole church. He writes this:

Yet by a paradox that finds its proof on almost every page of Christian history, the ignorant conquer the worldly wise and the weak claim victory over the mighty. When the church has forgotten this and has relied upon her trained leadership, effective organization, and large resources, she has failed. For her strength does not lie in these, but in God.

We must realize our absolute dependence upon Him. . . .¹⁵⁴

This total dependence allows for God's power to be brought to its finish in His people.

Verse 29 tells us that the result of God's choosing must be that no one has any basis for boasting before God. William Barclay reinforces the message of this verse as follows:

As Bultmann put it, the one basic sin is self-assertion, or the desire for recognition. It is only when we realize that we can do nothing and that God can and will do everything that real religion begins. It is the amazing and the true fact of life that it is the people who realize their own weakness, their own lack of wisdom, their own helplessness and powerlessness, who in the end are strong and wise. It is the fact of experience that the man who thinks that he can take on life all by himself in the end is certain to make shipwreck of life.¹⁵⁵

For purposes of limitation, the significance of the attributes of Christ that are mentioned in I Corinthians 1:30 and the quotation from Jeremiah in verse 31 need not be considered in this study. It is sufficient to summarize these verses by noting this "one great fact": God has freely given us in Christ what no man - whether wise or strong - could obtain for himself. Human pride must give way to trusting humility."¹⁵⁶ It is ironic that what the world strives after can only be truly received

¹⁵⁴John Schmidt, Letter to Corinth (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1947), p. 12.

¹⁵⁵William Barclay, The Letters to the Corinthians, The Daily Study Bible (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 24-25.

¹⁵⁶Craig, Interpreter's, p. 34.

when striving ceases. In our weakness Christ becomes all things for us.

One final point must be made before moving on to I Corinthians 2. In his commentary on 1:18-31, Kenneth J. Foreman raises the question of Christ-mysticism. He notes, however, that Paul's words are distinct from such an emphasis in that the individual does not lose his identity as a person. He is transformed into the image of Christ, but not literally into part of Christ. Christ is the life of the Christian who is yielded, but in the sense (different from that of the mystics) that the Christian's life is "in Christ," - i.e., that His life flows into theirs and makes them over.¹⁵⁷ This distinction reinforces the major concept of this study - the idea of God's tabernacling in His people. It is not a mystical concept, but the declaration that God transforms His people by means of Christ's presence within them.

In chapter 2 Paul shows how the message and those who hear it and those who preach it all match each other in folly and feebleness. In contrast to "excellency" of word (v. 1), which denotes a "rising out above something,"¹⁵⁸ Paul describes his weakness and fear and trembling.

Many commentators assume that Paul speaks in verse 2 of knowing nothing except "Christ and Him crucified" because of his defeat at the hands of the Greek philosophers in Athens, from which he had come to Corinth. Though it is true that he needed cheering (for God provided it for him in a vision, according to Acts 18:9-11),¹⁵⁹ it is an exaggeration to

¹⁵⁷ Kenneth J. Foreman, The Letter of Paul to the Romans, the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, the Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, Vol. XXI, The Layman's Bible Commentary, ed. Balmer H. Kelly (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1961), pp. 74-75.

¹⁵⁸ Grosheide, p. 58.

¹⁵⁹ Lenski, I Corinthians, p. 90.

call Athens "the scene of his only failure."¹⁶⁰ Such an interpretation takes us away from the point of the text, that Paul was weak, not only bodily, but consciously in his recognition of his personal lack of resources for the task before him.

Paul speaks often of his weakness, especially in the letters to the Corinthians (I 4:10, II 11:30, 12:5, 9). This emphasis must be seen within the larger context of all the paradoxes of the Corinthian letters and of Christ crucified (verse 2) around Whom they focus. Barrett summarizes these tensions as follows:

Of all the epistles, those to the Corinthians are most full of Christian paradox - of strength that is made perfect in weakness, of poor men who make many rich, . . . of those who have nothing but possess all things, who are the scum of the earth but lead it to salvation, who die and yet live; and the heart of the paradox is the preaching of the feeble and stupid message of the crucified Christ, which nevertheless proves to have a power and a wisdom no human eloquence possesses, since it is the power and wisdom of God Himself.¹⁶¹

This is why Paul decides to know nothing among the Corinthians except Christ rather than because of a failure due to a misplaced emphasis in his speech on Mars hill.

The verb form for crucified in verse 2 is significantly unusual. Whereas the indicative forms of this verb are almost always aorist in tense, in this case the participle is perfect. Such a grammatical form reflects the continuing force of Christ's crucifixion¹⁶² - a theological statement quite appropriate in the context of Paul's declaration.

¹⁶⁰Schmidt, p. 13.

¹⁶¹Barrett, I Corinthians, p. 64.

¹⁶²William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, I Corinthians, gen. eds. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Friedman, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976), p. 156.

Paul's emphasis on his own weakness is not based solely, or even primarily, on the physical ailments from which he suffered. Rather, it was his "state of mind," his being oppressed with a sense of his insufficiency and a realization that he had a task to do which was entirely above his powers.¹⁶³ Spiros Zodhiates clarifies our interpretation with these words:

True, he was physically weak, as we gather from II Corinthians 12:7, where he speaks of his "thorn in the flesh." But the expression egenomeen pros human (I became toward you) denotes rather an attitude than a permanent state of being. "I became weak," I took upon myself that attitude that if your salvation were to be effected it would not be accomplished through any power that I possessed, either of body or mind.

. . . He came with the consciousness of his own personal inadequacy to make the preaching of the Gospel effective in the lives of sinners. That's the consciousness that every one of us should have as we proclaim the Gospel.¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, as James Robinson Boise points out, the combination of the preposition en with the dative case and a verb of motion implies not only "the coming into a state, but the continuance in it." Moreover, the preposition en occurs with each noun, thereby making them more distinct.¹⁶⁵ Thus, as Paul understands his state of illness and spirit in light of the cross, "God brings him outwardly and inwardly into conformity with his preaching."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Charles Hodge, An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, [reprinted in] 1976), p. 31.

¹⁶⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, A Revolutionary Mystery: An Exposition of I Corinthians 2:1-16 (Ridgefield, New Jersey: AMG Press, 1974), pp. 52-53.

¹⁶⁵ Boise, p. 153.

¹⁶⁶ Hans Conzelmann, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, trans. James W. Leitch, Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, ed. George W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 54.

The same preposition en is used in verse 4 when Paul declares that his message came not with persuasive words of wisdom but in manifestation of the Spirit and power. The result of his coming with the attitude of weakness was that the Gospel was proved by "the changed lives that attended its proclamation,"¹⁶⁷ as Paul declares in II Corinthians 5:4.

The word translated "manifestation" or "demonstration" (apodeixis) signifies "the most rigorous proof."¹⁶⁸ Paul's claim is that the theology of weakness is not only logical, but also demonstrably true. C. K. Barrett gives insight into the significance of the context of this word choice by this statement:

Manifestation suggests proof. The genitives (πνεύματος and δυναμews) are thus both objective (since Spirit and power are manifested) and subjective (since the manifested Spirit and power bring proof of conviction). Spirit and power are often mentioned together (e.g., Acts i.8), and may be regarded as a hendiadys - one concept expressed by means of two words. When Paul preached a divine power gripped his hearers . . . and constrained them to penitence and faith; this was the work of the Holy Spirit. Compare e.g. Rom. xv.19; I Thess. i.5.¹⁶⁹

William Orr and James Walther offer these translations for the hendiadys mentioned by Barrett: "spirit(ual) power" or, even better, "powerful Spirit."¹⁷⁰

Once again, in verse 5, Paul asserts the distinction, declaring that faith ought to rest not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. This contrast of spiritual power and human wisdom is comparable to a larger theological contrast characteristic of Paul - viz., the contrast

¹⁶⁷ Findlay, p. 776.

¹⁶⁸ Morris, I Corinthians, p. 52.

¹⁶⁹ Barrett, I Corinthians, pp. 65-66.

¹⁷⁰ Orr and Walther, p. 156.

between "works done in obedience to law" and "divine grace accepted in faith."¹⁷¹ It is the combination of these two contrasts that undergirds the thesis of this study - that power is brought to its finish in the person who no longer relies on works done under the law, but who is freed by weakness to receive grace in all its dimensions.

In these words Paul was denouncing a faith that rests on mere emotions or on logical and philosophical arguments, a faith which, consequently, would be "at the mercy of other arguments of the same nature."¹⁷² H. A. Ironside paraphrases Paul as saying this: "I do not want to preach things in such a way that my human effort will persuade them. I am depending upon the Holy Spirit of God and divine power to do the work."¹⁷³

Four important lessons have been taught by this summary of Paul's approach to ministry among the Corinthians. First, he has shown that the way to approach those needing conversion is to set forth the truth of Christ the crucified. Secondly, he has demonstrated that the proper state of mind is not one of self-confidence or carelessness, but one of a sense of the individual's own weakness and "with great anxiety and solicitude." Third, the success of the Gospel has been seen to be dependent not on the skill of the preacher, but on the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Finally, faith has been declared to be founded not upon arguments addressed to the understanding, but upon "the power of God as exerted with and by the truth upon the heart."¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹Barrett, I Corinthians, p. 66.

¹⁷²Johnson, Wycliffe, p. 594.

¹⁷³H. A. Ironside, Addresses on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1938), p. 88.

¹⁷⁴Hodge, pp. 32-33.

The latter calls every Christian into the testimony. In that faith issues in powerful changes in the believer's life, "every Christian has thus, in his own experience, furnished demonstration that the religion which he loves is from God, and not from man."¹⁷⁵

In these first five verses of I Corinthians 5, Paul has shown all things to be focused around the Gospel, through which God works to confound human wisdom by the seeming folly of the crucified Christ. Verse 1 speaks of the apostle's bearing in its relation to the Gospel; verse 2 declares the Gospel to be his one and only theme. Verse 3 shows his attitude, while verse 4 shows his method in proclaiming the message of the Gospel. Finally, this fifth verse illustrates that the overall governing aim of all of the apostle's activity has been that the Gospel might prevail.¹⁷⁶ His desire always has been that his hearer's faith might rest in the power of God, and this has been made possible because the power of God rested (tabernacled) on him in his weakness (II Corinthians 12:9).

W. G. H. Simon offers this summary of the entire section considered in this chapter. He speaks of I Corinthians 1:18-2:5 as follows:

The very nature of the Cross itself, the obscurity and lack of talents of those who preached it, the undistinguished character and position of those who responded to it, all alike emphasized its source in God, and the utter dependence on him of both preacher and convert.¹⁷⁷

Utter dependence is the key. God's people are driven by their

¹⁷⁵Barnes, I Corinthians, p. 31.

¹⁷⁶Findlay, p. 777.

¹⁷⁷W. G. H. Simon, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, gen. eds. John Marsh, David L. Edwards, Alan Richardson, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1959), p. 65.

weaknesses to the kind of dependence that issues in free movement of God's power from its source in Him, through the yielded Christian (without any obstruction), and out in service on behalf of others. In weakness, God's power on the individual is brought to its end.

E. Hebrews 4:14-6:3

We have seen an emphasis on finishing in the frequent use of teleō in the book of Revelation (see the second exegetical chapter above). In this chapter we will consider a selection from the Letter to the Hebrews which uses the verb teleioō extensively.

The passage to be considered, Hebrews 4:14-6:3, was chosen because it also makes use of the noun astheneia, which is part of the context of teleō in II Corinthians 12:9. We can observe, then, not only the concept of perfection in its emphasis differing from the concept of finishing, but also the idea of weakness and its relation to the two verb thoughts.

This selection may be translated as follows:

4:14. Therefore, having a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, namely, Jesus, the Son of God, let us continue to hold fast the confession.

v. 15. For we do not have a high priest not able to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one having been tempted according to all (in all ways) according to (our) likeness (but) without sin.

v. 16. Therefore, let us continue to approach with confidence the throne of grace, in order that we might receive mercy and find grace with a view to needed help.

5:1. For every high priest being received from men is appointed on behalf of men for the things towards God, in order that he might bring gifts and also sacrifices on behalf of sinners.

v. 2. (The priest is thus) able to be gentle with those who do not understand (the ignorant) and those going astray, since even he himself is beset with weakness.

v. 3. And on account of this he is obliged, just as on behalf of the people thus also in his own behalf, to be making offering concerning sin.

v. 4. And someone does not take to himself the honor, but being called by God, even as Aaron (was) also.

v. 5. In this way also Christ did not glorify Himself to become a high priest, but the one who called to Him, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you,"

v. 6. In like manner also says in another (place), "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek,"

v. 7. Who, in the days of his flesh, having brought prayers and also requests to the One Who is able to save Him out of death, with strong cries and tears and having been heard from His godly awe,

v. 8. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered;

v. 9. And having been made complete in character, He became for all those continuing to obey Him the Author of eternal salvation,

v. 10. Having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek,

v. 11. Concerning Whom (we have) much to say to you and (it is) hard to explain because you have become sluggish in hearing,

v. 12. For though you ought to be teachers because of the time, you have need again of one to teach you certain fundamental principles of the beginning of the oracles of God, and you have become ones having a need of milk and not solid food.

v. 13. For everyone who continues to share milk is unacquainted with the word of righteousness, for he is a child,

v. 14. But for the fully mature there is the solid food, for those who, on account of exercise, have many faculties trained for the purpose of distinguishing good and (correspondingly) evil.

6:1. Therefore, having left behind the beginning word concerning Christ, let us move on to maturity, not again laying a foundation of repentance from dead works and believing in God,

v. 2. Of the teachings of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of the raising of the dead, and eternal judgment.

v. 3. And this we will do, even as God permits.

This passage from Hebrews can best be understood if it is divided into three major theological thrusts - a division which will be useful in

the verse by verse analysis which follows. First of all, the believer's reliance on the work and sympathy of Christ must be discerned. This would correspond to the emphasis of the verb teleō in our study of II Corinthians 12:9, although that verb does not occur in this section.

The second theological thrust to note is that of the perfection of Christ. The verb teleioō is used to declare this emphasis, for the writer to the Hebrews has carefully shown in this passage how Christ was perfected by His suffering to be the suitable instrument for God's purposes of salvation.

The third idea concerns the perfecting of the believers - based upon the perfection of Christ and distinguished from God's finishing His work in them. The perfecting of the believers involves the utilization of their gifts and abilities in contrast to the finishing (as in II Cor. 12:9), which happens best in their weaknesses and involves their total reliance upon the efficacy of God's power at work within them. These three ideas will be considered in turn as we interpret the theological import of the verses from Hebrews translated above.

The first few verses of this section from the Epistle to the Hebrews speak of the finished work of God on behalf of His people. The problem with many Christians is that they do not realize that they already "possess" the great High Priest, i.e., that His finished work is available to them. The question raised by the author's comment, "Therefore, having a great high priest," is whether or not the reader "has" Him. Floyd Filson shows this as the purpose of the author by this comment:

His aim is not merely intellectual and theological. He uses these aspects to sweep aside any doubts concerning the truth and crucial importance of the gospel, to make clear the completeness and adequacy of God's work in Christ, and to drive home the fact

that by their acceptance or indifference these Christians will make the crucial decision which will determine their spiritual status now and for all time to come. In every statement with important theological content he is urging the recipients to realize how much is at stake in their response to this gospel.¹⁷⁸

The great high priest is introduced in verse 14 with a double name which summarizes the message of the following verses. His human name, Jesus, suggests the perfect understanding and sympathy which will be the focus of our study of the concept of weakness, whereas His Divine Sonship stresses His acceptance with the Father and His "pre-eminent dignity."¹⁷⁹

Secondly, Christ is described as having gone through the heavens. Scholars debate about the proper interpretation of this phrase, but its major significance for this study is the idea, pointed out by John Ebrard, that Jesus did this before us as the first fruits of humanity in order to prepare a place for believers in the eternal substantial rest into which He has entered.¹⁸⁰ The implication of this idea is that He then pitches a tent of rest for His people both now (as in II Corinthians 12: 9) and someday more perfectly when we, too, pass through the heavens into that rest.

The response that believers should have to the finished work of Christ, according to the writer to the Hebrews, is to let that work be

¹⁷⁸Floyd V. Filson, "Yesterday": A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Chapter 13, N. 4, Second Series, Studies in Biblical Theology (Naperville, Illinois: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1967), p. 27.

¹⁷⁹Marcus Dods, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Vol. IV, The Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 283.

¹⁸⁰John H. A. Ebrard, Biblical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, trans. John Fulton, Vol. XXXVI, Clark's Foreign Theological Library (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1853), pp. 167-168.

finished for them by holding fast to their confession. The original phrase, kratomen tes homologias, uses a present active volitive subjunctive form of the verb krateō, which was an old verb coming from kratos, which means "power." It can best be translated, "to cling tenaciously," and so graphically pictures the response called for from the believer.¹⁸¹

As R. C. H. Lenski points out, it is our human weakness that disposes us to give up the confession.¹⁸² Our basis for fighting that disposition, however, is shown in the following verses, which reveal that Christ known those very weaknesses from His own experience and, therefore, is able to feel with us and to help us.

We are told by an unusual double negative in verse 15 that we have a high priest able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. The verb chosen here is one peculiar to the New Testament and used only twice, both times in Hebrews. Rather than sympaskō (which Paul uses in Ro. 8:17 and I Cor. 12:26), the writer to the Hebrews chose sumpatheō, which means "to suffer along with one."¹⁸³ The significance of this verb choice in light of the divinity of Christ is outlined by Hugh Montefiore as follows:

The objection is here anticipated that one so exalted cannot properly sympathise with human frailties. For these weaknesses, inherent in our humanity, not only concern the physical side of human life (Col. iv. 13), but also the intellectual (Ro. vi. 19), religious (Ro. viii. 26), and moral (I Cor. viii. 9) spheres of human existence. Jesus is not said to sympathise with these weaknesses in the sense that contemplation of them arouses in him feelings

¹⁸¹Archibald Thomas Robertson, The Fourth Gospel, the Epistle to the Hebrews, Vol. V, Word Pictures in the New Testament (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1932), p. 365.

¹⁸²R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), p. 150.

¹⁸³Dods, Hebrews, p. 283.

of pity and compassion. He sympathises because he has, through common experience, a real kinship with those who suffer.¹⁸⁴

By means of His having entered into these experiences with us because He chose to take on the nature of humanity, believers can see how much concern God has for our salvation. He was willing to take on all dimensions of human weakness. This involves not only such physical things as feelings of hot and cold, hunger and other bodily necessities, but also deeper things, such as hurt from contempt or suffering from want. Furthermore, as John Calvin realized, weakness involves, along with such external troubles, also "the emotions of the soul, such as fear, sorrow, dread of death and the like."¹⁸⁵ Calvin's definition is a comprehensive one and should be kept in mind when the term astheneia is considered more thoroughly below.

We must pause to perceive even more clearly how deeply Jesus is touched with a feeling of our infirmities, for His very character heightens the acuteness with which He must have been pained by them. J. Harry Cotton describes this as follows:

In his earthly life he had an amazing discernment of people, an exquisite sensitiveness to human need about him. As the author of the Fourth Gospel put it, "Jesus . . . needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man" (John 2:25).¹⁸⁶

Because He knew what was in men, Jesus realized that these very

¹⁸⁴ Hugh W. Montefiore, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1964), p. 91.

¹⁸⁵ John Calvin, Hebrews and I and II Peter, trans. William B. Johnston, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), p. 55.

¹⁸⁶ J. Harry Cotton, exposition, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Alexander Purdy, intro. and exegesis, Vol. XI, The Interpreter's Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 639.

weaknesses are main sources of temptation. This is evidenced on the night when He was betrayed by His warning the disciples that "the flesh is weak."¹⁸⁷

Martin Luther points out how such sympathy with weakness is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. In contrast to the shepherds of Israel, who are criticized in Ezekiel 34:2-5 for not strengthening the weak, it is said of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:4, "Surely He has borne our weaknesses and carried our sins."¹⁸⁸

In Hebrews 4:15 the writer stresses particularly that Jesus is able to sympathize with us in weaknesses because He was tempted in all points as we are. John Ebrard defines this "being tempted" more distinctly as follows - noting that we must keep in mind, the

opposition between nature and spirit, between involuntary physical life and freely conscious life, natural dispositions and culture, original temperament and passions and personal character, a given situation and the manner of conduct. Christ as true man had a truly human physical life, experienced the affections of joy and sorrow, of pleasure and aversion, of hope and fear and anxiety, just as we do. He was capable of enjoying the innocent and tranquil pleasures of life, and he felt a truly human shrinking from suffering and death; in short, he was in the sphere of the involuntary life of the soul primarily susceptible as we are. But there is a moral obligation lying upon every man, not to let himself be mastered by his natural affections which in themselves are altogether sinless, but rather to acquire mastery over them. . . .

Throughout the whole period of his life he renounced the pleasures of life for which he had a natural susceptibility, because he could retain these only by compliance with the carnal hopes of the Messiah entertained by the multitude, and he maintained this course of conduct in spite of the prospect which became ever more and more sure, that his faithfulness and persecution would lead him to suffering

¹⁸⁷ James Moffatt, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, ed. Alfred Plummer, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), p. 59.

¹⁸⁸ Martin Luther, Lectures on Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Walter A. Hansen, Vol. XXIX, Luther's Works (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 169.

and death, of which he felt a natural fear. That susceptibility of pleasure and this fear were what tempted him - not sinful inclinations but pure, innocent natural affections, belonging essentially to human nature.¹⁸⁹

Jesus not only was tempted in every way as we are, but probably those temptations were for Him much more severe - for several reasons, as observed by various scholars. Larry Richards emphasizes that they were deeper because He never gave in to them and so experienced them to the fullest extent possible.¹⁹⁰ William Neil insightfully comments that Jesus' temptations were also more severe because He did not have any of the limits that we possess and, therefore, would have had no limits to the evil that He could have done had He chosen the kingdom of the world rather than the service of God.¹⁹¹ Andrew Murray points out that perhaps the temptation to refuse the Father's will caused Him the deepest suffering.¹⁹² Especially this is significant for the purposes of this study since great emphasis has been placed on Christ's perfect yieldedness to the Father's will.

W. H. Griffith Thomas offers an outstanding summary of the importance of this definition of sin and temptation in the life of Jesus. He speaks of the relation of Christ's sinlessness and sympathy as follows:

Sin was not a temptation to Him because there was nothing in Him to respond to it, but it undoubtedly caused suffering, which was all

¹⁸⁹Ebrard, pp. 169-170.

¹⁹⁰Larry Richards, The Complete Christian: Insights for Life From the Book of Hebrews (Wheaton, Illinois: SP Publications, 1975), p.47.

¹⁹¹William Neil, The Epistle to the Hebrews, eds. John Marsh, Alan Richardson, and R. Gregor Smith, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1955), p. 54.

¹⁹²Andrew Murray, The Holiest of All: An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1894), p. 118.

the more intense because He was sinless.

This brings before us the remarkable and important point that Christ's sympathy is associated with His sinlessness. He feels with us because He is altogether unlike us. We might naturally expect the very opposite, and are perhaps sometimes inclined to think that Christ would be nearer to us if He were not a sinless being. But this idea is impossible, and even if it were not, it would be fatal. . . . We must pay special attention to the word "infirmities," for Christ has no sympathy with our sins. The sympathy of sinfulness would be a weakness, since if Christ had not been victorious, there could be no assurance of victory for us.¹⁹³

Thomas infers from this that rather than making His temptations unreal, Christ's sinlessness caused Him to feel temptation "most acutely." He had always been "surrounded by purity"; He had had "no experience of vice and degradation." Consequently, He perceived much more intensely the hideousness of sin than we who have been all our lives "accustomed to moral evil."¹⁹⁴

From the human perspective, according to Thomas, Christ's sinlessness consisted in the perfect "fidelity" of His will to the Father's, though it was "exercised under human conditions." This was possible because He "willingly received" the absolute filling of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹⁵

Thomas compares the impossibility of sin in Christ to the "impossibility of falsehood in God," as described in such texts as Titus 1:2. This results in his recognition that "~~He could not sin because He would not.~~"¹⁹⁶

In these words Thomas concludes his argument and warns against

¹⁹³W. H. Griffith Thomas, Hebrews: A Devotional Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), p. 55.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., pp. 56-57.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁹⁶Ibid.

extremes in our interpretation of the relation of Christ's sinlessness to temptation:

" . . . The fact that through the union of the two natures it was impossible for Him to yield takes nothing either from the force of the temptation which attacked Him or from the completeness of His knowledge of it. To take a simple illustration: a breakwater conceivably might be so constructed that it would be impossible for the sea to break it. Such would endure the utmost power of the waves, whilst a weaker one might succumb before the full force had been felt. No doubt a moral example is more complete when it is set by one who, in every respect, is under exactly the same moral circumstances as ourselves. But had Christ come, not merely "in the likeness of sinful flesh" but in flesh that was actually tainted with original sin, He could neither have been our Redeemer nor a perfect model of humanity. Nor does the truth that Christ was incapable of sin impair His moral liberty. God is the one Being who is perfectly free, but God cannot sin. Liberty in its highest sense does not carry with it the capacity of doing evil" (Holmes, p. 191).

We must, therefore, guard carefully against two extremes. The one is that Christ could not be tempted if it were impossible for Him to sin; the other, that the temptation was not real, and therefore, His humanity is of no value to us. His temptations were unmistakably real, and it is just because of His absolute sinlessness¹⁹⁷ that His humanity is of the most precious spiritual value for us.

The writer to the Hebrews adds one exciting qualifier to the statement that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, and that is that He endured those temptations "without sin." That sinlessness, Alexander Purdy points out, was the result of "conscious decision and intense struggle,"¹⁹⁸ but, because He was successful in overcoming the temptations He has become the perfect priest for us. He is perfectly both God and man, and because He has known our life, He can give us sympathy, mercy, and power.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

¹⁹⁸ Alexander Purdy, intro. and exegesis, The Epistle to the Hebrews, J. Harry Cotton, exposition, Vol. XI, The Interpreter's Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 639.

¹⁹⁹ William Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews, The Daily Study Bible Series (Rev. ed.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 42-44.

R. C. H. Lenski emphasizes the effectiveness of His having passed all temptations by pointing out that the verb form is a perfect participle, which means that the action which occurred over a period of time in the past has come to a moment of ending at some distinct point.²⁰⁰ Jesus was tried - and is being tried no longer - and, therefore, is able to bear with those who are being tempted.

Recognizing that this is the sort of high priest that we have, the writer to the Hebrews goes on in 4:16 to urge his readers to draw near to the throne of grace. F. B. Meyer points out that many Christians live impoverished lives because either they do not know their own infinite needs or they have never availed themselves of the infinite resources.²⁰¹

The author of this epistle combats these problems by urging Christians to draw near with confidence. The word parresia comes from par and resia and means to tell the full story, the freedom to speak one's mind (a right not possessed by the slaves in ancient Greece). In this epistle the word stresses the freedom with which Christians can approach the throne on the basis of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus.²⁰²

J. Harry Cotton reminds us of the fact that man has nowhere else to go to find rest for his weary spirit. As the disciples said to Jesus in John 6:68, "to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."²⁰³

²⁰⁰Lenski, Hebrews, p. 151.

²⁰¹F. B. Meyer, The Way into the Holiest: Expositions of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade, [n.d.]), p. 64.

²⁰²Neil R. Lightfoot, Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 101.

²⁰³Cotton, Interpreter's, p. 640.

The reason for this extensive discussion of the ideas of weakness, the temptations of Jesus, and the throne of grace in this chapter is that these ideas describe the emphasis of my contention concerning what happens when God's people allow Him to finish His work in them. Ray Stedman explains this principle of "the rest of God" as "the whole goal of God's work in human hearts." Stedman describes it more fully as follows:

This new principle, made available to us only in Jesus Christ, means to cease our self-directed activities and to trust in the ability of a second Person to work through us. We make faith so difficult but it is simply trusting in the work of another.

And that is what the life of rest is: trusting the Lord Jesus who has come to indwell our hearts who has tabernacled in us to do through us all that we do, using the functions of our human personality to do so.²⁰⁴

Stedman goes on to show that the phrase, "throne of grace," implies an important combination of elements by each of its two terms. The former emphasizes the authority and power by which what we need is granted, while the latter stresses the sympathy and understanding with which our needs are met.²⁰⁵ Therefore, because Jesus has already passed through the heavens and is, consequently, outside the limits of time and space, there is no limit to His power. To come to the throne of grace, then, means "to reckon upon the One who indwells us. The throne of grace is that close to us, that available to us."²⁰⁶

In connection with his verse by verse commentary on this section of Hebrews, William Newell dwells extensively on the lack of this principle of rest in the lives of Christians he has observed. He points out

²⁰⁴Ray C. Stedman, What More Can God Say?: A Fresh Look at Hebrews (Glendale, California: G/L Publications, 1974), p. 59.

²⁰⁵Ibid., p. 62.

²⁰⁶Ibid., p. 63.

that there are many Christians to whom a "sense of the fearful need of the shed blood of Christ on their behalf has never come; to whom the unutterable rest of faith in that blood, and the ecstatic sweetness of a purged conscience have never come." As a result, he shows how they have not drawn near to God as they might. He declares that it is possible for God's people to have untroubled rest, and, though many seem to rely on Christ, yet "among even the most earnest and 'consecrated' of these, the majority seemed yet to be engaged in what one might call an inward struggle, or were at least longing after 'a higher state of grace' in themselves." However, he continues, "there have been souls who have come into an unbroken abiding in God according to I John 4:16." He then cites the example of a man that he had observed and describes his observations as follows:

The very atmosphere of his presence was one of quietness, of satisfaction, of utter absence of all apprehension, or creature-fear. Rest, depth, devotion - all these breathed forth from him quite unknown to himself.²⁰⁷

This is the principle of rest, the goal of God's finished work in the lives of His people.

In chapter 5 the writer to the Hebrews turns to the Levitical priesthood in order to point out to the Jews the nature of the high priest as a type, to be fulfilled and superceded by the Messiah.²⁰⁸ According to Barclay, "It is in fact in that very suffering and that deep involvement in the human situation that the greatness of Jesus Christ lies. . . .

²⁰⁷ William R. Newell, Hebrews, Verse by Verse (Chicago: Moody Press, 1947), pp. 144-145.

²⁰⁸ Albert Barnes, Hebrews, ed. Robert Frew, Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 107.

The priest must be one with his people and Jesus Christ supremely is that."²⁰⁹

Hebrews 5:2 stresses that the priest, because he is chosen from men to represent men, is thus able to deal gently with sinners, since he himself is beset by weakness. The infinitive, metriopathein, which is usually translated, "to deal gently," actually means "to moderate feelings towards," i.e., to find a balance between insensitivity and hypersensitivity. Montefiore associates the word with magnanimity,²¹⁰ while James Moffatt goes so far as to say that metriopathein is the "moderation of anger in a person who is provoked and indignant."²¹¹ Alexander Purdy uses the term "ensoriousness" and "sentimentality" to describe the extremes between which the true priest must combine severity toward sin and sympathy for the sinner.²¹²

William Barclay adds from Plutarch the insight that the product of such a mean between "extravagant grief" and "utter indifference" would necessarily be patience, "that sympathetic feeling which enabled a man to raise up and to save, to spare and to hear."²¹³ Finally, such an ability, as Larry Richards declares, produces balanced caring because it involves "both feeling with the injured, yet ability to react and act for the other's true good."²¹⁴ In other words, the priest's sympathy with

²⁰⁹William Barclay, Epistle to the Hebrews, No. 20, Bible Guides, eds. William Barclay and F. F. Bruce (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 67.

²¹⁰Montefiore, p. 96.

²¹¹Moffatt, Hebrews, p. 62.

²¹²Purdy, Interpreter's, pp. 642-643.

²¹³Barclay, Letter to Hebrews, p. 46.

²¹⁴Richards, p. 50.

the sinner will not incapacitate him and keep him from helping constructively.

This extended description of the verb metriopathein helps us to see how significant it was that Jesus was Himself beset with weakness in order to exercise now such a balanced caring on our behalf. The concept of being "beset with weakness" provides another graphic picture for comparison. The verb which is usually translated "beset" or "surrounded" with weakness at other times means "clothed." This brings to mind the notion that the priest was separated from his fellow Jews and distinguished by the holy robes of his office, yet he was like them in being clothed with weakness.²¹⁵ Jesus, Who did not wear the robes of the priesthood, did wear the robes of weakness, but without the robes of sin, for He was clothed in perfect righteousness.

For that reason He did not have to offer a sacrifice for Himself (v. 3) and was thereby able to offer the perfect sacrifice for us. Hebrews 5:4-6 deals with the necessary qualification of a priest that he be called to his office and declares that Christ was so called, but these verses do not relate directly to the topic of this study and so need not be considered further here.

In the Cambridge Bible Commentary series, J.H. Davies notes the sufferings of Christ as described in three phrases, which occur in Hebrews 5:7-9. First, the loud cries and tears, which are the outward signs of His agony, are mentioned. Then the writer describes the school of suffering, by which means Jesus learned the depth and cost of obedience (even though

²¹⁵ Edward Fudge, Our Man in Heaven: An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baken Book House, 1973), p. 51.

He had been already disposed to obey). Finally, once perfected, His obedience was conclusively tested and confirmed by His death.²¹⁶

Lest the intent of Hebrews 5:7 to show the completion of Christ's work for us be misunderstood, James Draper points out that in the Greek there are two different words meaning "from"; one signifies "to come from, away from," and one is interpreted "to come out from within."²¹⁷ It is the latter which was chosen in 5:7 to show that Christ's prayer from His weakness was indeed answered when He was delivered out from fear of death.

The fact of Christ's experience of His weakness in Gethsemane, which is probably the setting for the description of Hebrews 5:7, is more clearly seen in the choice of the word krauge. This verb does not mean a cry that someone chooses to utter, but rather a cry which is wrung from him in the stress of some terrible tension or searing pain.²¹⁸

Having so cried out because of His weakness, Jesus is said by the writer of Hebrews to have been answered because of His "godly fear." Translated "humble submission" in the New English Bible,²¹⁹ this phrase does not mean "piety" or "a dignity" in Christ that the Father would reverence. Instead, Calvin defines the term as follows:

Christ was heard out of that which He feared, so that He was not

²¹⁶J. H. Davies, A Letter to Hebrews, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1967), p. 53.

²¹⁷James T. Draper, Hebrews: The Life that Pleases God (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1976), p.123.

²¹⁸Barclay, Letter to Hebrews, p. 47.

²¹⁹F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), p. 102.

overwhelmed by and did not give way to those evils, nor was He overcome by death. The Son of God descended to this struggle, not because He laboured under unbelief, the source of all our fears, but because He underwent in mortal flesh the judgment of God, the terror of which cannot be overcome without laborious effort.²²⁰

Calvin concludes that Christ feared death because in it He had to wrestle with the total sum of human guilt and with the very powers of darkness themselves.²²¹

Though this verse is positive in its conclusion that Christ's prayer was answered, yet there are strong implications of weakness in its message. Probably the author avoided the word weakness because in verse 3 it had been equated with sin, but the writer in the Jerome Biblical Commentary connects the term weakness with this verse, as follows:

There is no doubt, however, that the author, while avoiding the word, does consider that Jesus' ability to sympathize with sinners is based precisely on the fact that he knew temptation, as they do, and "shared in blood and flesh" (cf. 2:14-18; 4:15). He was acquainted with the trials of human nature, i.e., he experienced its weakness, particularly its fear of death. After his resurrection-exaltation he no longer knows weakness, but having experienced it he can sympathize with those who do. This concept of Heb. is similar to that of Paul: "He died on the cross through weakness, but he lives by the power of God" (II Cor. 13:4).²²²

This connection with the weakness/power imagery of II Corinthians places this section of Hebrews into the framework of the topic of this study, for Christ is seen to be the perfect demonstrator of how God's power is brought to its finish in weakness. This is emphasized by R. C. H. Lenski's comment that "the discussion as to when Jesus became the cause

²²⁰ Calvin, p. 65.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Myles M. Bourke, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," The New Testament and Topical Articles, eds. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Raymond E. Brown, Vol. II, The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 389.

of our eternal salvation is unnecessary. It occurred when he said on the cross: 'It has been finished!' and yielded up the spirit."²²³

In contrast to the "finishing" of the preceding verses, Hebrews 5:8 begins to take us in the direction of the concept of "perfection," for it states that it was through suffering that Christ learned obedience and thus became perfected. Floyd Filson sees the lesson of obedience as more important even than the teaching ministry of Christ as he says this:

It was the human Gethsemane struggle wherein Jesus learned to be fully obedient under the test of suffering which was of crucial importance. The maturity of victory over temptation was the necessary qualification for his real ministry.²²⁴

This is because, as Andrew Murray notes, in the lesson of obedience through suffering He "manifested perfectly the humility and submission and surrender to God, which is man's duty and blessedness."²²⁵

The perfection of His lesson in obedience is best seen by contrast with the qualifier, "although He was a Son," which is added in verse 8. Marcus Dods interprets it thus:

Although Son and therefore possessed of Divine love and in sympathy with the Divine purpose, He had yet to learn that perfect submission which is only acquired by obeying in painful, terrifying circumstances. He made deeper and deeper experience of what obedience is and costs. And the particular obedience [$\tau\eta\ \upsilon\pi\alpha\gamma\epsilon$] which was required of Him in the days of His flesh was that which at once gave Him perfect entrance into the Divine love and human need.²²⁶

Having so seen the perfection of Christ through His obedience in suffering, we begin to catch sight of the meaning of perfection in our

²²³Lenski, Hebrews, pp. 167-168.

²²⁴Filson, p. 37.

²²⁵Murray, p. 185.

²²⁶Dods, Hebrews, p. 289.

own lives. John Calvin reflects on the significance of verse 8 for our lives in these words:

He did this for our benefit, to give us the instance of the pattern of His own submission even to death itself. . . . Therefore we also should be instructed and guided into obedience by God by His example, by our various tribulations, and finally by death itself. Indeed our need is much greater because we have rebellious and untamed spirits unless God has subdued us to bear His yoke by trials like these.²²⁷

The perfection of character which is ascribed to Jesus in Hebrews 5:9 is a perfection of function, of Jesus' having attained a previously determined goal. Its connection with His being the author of eternal salvation is described by John Wick Bowman as follows:

The meaning here is that Jesus obediently accepted the suffering which was laid upon him by the sinful conditions of the world into which, at the Father's command, he had entered. The result of this utter obedience to his Father regardless of cost was our Lord's maturing to the point where he became worthy of being "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (v. 9).²²⁸

Hugh Montefiore stresses that such perfection of human character is not a static quality of excellence, but rather a "perfect (or absolutely appropriate) response to each of life's changing circumstances."²²⁹ This concept, then, tells us how believers are to be involved in the other dimension of verse 9, since Christ is described as being fitted as the source of salvation for all who obey Him. Ray Stedman connects the two ideas in these words:

Being made perfect - having entered into all that any sinner in all his weakness ever knows - being made perfect he became the source

²²⁷Calvin, p. 66.

²²⁸John Wick Bowman, The Letter to the Hebrews, the Letter to James, and the First and Second Letters of Peter, Vol. XXIV, The Layman's Bible Commentary, ed. Balmer H. Kelly (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1962), p. 40.

²²⁹Montefiore, p. 100.

of eternal salvation to all who obey him. That is the language of discipleship. When we obey Him, as He obeyed the Father, then all that God is, is made available to us, just as in the hour of His anguish all that God is, was made available to Him on this principle of trust. . . . He absolutely refused to question the Father's wisdom.²³⁰

In verse 10 we are reminded once again of the designation of Christ by God to be a priest after the order of Melchizedek. He is perfectly qualified to be our priest, not just because He fulfilled all the formal requirements, but because "he is completely fitted to deal with human weakness and human sins in a radical way, having faced these facts from inside humanity itself."²³¹

Hebrews 5:11 interrupts the flow of the text with a warning to the readers because of their lack of maturity and, consequently, can be seen, for the purposes of this study, as the initiation of the third concept with which we are dealing - viz., that of the maturity of the believer. The writer indirectly criticizes the readers for their sluggishness of hearing and then notes the marks of immaturity. He reminds them of their responsibility to be teachers, but realizes that age and time do not necessarily produce maturity since the Hebrews he addresses are not able to instruct others (v. 12). As Barnes comments in his Notes, all Christians ought to be teachers.²³² Jonathon Edwards yearns for the same productivity on the part of Christians in his sermon title, "The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth." Those who do not possess such maturity and knowledge of Divine truth are still as

²³⁰ Stedman, p. 72.

²³¹ Purdy, p. 646.

²³² Barnes, Hebrews, p. 122.

children, according to verse 13.²³³

Verse 14 introduces the next mark of spiritual maturity - viz., the ability to discern good from evil. According to Ray Stedman, those suffering from "arrested development" are "emotionally gullible."²³⁴ Maturity is linked in this verse with the exercise of power,²³⁵ with the training of the faculties.

Brooke Westcott describes such perfection as manifested in the person in whom "each human faculty and gift has found a harmonious development and use." He speaks of the complete satisfaction of the ideal and concludes as follows:

The spiritual maturity of which the apostle speaks is the result of careful exercise. It belongs to those who have their senses - their different organs of spiritual perception - trained, in virtue of their moral state gained by long experience.²³⁶

Training, involvement, practice - such words describe the effort of the Christian pressing on to perfection.

Larry Richards clarifies the distinction between perfection on the part of believers and the finishing which is the emphasis of this study by differentiating between the gift and the challenge of maturity.²³⁷ The gift from God is the capacity to live out a sonship, whereas the challenge is to use the truth and thereby to begin to reflect God's character

²³³Robert W. Ross, "Hebrews," ed. Everett F. Harrison, The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Moody Monthly ed.; New York: The Iverson-Norman Associates, 1971), p. 916.

²³⁴Stedman, p. 78.

²³⁵Moffatt, Hebrews, pp. 71-72.

²³⁶Brooke Foss Westcott, The Epistle to the Hebrews (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), p. 135.

²³⁷Richards, pp. 53 and 58-59.

and to enter His program.

Because the readers are not experiencing such maturity, the writer to the Hebrews issues a challenge at the beginning of chapter 6. His call to "go on to perfection" does not mean to sinless perfection, for he recognizes a maturity yet ahead, which he disowns in the present (cf. Phil. 3:12 or I John 1:8).²³⁸ The weak must, however, recognize their immaturity, face it, and press on.²³⁹

This exhortation is seen by some to be the focus of the entire book of Hebrews. Ray Hession subtitles his book, From Shadow to Substance, with the key phrase from Hebrews 6:1, "Let Us Go On." James Moffatt, recognizing the author's disappointment that his readers did not understand the message about Christ's priesthood, exclaims, "He has every reason to expect an effort from them, and therefore he follows up his remonstrance with a word of encouragement."²⁴⁰

The noun for the maturity into which he calls the Hebrews is a technical term used in educational distinctions. Pythagoras divided his students into hoi manthanentes, the learners, and hoi teleioi, the mature. Philo utilized these three categories: hoi erchomenoi, those just beginning; hoi prokoptontes, those making progress; and hoi teleiomenoi, those beginning to reach maturity.²⁴¹ F. F. Bruce names these stages of three-fold ascent infancy, moral maturity, and spiritual illumination.²⁴²

²³⁸ Stedman, p. 80.

²³⁹ John Phillips, Exploring Hebrews (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), pp. 88-89.

²⁴⁰ Moffatt, Hebrews, p. 72.

²⁴¹ Barclay, Letter to Hebrews, p. 52.

²⁴² Bruce, Hebrews, p. 109.

It is not necessary for the purposes of this study to discuss the various doctrines which are claimed by the author of Hebrews to be fundamental principles beyond which the maturing Christians ought now to move. We continue our study into Hebrews 6:3, however, because there the qualifier, "as God permits," which is added to the assertion, "this we shall do," returns us again to the concept of "finishing" with which we began. Dependence on the Holy Spirit is again proclaimed,²⁴³ and the reader is reminded that, though effort is expected of him as he presses on to maturity, yet that effort is founded on the fact that God's work is to be finished in the believer. R. C. H. Lenski describes the relationship of the ideas this way:

On the part of the writer the clause implies the earnest prayer: "May God permit me to accomplish my part for the readers!" It implies likewise that the readers pray: "May God permit the accomplishment in us as far as our reading and our hearing of this letter is concerned!" There is no doubt regarding God, for the conditional clause is one of expectancy. This expectancy rests, as it should always also in our case, on humble dependence.²⁴⁴

Ray Stedman sees this principle, rather than the "pressing on" to which believers are called, as the essential focus of the book of Hebrews. Throughout his commentary he refers to the principle of "the rest of God," and he concludes his discussion of the section studied here with this description of the principle: "a moment-by-moment exercise of faith, a perfect understanding of God's principle of activity, a coming of age, an entering into spiritual manhood."²⁴⁵

This brings together the three principles considered in this section

²⁴³Barnes, Hebrews, p. 128.

²⁴⁴Lenski, Hebrews, p. 179.

²⁴⁵Stedman, p. 81.

from the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Christian recognizes that God is the One Who finished His work of redemption through the perfection of His Son. The Christian's response is a striving after maturity also, but the believer always understands that such perfection is based on the finishing of God's work in His life - which happens in proportion to the degree to which he rests in total dependence on the One Who is our great High Priest, even Jesus, the Son of God.

F. II Corinthians 4:7-5:5

In the first exegetical chapter of this section we saw that God tabernacled perfectly in Jesus. All of His purposes were thoroughly brought to their end in Christ's perfect work of atonement. Then we learned from Revelation that God will someday tabernacle perfectly again in all of His people. To this glorious fulfillment Paul looked forward with an eager hope, as expressed in the passage studied from II Timothy. Meanwhile, however, as he waited for the consummation of God's purposes, Paul experienced God's power working through weakness, an idea first considered in the section of I Corinthians studied in the fourth exegetical chapter. Next, utilizing a selection from Hebrews, we considered how God perfected Jesus for His task as our great High Priest and how the Christian's striving after perfection is based on God's finished and finishing work. Now in this chapter we will begin to observe in II Corinthians 4:7-5:5 Paul's struggles with his own weaknesses as a prelude to the following final exegetical chapter. Also in this passage Paul makes rare comments about the final triumph of God's power over weakness that will take place at the end of time.

The selection to be studied in this chapter may be translated as follows:

4:7. But we have this treasure in vessels made of earth, in order that the extraordinary (quality) of the power might be of God and not from us.

v. 8. In every respect oppressed, but not cramped; uncertain, but not in great difficulty;

v. 9. Persecuted, but not forsaken; thrown down, but not des-

troyed.

v. 10. Always carrying about the death of Jesus in the body, in order that also the life of Jesus might be revealed in our body.

v. 11. For always we who live are being handed over into death on account of Jesus, in order that the life of Jesus might be revealed in our mortal bodies.

v. 12. Therefore the death is actively being developed in us, but the life in you.

v. 13. But having the same spirit of faith, according to that which has been written, "I have believed; therefore, I have spoken," even so we believe; therefore, also, we speak,

v. 14. Knowing that He Who raised the Lord Jesus will raise also us with Jesus and bring us before (Him) with you.

v. 15. For all things (are done) on account of you, in order that the grace which increased through the thankfulness of many might abound to the glory of God.

v. 16. Wherefore, we are not faint-hearted, but if even the outside man of us is being brought to decay, yet the inside of us is being renewed day by day.

v. 17. For the momentary slight affliction of our tribulation according to a transcendant age is producing a fullness of glory to us.

v. 18. We are not fixing our attention on the things which are seen, but on those which are not seen. For the things which are seen are transient, but those which are not seen, (are) eternal.

5:1. For we know that if our earthly house of the tent might be destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made by hands, eternal in the heavens.

v. 2. For even in this (tent) we sigh, desiring to put on our dwelling which is from heaven.

v. 3. For by being dressed, we will not be found bare.

v. 4. For also those who are in the tent are sighing, being burdened - on whom we do not wish to strip but to put on, in order that that which is mortal might be swallowed up by life.

v. 5. And God Who prepared us for the same purpose (is) He Who gives us the Spirit as a downpayment.

Many commentators link this section of II Corinthians to the la-

ter passage considered in the following chapter of this study, for the picture here of the clay pots is a supreme manifestation of the divine law propounded in II Corinthians 12:9, that God's strength is brought to its finish in man's weakness.²⁴⁶ The same "utter dependence" that characterized the beginning of chapter 5 in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is prominent here. William Barclay gives this description of the definition of man operative in these chapters:

The real characteristic of man is not his power but his weakness. . . . Life has surrounded with infirmity, although Christ has surrounded us with glory, so that we may remember that the infirmity is ours and the glory is God's, and so that we may recognize our own utter dependence on God.²⁴⁷

The picture of man, with respect to his powerlessness and littleness, as a jar in relation to its potter is a common image in the Old Testament. It appears in Job 10, Isaiah 30, Jeremiah 19. Paul uses the image elsewhere in Romans 9.²⁴⁸ The image is terribly graphic in portraying man's hopeless condition, for clay pots are "cheap, utterly common, the least valued, used with small care, bound to break sooner or later."²⁴⁹

It is a totality of weakness that is being described. R. H. Strachan emphasizes that for Paul it was more than the malfunctions of his body that constituted his earthiness. He elaborates as follows:

²⁴⁶R. V. G. Tasker, The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, gen. ed. R. V. G. Tasker, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), p. 72

²⁴⁷William Barclay, The Letters to the Corinthians, p. 221.

²⁴⁸J. H. Bernard, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Vol. III, The Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 61.

²⁴⁹Lenski, Corinthians, p. 974.

It is not only his bodily frailty which sets forth that the transcending power belongs to God. Paul had limitations and confusions both of mind and will. The description in verses 8, 9 suggests both inward and bodily weakness. . . . We can also imagine the nerve strain, the sense of abandonment, and the resentment which such treatment would bring. Yet, for each word describing his own weakness, he finds another which celebrates the "excellency of the power of God" that delivered him. This deliberate choice of contrasted words reveals a consciousness that even such painful and sordid experiences belong to a life which is a constant pageant of triumph in Christ (ii. 14).²⁵⁰

As demonstrated by this description, however, the more deeply one perceives the limitations of the vessel, the more clearly rings out the truth of the greater power of God. The weakness of the clay pot highlights the immensity of the treasure. Kenneth J. Foreman uses the phrase, "a cheap crockery jar containing a hoard of jewels."²⁵¹

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes offers this summary of that emphasis in Paul's letter and thereby relates this text to the later section from II Corinthians 12 which serves as the focus of the following chapter and of this entire study:

But it is one of the main purposes of this epistle to show that this immense discrepancy between the treasure and the vessel serves simply to attest that human weakness presents no barrier to the purposes of God, indeed, that God's power is made perfect in weakness (12:9), as the brilliance of a treasure is enhanced and magnified by comparison with a common container in which it is placed.²⁵²

This idea of the brilliance of the treasure and the image of the light which it emits causes many commentators to associate this section of II Corinthians with the story of Gideon in Judges 7. Not until the

²⁵⁰R. H. Strachan, The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, ed. James Moffatt, The Moffatt New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1935), p. 94.

²⁵¹Foreman, Layman's, p. 127.

²⁵²Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, ed. F. F. Bruce, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. 135.

earthen vessels which the soldiers carried were broken could the light inside be seen.²⁵³

Once again, Hughes' comments provide an excellent drawing together of these ideas. He writes the following:

Paul is speaking here primarily of himself and his apostleship. But the great truth he is affirming is applicable to every genuine servant of Christ. In all their abject weakness and in every crushing affliction Christians are not only conquerors but more than conquerors, always, however, and solely by virtue of the all-transcending grace and love of God (Rom. 8:27). It was the exceeding greatness of this same power that enabled Gideon with his contemptible handful of followers to advance in the darkness against the hosts of Midian and, by the breaking of their earthen pitchers and the consequent shining forth of the light, to turn to flight the alien army (Judg. 7:15ff.; Heb. 11:34). So also for the Christian (as the succeeding verses show) the breaking up of the outward man, the daily dying to self, allows the divine life and glory within to burst forth and drive back the powers of darkness, to the praise of Almighty God. It is precisely the Christian's utter frailty which lays him open to the experience of the all-sufficiency of God's grace, so that he is able even to rejoice because of his weakness (12:9f.) - something that astonishes and baffles the world, which thinks only in terms of human ability.²⁵⁴

It might seem strange that so great a treasure is allowed to be exposed to mishaps which befall the perishable jar in which it is carried, but that is the very principle which was demonstrated by God when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).²⁵⁵ As the letter to the Hebrews stresses, Jesus became fully flesh so that He could be tempted and suffer in every way, but without sinning.

That same wholeness of being is to characterize our understanding of the vessel. Alfred Plummer and Charles Erdman both declare that

²⁵³J. Vernon McGee, II Corinthians (Pasadena, California: Thru the Bible Books, 1977), p. 48.

²⁵⁴Hughes, p. 137.

²⁵⁵Bernard, p. 61.

the clay pot signifies the whole personality, with all its human infirmities and imperfections.²⁵⁶ and ²⁵⁷

This wholeness is significant because the divine life and power are manifested in wholeness of commitment to serving others and to suffering for them.²⁵⁸ Ralph Martin makes this observation:

Christ's messengers are consigned to a life of humiliation and danger. And it is all in order to leave the unmistakable impression that the power of the message does not derive from the ingenuity and skill of the pleaders but comes solely from the inherent truth of the message as God's Word.²⁵⁹

This is, as Alan Redpath notes, the "cost of communication."

There is a price that must be paid if God's people are going to communicate the character of Jesus.²⁶⁰ Paul's suffering came about because of the message which he proclaimed and because of the intensity (and consequent damage to his body) with which he proclaimed it. Redpath answers the question of why the communication should be so costly with these words:

Because the whole principle of Christian living is totally contrary to the principle in which everyone else lives. The principle of the world is "self-glorification," and the principle of the Christian is "self-crucifixion. . . ." The principle of man is greatness, bigness, pomp, and show; the principle of the cross is death.

²⁵⁶ Alfred Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, eds. Francis Brown and Alfred Plummer, The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 127.

²⁵⁷ Charles R. Erdman, The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Exposition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1929), p. 54.

²⁵⁸ Floyd V. Filson, intro. and exegesis, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, James Reid, exposition, Vol. X, The Interpreter's Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 319.

²⁵⁹ Ralph P. Martin, Scripture Union, p. 68.

²⁶⁰ Alan Redpath, Blessings Out of Buffetings: Studies in Second Corinthians (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1965), p. 57.

. . . It is far deeper than that no movies, alcohol, etc. , for deep down in the Christian's life, always and all the time, there is to be a "no" to every demand that the flesh may make for recognition, and every demand that the flesh may make for approval, and every demand that the flesh may make for vindication.²⁶¹

Albert Barnes speaks of the faith and prayer and self denial that are imperative in order that the ministry to which a believer is called might be carried on according to God's purposes. God desires to get rid of all pride in human glory so that it might be clearly seen that He is All in all.²⁶² In terms of the major concept of this study, God has to continue to exert power on His people until all human glory is effaced. Then His power can be brought to its finish as He tabernacles in that life with the fulness of His presence.

II Corinthians 4:8-10 contains a sequence of comparisons which illustrate the principle that the power working in the Christian is all from God. All the verbs in this sequence are present participles describing the continuing state of the apostle's weakness. They seem to be in an ascending order and, therefore, give the impression of a swelling crescendo which culminates in the fact of death. The opposite mood from what would consequently be expected is created, however, because the terms are paradoxical and antithetical, contrasting one's situation in the world with the fact of God's mighty deliverance.²⁶³ As Alfred Plummer exults, "whatever hostile agents, whether human or diabolical, may do, the earthen

²⁶¹Ibid., p. 58.

²⁶²Albert Barnes, II Corinthians and Galatians, ed. Robert Frew, Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 86.

²⁶³Wick Broomall, "II Corinthians," ed. Everett F. Harrison, The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Moody Monthly ed.; New York: The Iverson-Norman Associates, 1971), p. 664.

vessels are able to bear the shock and continue to render service.²⁶⁴

The glory of this inner secret of the earthen vessel is described by Hughes as follows:

The Apostle is speaking the language of experience, and, what is more, of constant experience (as the present tenses and the "always" of v. 10 show) - the experience simultaneously of his own incapacity and of God's transcending power which transforms every situation. Hostile forces press in upon him from all sides and threaten to crush and immobilize him, but a way out of the desperate straits in which he finds himself is always provided; contrary to all human probability, God brings him safely through. Moreover, there is always the inner secret, the treasure of divine grace within the earthen vessel of his physical frame, which ensures that, no matter how straitened his outward circumstances, his heart is not narrowed and confined, but enlarged and expanded by the liberating love of Christ. . . .

. . . To be at the end of man's resources is not to be at the end of God's resources; on the contrary, it is to be precisely in the position best suited to prove and benefit from them, and to experience the surplus of the power of God breaking through and resolving the human dilemma.²⁶⁵

The power described is made available to the apostle through his close union with his Lord. For Paul this union is not just something to happen later at the end of life, but it is available now, always, in the midst of trials and daily service.²⁶⁶ This is emphasized in verse 10 and again in verse 16, which speaks of the daily renewal of the Christian.

C. K. Barrett speaks of this concept as "the peculiar Christian eschatology, which insists that the age to come has already (though not completely) come into the present."²⁶⁷ This is the eschatology present in the major topic of this study - that God tabernacles in His people to a

²⁶⁴Plummer, II Corinthians, p. 129.

²⁶⁵Hughes, pp. 138-139.

²⁶⁶Filson, II Corinthians, p. 320.

²⁶⁷C. K. Barrett, A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, gen. ed. Henry Chadwick, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), p. 146.

greater extent when they are weak, though not ever completely as will be the case at the end of time (see discussion of Revelations selections in chapter II B above).

For purposes of limitation, II Corinthians 4:10-16 and the ideas about the resurrection of the body presented in the larger context of 4:16-5:10 will not be discussed in this chapter. We turn now instead to a brief consideration of the contrast of the use of skēnē (tent) in II Corinthians 5:1-5 with the concept of God's tabernacling as it appears in the key passage of this study.

The significant difference is introduced by the word translated "earthly." In this passage describing the contrast of man's temporal existence with that which is eternal, Paul uses the term for tent to represent the present existence. Consequently, skēnē is emphasized for its temporariness, that the tent can be easily taken down.²⁶⁸ The reference to this life's body as a tent stresses the "inferior, insecure, and transient nature of the present life."²⁶⁹

The metaphor is probably taken from Leviticus 23:42, where the Feast of Tabernacles is described. The purpose of the Israelites' living in tents or booths during the festival was to remind them of their "pilgrim life en route to Canaan."²⁷⁰ Kenneth J. Foreman offers this insight into the meaning of the tent:

A man who lives in a tent never belongs where he is; he belongs somewhere else. A man in a house belongs there. So death is not a leaving home; it is a going home.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸Barrett, II Corinthians, p. 151.

²⁶⁹Filson, II Corinthians, p. 326.

²⁷⁰Martin, p. 71.

²⁷¹Foreman, p. 129.

Foreman's picture begins to describe the comfort which Paul proclaims in this section in II Corinthians. He uses the grand words, "that mortality might be swallowed up by life," to portray the process of transformation from "personality-involved-in-perishable-body to personality-glorified-by-spiritual-body."²⁷²

The assurance that personal immortality is ultimately guaranteed is provided by the down-payment of the Holy Spirit, according to II Corinthians 5:5. Consequently, the believer can trust throughout the process that his spiritual personality is already being built up by God. He is creatively working to assure the growth of the inner man.²⁷³ This process happens in the present because we already "have a building from God."²⁷⁴ Though it is a mixing of the metaphors, we can see that the building was given at the time when God tabernacled in the believer.

The word used for building (oikodome) especially signifies a temple building.²⁷⁵ Furthermore, God's people have always understood the Tabernacle to be the place where God manifested His presence. This is the same meaning conveyed by the concept of tabernacling when it is used in an eternal sense.

Though in this passage Paul uses the term tent to stress the transience of earthly existence, the idea of tabernacling in Scripture

²⁷²P. C. Hanson, II Corinthians, gen. eds. John Marsh, Alan Richardson, R. Gregor Smith, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1954), p. 46.

²⁷³Strachan, pp. 101-103.

²⁷⁴Lenski, II Corinthians, p. 997.

²⁷⁵John J. O'Rourke, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians," The New Testament and Topical Articles, eds. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Raymond F. Brown, Vol. II, The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 280.

refers to God's presence and thus signifies an eternal habitation. Based on the same family of words, these two opposing concepts can be readily discerned in the contexts of passages which contain them.

The possibility of God's present indwelling - i.e., His tabernacling - is implied by the message of II Corinthians 5:1-5. Its incompleteness is stressed, however, and the resultant groaning, which occurs during the waiting for its culmination, is recognized. But the fact that the building is a present possession must, above all, be realized. William Barclay outlines its significance in these words:

It is Paul's conviction that even here and now the Christian can enjoy the foretaste of the life everlasting. It is given to the Christian to be a citizen of two worlds. He has one foot in time and one in eternity. His body is on earth but his heart is in heaven. And the result is, not that he despises this world, but that even this world is clad with the sheen of glory which is the reflection of the greater glory that shall be.²⁷⁶

That sheen of glory is experienced by the believer when God's power is brought to its finish on his life, when God no longer has to work on him to conform him to His image. Then, instead, he is free in his weakness to enjoy his earthiness, for, as Alfred Plummer translates II Corinthians 4:7,

. . . this glory has another side. This illuminating power is entrusted to unattractive and worthless persons, as treasure is stored in earthen jars, in order that it may be patent to all that the excellency of power which we exhibit is God's gift, and does not emanate from us.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶Barclay, Corinthians, p. 229.

²⁷⁷Plummer, II Corinthians, p. 123.

G. II Corinthians 11:30-13:11a

All of the preceding exegetical studies have served to provide the context in which the following section can be studied. Consideration of the concepts of power and weakness, of God's past, present, and future tabernacling, and of the comparison of perfecting and finishing has given us the tools for turning now to the major text of this study. At the end of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he writes of his "thorn in the flesh" and thereby presents to us the basis for a theology of weakness and God's power at work through weakness. Paul's comments are set in strange juxtaposition to his listing of trials and his description of a heavenly experience. That context must be carefully understood so that our study of the verb teleō in II Corinthians 12:9 can be pursued appropriately.

The entire section from II Corinthians 11:16 to the end of the book deals with Paul's reproach to troublesome persons trying to destroy his credibility in the Corinthian congregation. For purposes of limitation, however, we will consider only II Corinthians 11:30-12:10 and 13:1-11a in this chapter. These paragraphs may be translated as follows:

11:30. If it is necessary to continue boasting, I will boast of those things which are my weaknesses.

v. 31. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus knows that I am not lying - He Who is worthy of praise forever.

v. 32. In Damascus the governor of King Aretas guarded the city of the Damascenes to arrest me,

v. 33. And through a window in a basket I was let down through the wall and ran away from his hands.

12:1. It is necessary to boast - this not being profitable to me on the one hand, but, on the other, I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

v. 2. I know a man in Christ (who) fourteen years before - if in (the) body I do not know, if outside of the body I do not know - God knows - such a man having been conveyed away suddenly as far as the third heaven,

v. 3. And I know that such a man - whether in (the) body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows -

v. 4. That he was snatched up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words which it is not possible for man to speak,

v. 5. On behalf of the one alluded to, I will boast, but I will not boast in behalf of myself except in weaknesses.

v. 6. For if I wish to boast, I will not be foolish, for I will say truth - but I will abstain, lest anyone might consider me above that which he sees in me or hears from me.

v. 7. And on account of the excess of the revelations, in order that I might not rise up overmuch, He gave to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, in order that he might buffet (me), in order that I might not be raised up.

v. 8. Because of this I called the Lord to my aid three times in order that it might keep away from me,

v. 9. And He said to me, "Sufficient to you (is) my grace, for my power in times of weakness is brought to the end." Accordingly, all the more gladly rather will I boast in my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ might tabernacle in me.

v. 10. For this reason I delight in weaknesses, in mistreatments, in necessity, in persecutions, and distresses, for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

13:1. This is the third time I am coming to you. "In the mouth of two and three witnesses every word shall be confirmed."

v. 2. I have told you before on my second visit and I foretell so presently now being absent to those who have sinned beforehand and to the others again that if I come I will not spare again.

v. 3. Because you are seeking proof of the Christ-speaking-in-me, Who to you is not weak but shows Himself powerful in you,

v. 4. For (He was) even crucified out of weakness, but (now is) living from God's power. For also we are weak in Him, but we will live with Him in God's power for you.

v. 5. Try yourselves if you are in the faith; examine yourselves. Do you not know yourselves that Christ Jesus is in you? unless you are unqualified.

v. 6. But I hope that you will know that we are not unqualified.

v. 7. But we pray to God for you not to do any wrong, not in order that we might appear acceptable, but in order that you might do the good, but we might be as unqualified.

v. 8. For we are not powerful against the truth, but on behalf of the truth.

v. 9. For we rejoice when we are weak, but you are strong. And we pray this: your completion.

v. 10. Because of this I am writing this while away, in order that being present I might not use severity according to the authority which the Lord gave me - for the purpose of building and not for the purpose of destruction.

v. 11. As to the rest, brothers, continue to become fully qualified, be comforted. . . .

Though it is not necessary to consider the verses from II Corinthians 11:16 and following in detail, it is important to understand their general thrust so that Paul's descriptions to be studied in this chapter can be appropriately placed in context. The Wycliffe Bible Commentary offers an excellent summary, mnemonically constructed, which will serve well to introduce Paul's thought progression in these verses. His major points can be outlined as follows:

(1) Paul's provocation (v. 21) - his unwilling defense of himself against unwarranted calumnies;

(2) Paul's pretensions (vv. 22-24a) - his superiority in all matters of human pride (cf. Phil. 3:4ff.);

(3) Paul's persecutions (II Cor. 11:24b, 25) - his many sufferings for the sake of Christ;

(4) Paul's perils (vv. 26, 27) - his frequent dangers encountered on his journeys;

(5) Paul's perturbations (vv. 28, 29) - his uninterrupted anxiety for all the churches (ASV);

(6) Paul's principle (v. 30) - his paradoxical glorying in his weakness;

(7) Paul's protestation (v. 31) - his ultimate deference to God's knowledge for the truthfulness of his record.²⁷⁸

We begin with Paul's principle (number 6 on the Wycliffe list) in order to confront the reality of the juxtaposition of weakness and strength in this paradox. It seems that 11:30 should mark the beginning of a new chapter in this second letter to the Corinthians because it serves as a preparatory comment to Paul's further exposition of his own weakness in 12:7-10. The whole sequence of this comment, concerning Paul's glorying in his weakness, the incident at Damascus which he mentions in 11:32-33, the event of the heavenly revelation which begins chapter 12, and the occurrence of the thorn in the flesh and God's answer to his prayer for deliverance must be seen as a unified sequence, intentionally arranged to surround the glory of the vision with an atmosphere of humility and dependence.

Paul has spoken throughout this epistle of his own weakness; he has given prominence to "the frail earthen vessel, the decaying outward man, the disintegrating physical frame, the body absorbing persecution."²⁷⁹ Now he comes to the climax of such glorying in weakness. But it is important to observe that he still finds it difficult to speak of himself. He says, "If I must needs glory. . . ."

James Reid speaks of the sense of values which causes such hesitancy in Paul with these words:

By weakness Paul means his own physical weakness and the weakness

²⁷⁸ Broomall, Wycliffe, p. 684.

²⁷⁹ Hughes, p. 418.

which he felt in sympathy with others who were weak. In addition to this, there was the humiliation which is involved in the acceptance of suffering for Christ's sake. It is the willingness to lose reputation, to be scorned and despised in the cause of Christ. It is like "the weakness of God" shown in the Cross (I Cor. 1:25), which in the eyes of faith "is stronger than men." The Cross had transformed all Paul's values.

There is also the fact, which he had experienced and which he elaborates in ch. 12, that God's strength is made perfect in his weakness. It is not easy to believe that a man can be sincere who claims that he finds satisfaction in the things that humiliate him. Only the grace of Christ, changing our whole point of view and enabling us to "pour contempt on all our pride," can make it possible.²⁸⁰

We need not pursue the question of why Paul includes the solemn asservation of his truthfulness in verse 31, nor do we need to debate if it refers to that which precedes this verse or that which follows it. It is sufficient for our purposes to note the intensity of his attitude and his deep desire to convey the important message of the context of this verse.

Much speculation is also raised concerning the reason for Paul's inclusion of the Damascus incident reported in verses 32 and 33. Commentators debate that the incident is misplaced or the added redaction of a later editor or a bad memory that rankled in Paul so that he had to get it out or a brief respite in the midst of this intense letter. These superficial explanations miss the fact that the dramatic event set the pattern for his life as an apostle. As Calvin noted, it was "his first apprenticeship in persecution," but beyond that, it provided a glaring contrast to his former life and emphasized, right at the beginning of his ministry, "his own abject weakness and frailty."²⁸¹ By means of this in-

²⁸⁰James Reid, exposition, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Floyd V. Filson, intro. and exegesis, Vol. X, The Interpreter's Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 403.

²⁸¹Hughes, p. 422.

troductory incident and then of Paul's revelation of his previously unmentioned "thorn in the flesh," the apostle's "relation of his rapture into the third heaven is hemmed in," in order that he might "keep himself in true perspective."²⁸² To observe the degradation of the escape from Damascus by means of a rope basket let down over the wall enables his readers to avoid the false elevation which Paul fears (see 12:6).

R. C. H. Lenski adds another significant insight in this comment:

The flight from Damascus was the beginning. Paul's career began, like that of Moses, with flight and with a long period of waiting, waiting, nothing but waiting. This makes the flight from Damascus so significant. It forced Paul into the long wait in which he fully learned that he was nothing, that his mightiest asset was utter weakness, weakness which enabled God to do everything with him and through him.²⁸³

At the opening of chapter 12 he declares that it is necessary for him to continue glorying. The conduct of others towards him has forced him to do so. However, he reasserts at this point that it remains for him an uncongenial and unprofitable duty.

Furthermore, it can be seen that this glorying forced on him by others is a useful prelude to the main message he wants to convey concerning his weakness.²⁸⁴ Later, Paul declares that it was to keep him from being too elevated over the vision he is about to relate that he received the "thorn in the flesh." It is important that we see together both the ecstatic reception of heavenly revelation and the humiliating struggle with the satanic thorn in order to comprehend as much as possible these mysteries of God's dealing with His servants. Moreover, "if we have any

²⁸²Ibid.

²⁸³Lenski, Corinthians, p. 1287

²⁸⁴Hughes, p. 429.

sensitiveness," as William Barclay cautions, "we should read this passage with a certain reverence, for in it Paul lays bare his heart and shows us at one and the same time his glory and his pain."²⁸⁵

It is not necessary for us to consider the possibility or impossibility of an actual bodily transportation to the third heaven, nor do we need to consider the various levels of heaven and Paul's second comment concerning the exaltation to Paradise. What is important for our purposes is to recognize the heights of this experience as they provide reason for his subjection to the thorn and to realize the value of this translating experience for his ministry.

Once again, the Wycliffe Bible Commentary provides an excellent summary for us to organize the details of Paul's visionary experience. The apostle tells us that his vision was the following:

- (1) personal - I know a man (ASV);
- (2) Christian - in Christ (therefore, not belonging to either Judaism or paganism);
- (3) historical - fourteen years ago (therefore, dated in history - not a fiction);
- (4) mysterious - whether in the body, etc.;
- (5) ecstatic - caught up to the third heaven (cf. Enoch, Elijah, Ezekiel);
- (6) revelatory - heard unspeakable words;
- (7) indelible - a "thorn" was placed in his flesh (v. 7).²⁸⁶

Even Paul's accounting of the experience reinforces the atmosphere of humility which pervades this letter. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes

²⁸⁵Barclay, Corinthians, p. 256.

²⁸⁶Broomall, Wycliffe, p. 685.

offers three dimensions which reinforce Paul's attitude. First, he speaks of himself only in the third person - almost as if there were two Pauls, as R. C. H. Lenski points out.²⁸⁷ Secondly, he declares frankly his ignorance concerning the question of whether or not his experience was in or out of the body. Third, by implication his hesitancy to speak of himself is seen in the fact that the experience had taken place fourteen years before, but, seemingly, it had never been mentioned in the intervening years.²⁸⁸ Now he mentions it to show that he had known the heights of exaltation and, consequently, to declare that those heights are not what constitute the glory of his life in his present, infirm, earthly condition.

It would be enjoyable to speculate about the nature of that Paradise to which Paul was taken, but, again, it is not within our purposes to do so. Paul himself cannot describe what he heard and saw there. The question might be raised why such a vision would be given to him if he is not allowed to relate it to others. The answer lies in the comfort and encouragement and inspiration that it gave him and which he could pass on to others without causing others to covet a similar experience.²⁸⁹

Furthermore, as Hughes asserts, his extraordinary experience "must have exercised an incalculable influence on Paul's whole ministry and apostleship, providing, it may be, a key to his astonishing zeal and indefatigable labours, through which intold blessing flowed." Though Paul was the sole recipient and though he could not speak to others about

²⁸⁷ Lenski, Corinthians, p. 1296.

²⁸⁸ Hughes, pp. 429-430.

²⁸⁹ Erdman, II Corinthians, p. 123.

its details, "its effects did not end in him."²⁹⁰

In verses 5 and 6 Paul makes an important comment about glorying and truth and the relationship of a minister of the Gospel to the people he serves. As Lenski notes, "however highly the Lord favors and blesses his ministers, for his work among men he is able to use none unless they be lowly. . . ."²⁹¹ Self-vaunting is "not only foolish, but also false. It subverts the fundamental truth that to God alone is all glory due."²⁹²

Paul's experience was a real one - he speaks the truth when he mentions it - but his readers might misunderstand and give credit to him when the experience could be attributed only to the omnipotence and grace of God. The message of the Scriptures is that God takes ordinary persons and transforms them into extraordinary vessels by means of the Spirit's power at work within them. Therefore, Hughes concludes the following:

And it is ever the work of the Holy Spirit miraculously to transform human lives in this way. The very same power which was active in the lives of the Apostles is available in all its fulness for us today; and, as with them, the glory belongs entirely to God (10:17).²⁹³

After warning his readers about the danger of their elevating him to a position above that which was reality, Paul introduces the element which God was using to keep his own attitudes in proper perspective. Verse 7 announces that he was given a "thorn in the flesh."

Speculation about the exact nature of Paul's "thorn in the flesh," which he deliberately declines to make explicit, can be summarized in four

²⁹⁰Hughes, p. 439.

²⁹¹Lenski, Corinthians, p. 1298.

²⁹²Hughes, p. 440.

²⁹³Ibid., p. 441.

general categories. Due to lack of evidence no definite conclusions can be reached, but to consider the possibilities enables us to have a wider vision of the extent of the weakness to which Paul refers.

The first category, proposed by Calvin, is that the thorn involved spiritual temptations.²⁹⁴ These might include such things as temptations to despair or doubt, faint-heartedness in ministerial duties,²⁹⁵ blasphemous thoughts, stings of conscience over his earlier life,²⁹⁶ or discouragement caused by the contrast of the humiliation suffered and the revelations experienced. Perhaps in this category also should be included Foreman's notion that the thorn was Paul's unattractive personality,²⁹⁷ but such a hypothesis is not supported by the Scriptural record at all.

Tasker is convinced that the thorn was spiritual in character because it was sent by God for the flesh, "i.e., to prick the bubble of the apostle's arrogance, traces of which almost certainly lingered on even after he has been converted from Pharisaism." Such traces could be easily aggravated by a feeling of spiritual superiority engendered by his visions."²⁹⁸

Tasker insists on this spiritual interpretation especially because he perceives that the usual impression of Paul given by the Scriptures is that of a man of "exceptionally strong constitution and remarkable powers of physical endurance." Such a picture is "not really com-

²⁹⁴Barclay, Corinthians, p. 258: all four are summarized by Barclay.

²⁹⁵Tasker, p. 176.

²⁹⁶Boise, p. 303.

²⁹⁷Foreman, Layman's, p. 149.

²⁹⁸Tasker, p. 175.

patible with the view that he was the constant victim of a severe physical ailment."²⁹⁹

A second category of thought might be represented by Luther, who thought that Paul's thorn involved the oppositions and persecutions which he had to face, both from within and from outside of the Church. Chrysostom thought that the thorn in Paul's side was an individual opponent.³⁰⁰ Related to this, a modern commentator, Menoud, proposes that the thorn was "the great sorrow and unceasing pain which he experienced in his heart because of the unbelief of his Jewish compatriots."³⁰¹ He agrees with Tasker that nothing justifies the idea that Paul suffered from sickness.

A third category, especially favored in the past by Roman Catholics, is that Paul's thorn involved carnal temptations, or in Boise's words, "enticements to unchastity."³⁰² This is probably the least likely of the theories because everyone suffers such temptations, and Paul would certainly have struggled with them before his experience of the heavenly vision.³⁰³

Much of the controversy over the nature of the thorn derives from confusion over the actual meaning of the word usually translated "thorn." The noun skacops in classical Greek actually meant "stake," which would cause the trial of which Paul speaks to be likened to a continual impale-

²⁹⁹Ibid.

³⁰⁰Bernard, Expositor's, p. 111.

³⁰¹From a footnote in Hughes, p. 446.

³⁰²Boise, p. 303.

³⁰³O'Rourke, Jerome, p. 289.

ment.³⁰⁴ Barclay dismisses all of the categories above because he says that they do not fit in with the "almost savage pain" indicated by the word stake.³⁰⁵

However, as the word is used in the Septuagint, it is best translated, "thorn," so that Paul's trial is better compared "to the vexatious irritation of a thorn rather than to the agonizing and fatal torture of impalement on a stake."³⁰⁶ Bernard is convinced that the trial was definitely a bodily infirmity, and he adds that "it apparently affected the dignity of his outward appearance (Gal. iv. 14), and was evident to the eye."³⁰⁷ The fact that it could be seen by others must have served further to humble Paul.³⁰⁸

The four physical ailments most often suggested are epilepsy, eye trouble, severe and prostrating headaches (which could have been caused by the vision troubles), or attacks of malarial fever (which could be the source of the previous two and which seems to be the most convincing). Other suggestions include "hysteria, hypochondria, gallstones, gout, rheumatism, sciatica, gastritis, leprosy, lice in the head, deafness, dental infection, neurasthenia, and impediment of the speech,"³⁰⁹ and insomnia.³¹⁰

³⁰⁴ Bernard, Expositor's, p. 110.

³⁰⁵ Barclay, Corinthians, p. 258.

³⁰⁶ Bernard, Expositor's, p. 111.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Barnes, II Corinthians, p. 254.

³⁰⁹ Hughes, p. 446.

³¹⁰ Archibald Thomas Robertson, The Epistles of Paul, Vol. IV, Word Pictures in the New Testament (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1931), p. 265.

Indeed, it is a blessing that no one knows for sure from what Paul suffered in that "each of us has some such splinter or thorn in the flesh, perhaps several at once."³¹¹ It is best to conclude with Barnes as follows:

All that can be known of this is, that it was some infirmity of the flesh, some bodily affliction or calamity, that was like the continual piercing of the flesh with a thorn (Gal. iv. 13); and that it was designed to prevent spiritual pride.³¹²

The latter underlined word presents the second dimension of the thorn in the flesh which should be noted - viz., that it was "given" to Paul (which must mean "by the Lord"³¹³). The word implies that it was a favor,³¹⁴ though, on the other hand, Paul calls it a messenger of Satan. Hughes brings these seemingly conflicting ideas into harmony with this explanation:

. . . this stake for the flesh was satanic in origin, attributable to demonic agency, though permitted by God and overruled by Him for His servant's good. As was the case with Job (Job 2:1ff.), God's gracious and restraining hand is never removed. And as always, the heavenly Father's chastening is "for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness" (Heb. 12:11).³¹⁵

Reid reinforces this harmonization of the grace of God and the assaults of Satan with his realization that "there was no morbid sentimentality in Paul's attitude toward disease."³¹⁶ Paul saw both the evil of Satan's intrusion on God's design for human life and the loving Will

³¹¹Ibid.

³¹²Barnes, II Corinthians, p. 254.

³¹³Lenski, Corinthians, p. 1299.

³¹⁴Barnes, II Corinthians, p. 254.

³¹⁵Hughes, p. 447.

³¹⁶Reid, Interpreter's, p. 407.

behind the permission of God which allows sickness to come to His children. He recognized that disease was not a part of God's creative purposes, but he saw also the necessity for discipline.

Paul's double reference to the fact that God had allowed the thorn to keep him from being too elated proposes the third element for our consideration concerning Paul's weakness. Here, and in other passages from Paul, "one gets the impression that humility was not an easy or automatic virtue for him." Paul himself knew that the "hard and continued discipline of pain and ill health was God's way of saving him from the pride that is fatal to the Christian spirit and usefulness."³¹⁷

The Greek word that is translated "exalted overmuch" is the present passive subjunctive of an old verb, huperairō, which means "to lift up beyond," and which is used only here in the New Testament.³¹⁸ Paul was distinctly aware at this point of the danger which God lovingly prevented by the giving of the thorn.

Reid elaborates upon the danger of spiritual pride with these comments:

Ships with a high superstructure need heavy ballast to keep them from overturning. . . . Pride of success, of money, or of power is evil because it is a form of self-worship and isolates us from our fellows and from God. But the pride that comes from the contemplation of our virtues, or of our insight into spiritual things, or of the secrets God has whispered in our ear, is the worst of all, because it feeds on that which should make us humble - God's mercy and grace. Paul knew the danger; it was from this pit that he had been rescued, his feet set on the rock of utter dependence on God.⁴⁰⁸

The fourth dimension to note about Paul's thorn in the flesh is

³¹⁷Filson, Interpreter's, p. 407.

³¹⁸Robertson, Word Pictures, IV, 265.

³¹⁹Reid, Interpreter's, p. 408.

that his response was to call upon the Lord for deliverance from it. As several commentators have noted, this seems to be the only occurrence in the New Testament of prayer explicitly addressed to Christ.³²⁰ Significantly, the verb is parakaleō, which means to call alongside and from which the name Paraclete, one of the titles of the Holy Spirit, is derived. The verb appears in the aorist tense, which indicates that Paul no longer prays in the same way.³²¹

Attention could be paid at this point to the significance of the three prayers or to the meaning of prayer in general, but the only essential consideration for our purposes is to realize that after three times, Paul came to the joy of acceptance. Hughes describes this submission as follows:

The stake for the flesh, then, continued to afflict the Apostle. But while it remained so also did the force and validity of the Lord's answer to his supplication: "He hath said. . . ," and what He has said remains unshakeably firm. To this answer, in which the will of God is revealed, Paul submits. It is not a case of his resigning himself to it as to an unwelcome but inexorable fate. He welcomes it, "most gladly," with full existential eagerness. He commits himself to it without regret or reservation. . . . Enthusiastic willingness for the will of God, whatever it may entail, is the mark of genuine faith. In the Christian perspective there is no place for the aimless non-resistance of dispirited resignation.³²²

A fifth dimension of the thorn to note is God's response to Paul's plea for deliverance. Though the specifics of his request were denied, "the Lord's answers to prayer are never negative, except in a superficial and proximate sense." As Hughes proclaims, "essentially and in the

³²⁰E.g., Margaret E. Thrall, I and II Corinthians, gen. eds. P. R. Ackroyd, A. R. C. Leaney, and J. W. Packer, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1965), p. 178.

³²¹O'Rourke, Jerome, p. 289.

³²²Hughes, p. 451.

ultimate issue they are fully positive, and directed to the eternal blessing of His people."³²³ The opposite is the idea expressed in Psalm 106: 15, where God answered the prayers of the people positively and, in giving them what they asked, sent a wasting disease among them.³²⁴

Barnes offers several reasons why prayers are sometimes not granted as requested. First of all, the grace imparted is of much greater value than a direct answer to the prayer would be. Furthermore, the request might not be good for the person who prays. Finally, God might have a much better plan in store for the believer.³²⁵ In the words of Foreman, "God sometimes refuses to give us what we want in order to give us what we need," or, as Augustine said, "He withholds gifts so we may desire him."³²⁶

R. C. H. Lenski explains profoundly the meaning of the Lord's first answer to Paul. He brings everything together in this way:

The Lord's answer to Paul is weighty, indeed, and of the highest significance for the boast which Paul has been making. "Sufficient for thee is my grace." ἀρκεῖ σοι, emphatically forward, "it suffices for thee," for all thy life, all thy work, all thy suffering, also and especially for this distressing "thorn for the flesh." By placing the subject last it is made equally emphatic; "my grace." It is the blessed word χάρις. . . in the fulness of its meaning, the Lord's undeserved favor toward one who as a sinner has deserved the very opposite, this boundless favor will all that it bestows, pardon and peace, support and deliverance, comfort, strength, assurance, hope, joy, and every gift. . . . It permits Paul to be tried, but only in order that what the Lord has indicated . . . may be most perfectly accomplished. This grace cannot be insufficient; it will attain its τέλος or goal in Paul's experience. That grace cannot abandon Paul; it is mightier than "the thorn," mightier than any "messen-

³²³Ibid.

³²⁴Redpath, Blessings, p. 221.

³²⁵Barnes, II Corinthians, p. 258.

³²⁶Foreman, Layman's, p. 149.

ger of Satan." It will support him in every ordeal and shine the brighter as pure, undeserved grace the more it is put to the test. What a sweeter reply from the Lord could Paul have desired?³²⁷

The sixth idea to note about Paul's thorn in the flesh is the meaning of the Lord's words, he gar dunamis en astheneia teleitai. It is the contention of this study that the translation "power is made perfect in weakness" leads to an insufficient understanding of what God's all-sufficient grace accomplishes in the weakness of man. Commentators generally understand that the form of teleō in this verse indicates a continuous fact in Paul's life,³²⁸ but they usually have the power change going in the wrong direction. Robertson, for example, says that the present passive indicative makes the verb linear in idea. In other words, he declares, "power is continually increased as the weakness grows. . . . The human weakness opens the way for more of Christ's power and grace."³²⁹

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary translates the verb, "is being (continually) made perfect," and then notes for comparison Hebrews 5:9,³³⁰ which does not use the verb teleō at all. It is correct to say, as Hughes does, that "the abject weakness of the human instrument serves to magnify and throw into relief the perfection of the divine power"³³¹ because the divine power is perfect and is seen more easily as the servant's weakness is greater. But the nature of that visibility is more clearly understood when the form teletai is translated truly as the verb teleō, rather than

³²⁷Lenski, Corinthians, pp. 1303-1304.

³²⁸E.g., Bernard, Expositor's, p. 111.

³²⁹Robertson, Word Pictures, IV, 266.

³³⁰Broomall, Wycliffe, p. 686.

³³¹Hughes, p. 451.

as the verb teleioō.

R. C. H. Lenski is the only commentator who points out the distinctions between the two verbs. Some commentators understand the significance of the distinction, but without the ease which separating them brings. For example, Reid offers this excellent statement of the relation of Paul's weakness to God's power:

The point of Paul's weakness could become the place of God's power. It could become a center through which that power could most fully radiate. . . . The weakness or defect can bring people into the condition in which they are open to God's Spirit. . . . Self-confidence is a good quality, provided it is based not on self-sufficiency but on a deep dependence on God. We come to that dependence only when self-sufficiency has been broken by some situation or experience that is too much for us. When self in its various forms is laid in the dust, God can fully come in.³³²

This comment reflects understanding of the principle involved, but Lenski is the only commentator who clarifies the distinction between the two verbs teleō and teleioō. His explanation serves as the crowning point toward which all the previous etymological and exegetical chapters in this study have been leading so it will be quoted at length. He lays the theological foundation for a theology of weakness with this exposition:

One must distinguish between the two verbs. Jesus said: "It is finished!" the end has been reached, the last stroke has been done. The noun in the verb is τέλος, the end, the last point. He said nothing about his being τέλειος, having reached a certain maturity or perfection. The sense of our passage is not, as our versions have it, the power "is made perfect," comes to perfection only in the midst of weakness. The Lord says that the divine power "is finished," is brought to the end of its work in weakness. The present tense is not "linear" . . . but gnomic. . . .

The Lord's power is certainly always τέλειος, mature, complete, and it cannot be made perfect, for it is ever so. But this power works and does things in us. It has much to do. When it has brought us to the point where we are utter weakness, its task is finished. It has then shaped us into a perfect tool for itself. As long as we sinners imagine that we still have some power we are unfit instru-

³³²Reid, Interpreter's, p. 409.

ments for the Lord's hands; he still has to work on us before he can work properly through us. But when he has reduced us to utter nothingness, then the $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ is reached; with such a tool the Lord can do great deeds. "The power" is generally identified with "my grace." Strictly speaking, the Lord's grace possesses power and works and operates in and through us with this its power.

This brief explanation showed Paul why the Lord gave him the thorn for the flesh. It was done lest he lift himself up unduly and thus become a tool that was unfit. . . . It was his weakness that made him so excellent a tool for the Lord.³³³

This is the seventh point to note about the thorn. Because of it Paul was forced to recognize his weakness, and in that recognition God's power on him could be brought to its end. Other commentators have understood this message, but Lenski pinpoints its reality by observing its foundation in Paul's choice of the verb teleō.

The second half of verse 9 and verse 10 tell us the results of this realization on Paul's part and take us back to the idea with which we began this chapter - viz., his glorying in his weakness. Paul insists, having learned this lesson about sufficient grace and power being brought to its end, that he would now rather glory in his weakness than ask for the thorn to be removed. As Tasker asserts, "this is not the cry of a fanatic rejoicing in pain. Paul's glorying rests on the assurance that only in this low estate will he be protected by the overshadowing power of Christ."³³⁴

Paul says that he glories "with exceeding gladness." He realizes that it is far better to have "a big God and a little Paul."³³⁵ Hughes thoroughly marks the distinction between this theology and that of the

³³³Lenski, Corinthians, pp. 1305-1306.

³³⁴Tasker, p. 179.

³³⁵Rice, Church at Corinth, p. 261.

ascetics who tried to inflict suffering upon themselves so that they might earn God's favor. He summarizes the difference in these words:

That was a joyless theology of insecurity, whereas Paul's theology is one of unclouded joy and impregnable security precisely because of the complete adequacy of God's grace in Christ to meet and make good the complete inadequacy of sinful man in the presence of his holy Creator. The weaknesses which Paul welcomed were not self-induced; they were given him (v. 7), and with them was given also grace sufficient for him to triumph through a power not his own and to rejoice because Christ instead of self was glorified.³³⁶

This first result, that of Paul's glorying in his weakness, leads to a second result, that the more he submits to his weakness the more the power of God can tabernacle in him. Several commentators, in reflecting upon the significance of this image make reference to other passages which we have considered in this study. Bernard, for example, suggests John 1:14, Revelation 7:15, and Revelation 21:3 for comparison.³³⁷

No commentator, however, makes note of the uniqueness of the verb episkēnoō in this verse, other than the comments in The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, which are noted in the etymological section above. Many theologians do remark about the presence of God implied in this verb, and Lenski recognizes that the aorist tense of the verb signifies that the tent has for once and for all been spread over Paul and all his weaknesses.³³⁸ It is my opinion that the prefix epi on the verb qualifies that spreading and marks its incompleteness in anticipation of the perfect tabernacling of God over/in His people at the end of time (see theological formulations below and the exegetical study of Revelation

³³⁶Hughes, p. 452.

³³⁷Bernard, Expositor's, p. 112.

³³⁸Lenski, Corinthians, p. 1306.

7 and 21 above).

Verse 10 takes us in still a third direction after the lesson of the thorn has been learned by Paul. His listing of all the things that he will take pleasure in is closely related to II Corinthians 4:7-10 (see exegetical study II D above) and 6:4-10. Paul is not saying that the endurance of human suffering and hardships is of any value in itself, but he glories in what these things mean for Christ's sake.³³⁹ Tasker explains the paradox in these words:

Only a convinced Christian can take pleasure in sufferings endured for Christ's sake, for he alone has been initiated into the divine secret, that it is only when he is weak, having thrown himself unreservedly in penitence and humility upon the never failing mercies of God, that he is strong, with a strength not his own, but belonging to the "Lord of all power and might. . . ."340

Satan had sent the particular trial to buffet Paul, Redpath exults, but the result instead was "to drive Paul to a new depth of trust and obedience and faith in God." The significance of the thorn is that its "pressure" and the "power of Calvary become completely bound up together."³⁴¹ The end result is that the Christian can declare, "when I am weak, then I am strong."

We could spend considerable time and space discussing all the lessons that Paul learned from this encounter with His gracious God, but it will suffice for our purposes just to mention a few of them briefly. First of all, as this section of the letter emphasizes, Paul learned humility. His crippling weakness served continually as a reminder of his human frailty and finitude. Secondly, he was experiencing Christ's pre-

³³⁹Hughes, pp. 453-455.

³⁴⁰Tasker, p. 179.

³⁴¹Redpath, Blessings, p. 220.

sence in a special way; through suffering he began to know God's tabernacling. Furthermore, new doors for service were opened to Paul in his specific ministry because of his weakness, though we will not consider the implications of these in this study.³⁴²

Finally, besides its effect on the Church through Paul's writing about it in this letter, his experience was a significant factor in the development of the Church at that time. Foreman proposes this idea as follows:

This harsh experience of the Apostle has been a blessing to the Church, too. Otherwise it could have been said: How could Christianity have missed? It was upheld and spread by a man of commanding powers, without a visible weakness, a man with no inner handicaps whatever. On the contrary, the most effective spokesman for Christ in the early years was this man Paul, a man who could be and was criticized and even despised by some, a man with real personal handicaps; yet a man filled with the Spirit. Paul spoke out of personal agony, personal discovery, when he wrote: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (II Cor. 4:7).³⁴³

Paul had no desire to establish the Church by the workings of his own power. In fact, that is the message that he proclaims to the Corinthians in the opening verses of chapter 13. He declares that he is glad to be weak if they are strong. His purpose is not to exert power on them, but to work for their edification, for their perfection. Four verses from this chapter should be considered to deepen our understanding of the context of II Corinthians 12:9.

Verses 3 and 4 give three contrasts which put the theology of this study into concise perspective. First, Paul contrasts his own weakness with the power he hopes for in the Corinthians. He is glad to be weak if it means that they are growing strong in their faith. Secondly, he

³⁴²Martin, p. 93.

³⁴³Foreman, Layman's, p. 150.

contrasts the weakness of Christ's death with the power of His resurrected life. Christ's death on the cross marks the lowest point of his humiliation (Phil. 2:8). Yet in that event God's power to save man was released (see exegetical study of I Corinthians 1:18-2:5 above).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks about the uniqueness of the Christian message and the place of the crucified Christ as its focus in these words:

God in human form, not, as in other religions, in animal form - the monstrous, chaotic, remote, and terrifying - nor yet in abstract form - the absolute, metaphysical, infinite, etc. - nor yet in the Greek divine-human or autonomous man, but man existing for others, and hence the crucified.³⁴⁴

It is the power of this Christ, crucified out of weakness, but resurrected in power, which is available to God's people as they become yielded to Him. This Christ has become the center of life for Paul; from Him his inspiration and direction are drawn. Consequently, his ministry is effective; he is being fully used by God and thus is truly finding himself (cf. I Corinthians 2:3-5 and note exegetical study II D above).³⁴⁵

Two significant ideas for the context of II Corinthians 12:9 occur in 13:9. First of all, Paul declares his contentment with all of his weaknesses if they contribute to the edification of the Corinthian people.³⁴⁶ In other words, Paul would far rather be weak in the sense of not having to exercise his apostolic power and authority if the Corinthian people, while testing themselves as he bids them in the previous verses, do the noble thing and recognize the truth of the message he has proclaimed. In the words of Robertson, "he is no Jonah who lamented when

³⁴⁴As quoted in Martin, p. 96.

³⁴⁵Reid, Interpreter's, p. 421.

³⁴⁶Bernard, Expositor's, p. 118.

Nineveh repented."³⁴⁷

The second idea immediately follows upon the first. Paul prays for them, that they might experience "perfecting." This is the only place in the Bible that this particular noun is used; (the verb appears immediately in verse 11). It means "improvement" and suggests the idea of repairing what is broken or restoring what is lost.³⁴⁸ The fact that Paul chose such an unusual word in this place reinforces my opinion that he was also very careful to choose teleō instead of teleioō and episkēnoō rather than skēnoō in 12:9. Paul had at his command a wide variety of words signifying perfecting, completing, finishing, becoming. In each place he uses precisely the connotations that are appropriate. Here the word katartisis suggests a fitting out that is thorough and complete. From this word derives the English word artisan.³⁴⁹ The word does not carry the idea of "perfectionism." Paul clearly intends for the Corinthian congregation to be actively pursuing a "restoration of harmonious and efficient functioning."³⁵⁰

This same idea reappears two verses later in the imperative verb katartidzesthe. The form is passive and implies that the work must be done by another. Furthermore, the word seems to be emphasized to provide a contrast to the finishing of 12:9 and Paul's glorying in his weakness. Paul wants the Corinthian people to be perfected, but he realizes that this will take place only as he is a willing and weak instrument in God's

³⁴⁷Robertson, Word Pictures, IV, p. 271.

³⁴⁸Tasker, p. 190.

³⁴⁹Lenski, Corinthians, p. 1337.

³⁵⁰Hughes, p. 484.

hands. When God's power is brought to its finish on his life, he can be the perfect tool for His use in molding the Corinthian congregation. The verb in this verse is present tense; that implies that the action is something progressive.³⁵¹ As God's power is brought to its finish on individual lives, the process can be begun.

³⁵¹Boise, p. 309.

III. SUMMARY - A THEOLOGICAL FORMULATION

Is there an answer to the problem of human pain and suffering? To whom can a person turn to find strength to carry him through the difficulties of life? Does Christianity offer a resource which can enable its believers to bear up under struggles and discouragements, and to emerge from them triumphantly?

The apostle Paul proclaims exultantly that Christ is the answer to all of these questions, that His grace is sufficient to meet all of a person's needs. Having struggled with a "thorn in the flesh" himself, he records for the members of the church at Corinth the answer which had carried him through the time of deep testing - an answer which continued to sustain him throughout his life. In II Corinthians 12:9 Paul announces the answer which the Lord gave to his pleas for healing; His words were these:

Sufficient to you is my grace, for my power in times of weakness is brought to the end.

It is my contention that the message of this verse is better understood if the verb teletai is translated "brought to its end" rather than the usual rendering, "is made perfect." Then the verb can be seen more clearly in its close connection with the second verb of the following statement, which was Paul's response to the Lord's message of grace:

Accordingly, all the more gladly rather will I boast in my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ might tabernacle in me.

The verb skēnoō, which is used elsewhere in the New Testament to signify the tabernacling presence of God, has, in the context of II Cor-

inthians 12:9, an added prefix, the preposition epi. Because epi bears the connotation of "approaching" or "drawing near to," it seems that the verb episkēnoō was chosen deliberately by Paul to signify a tabernacling that is not quite complete, but which is approaching what it should be. Consequently, it is the thesis of this study that the tabernacling of God takes place in the believer's weakness. His power must be exerted on the believer as long as the believer tries to live out of his own power. When he gives up in weakness and yields himself to the indwelling presence of the Lord, then God's power is able to be brought to its finish. Perfect weakness would result in perfect tabernacling. God's power on the individual would then have been brought completely to its end; consequently, the believer would be the perfect vessel for God's power to be extended through him to others.

To arrive at this theology, however, requires a thorough undergirding in the Scriptural concepts of power and weakness, of tabernacling and of finishing (teleō), as opposed to the related verb, perfecting (teleioō). Furthermore, the observance of God's tabernacling action in the past and the promise of His tabernacling in the future enables us to comprehend more thoroughly the nature of His tabernacling in the present in human weakness. In order to see these ideas as part of the wholeness of a theology of weakness, we have traced elements in seven sections of Scripture. A brief summary of each of these sections will enable us to outline the progression of thought which leads to the conclusion that weakness is the means by which God is able to work powerfully through, rather than on, the Christian's life.

God's perfect tabernacling has taken place at only one time in history and in only one person - viz., His Son Jesus Christ. Throughout

His life Jesus declared that He did not do anything of His own will, but only because He was fulfilling the will of His Father (e.g., John 5:30, 6:38, and 17:4).

The fact of God's tabernacling in the person of Jesus Christ is announced in John 1:14. The verb is in the aorist tense and therefore signifies a completed tabernacling. The rest of the Gospel account reveals Jesus as the perfect bearer of the image of God, as the totally yielded and obedient Son, Who always did exactly what the Father would have Him do.

His life of total submission came to an ignominious end (from an earthly perspective) in His death on a cross, but from that cross He cried out victoriously, "It has been brought to the finish" (John 19:30). His shout was exultant because He realized that He had completed everything which God had ordained for Him to do. All which had been prophesied of Him in the Scriptures had been thoroughly fulfilled (John 19:28). At the point of His death - at the moment of greatest weakness - God's perfect tabernacling was brought to its goal. Through the yieldedness of the Son, God reached out with the power of salvation to all mankind. His power never had to be exerted on Jesus, Who was the perfect vessel; therefore, it could reach out to everyone with salvation.

The book of Revelation gives pictures of the future. Someday - at the end of days - God will make His dwelling among men as He once walked with Adam in the garden. He will tabernacle with His people, and they shall know Him face to face. That tabernacling will take place when everything has come to its end (telos).

Revelation 7:9-17 presents a picture of the joy of the saved as they exalt in the presence of their God. They will sing songs acknow-

ledging His perfect power (v. 12). The evil things of the world, such as hunger and thirst and tears, will have passed away (vv. 16-17). They will be guided to springs of living water by their perfect Shepherd (v. 17). All of this will take place because He Who sits on His throne will "tabernacle over them" (v. 15).

The concept of finishing is very prominent in the book of Revelation. In several places, John announces that the wrath of God has been brought to its end (e.g., 15:1), and he records the cry of the great voice saying, "It is done!" as an angel pours out the seventh bowl of God's wrath (16:17). Three times in chapter 20 (vv. 3, 5, and 9) events are associated with the time when the thousand years are brought to their end.

Revelation 21:1-6 gives us a glimpse at the culmination of the Apocalypse. The Apostle describes his vision of the new heaven and the new earth, of the coming down of the new city Jerusalem. As he sees the city come, he hears a voice declaring that the old distinction between heaven and earth no longer exists, for now "the dwelling of God is with men" (v. 3). Now God will tabernacle among them, and they shall be His people. All things will be new, for that which is of the old order will be done. God declares Himself to be both the beginning (source) and the end (telos). This is the perfect tabernacling to which God's people look forward. It will take place at a precise time in the future - at the end of history.

It is to this glorious picture of the future relationship with God that Paul looks forward in his valedictory letter to Timothy. Recognizing that he is already on the point of departure, he proclaims in II Timothy 4:6-8 that there is laid up for him a crown of righteousness which

the Lord will award to him at the last day (v. 8). Meanwhile, as he looks over his life, he can say with complete confidence that his race has been brought to its finish. The verb teleō appears here (v. 7) in the perfect tense, indicating the culminating point of the process of running the race. Paul's assurance comes because he has been faithful in the running. The vision that motivated him to continue on his course is the epiphany of his Lord.

Because we know, however, that Paul's life was filled with much struggle and conflict, we must ask the question of how Paul was able to persist in running in spite of all obstructions. As we pursue that question, we discover that it is really the question of how the perfect tabernacling of God in the past (as in John) and the perfect tabernacling of God in the future (as in Revelation) can take place in the present (as Paul seems to have experienced it, according to his comments in II Timothy).

The secret to appropriating God's tabernacling presence, Paul had discovered, lies in looking to Jesus and being transformed into His image (see, e.g., II Corinthians 3:18 or Galatians 2:20). In I Corinthians 1:18-2:5, Paul speaks of his determination to know nothing in his ministry and life except Christ crucified. He acknowledges that such an attitude seems folly to the world and is offensive to the Jews, but he declares to the contrary, that God's foolishness is wiser than the highest wisdom of men.

Paul reminds his readers that he had come to them with much weakness, but he asserts that to do so is always to everyone's benefit because then the belief of those who respond to his message comes not because of his brilliance or persuasiveness, but because of the power of God at work

by means of the Holy Spirit. His life and ministry are seen as a demonstration of that Spirit and power, even in the midst of his trembling and weakness.

The question of how that power is manifested in weakness, however, is still unanswered. Paul writes the truth when he declares himself to be a manifestation of the Spirit's power, but he has not yet clarified how that takes place. Not until he bares his soul to the Corinthians in his second letter is the question given an answer.

It is useful, at this point, to compare the message of grace as it is recorded by another writer in the Scriptures to see how the concepts of power and weakness and being brought to the finish are used in general. In Hebrews 4:14-6:3 the writer offers an excellent summary of the significance of the weakness of Christ, of His office as our **High Priest**, and of the Christian's growth to maturity in Him. This section takes its readers full circle, beginning with the fact of our possession of the great High Priest and our dependence upon Him and ending with the same realization that we will move on to greater maturity in faith according to God's permission or will.

The confidence that the Christian can have in approaching the throne of God to find grace for all of his needs is based upon the realization that Jesus as the great High Priest has suffered everything that a human being can suffer, and, therefore, that He is able to suffer together with us in our weaknesses. Furthermore, because He suffered all things without sinning, He has the power to deliver us from temptations and testings.

Christ is pictured as the priest who is made perfect (teleiōō) in His priesthood by that which He suffered. Because we know that Christ

was already perfect as to His moral stature, we recognize that the verb teleioō refers here not to the perfecting of Him as a person, but to the perfecting of Him as to the office He undertook. In other words, the verb is used to describe the fact that Christ could not fulfill the function of sympathizing with us in our weaknesses had He not undergone them also.

Because He did obediently submit and, thereby, was made perfect, He became the source of salvation for all who depend on Him. Once a person believes, then the process of maturing can begin to take place.

What is seen in this cycle in the letter to the Hebrews is the paradoxical doctrine, which frequently appears in Scripture, that the believer is both totally passive and dependent upon God's power at work within him and yet totally active and involved in pursuing God's will and learning that which will cause spiritual growth. The key to the harmony of these two seemingly conflicting ideas lies in the nature of grace and in the facts of power and weakness.

Christ was designated by His Father to be a priest after the order of Melchizedek to offer once and for all the perfect sacrifice for sins, to make possible forever free communication between God and men. On the basis of His finished work, the believer comes to God. Once having come to God, however, the believer becomes actively involved in the process of maturity or perfecting.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul opens himself up more than he does in any other letter. While defending his apostolic authority, he lists his credentials, itemizes the various sufferings he has endured, and discusses his thorn in the flesh. Whereas I Corinthians seems to focus primarily on matters of doctrine and Paul's ministry, II Corinthians focuses on matters of personality and Paul's life. For that

reason we are able in this letter to enter most intimately into his struggles in order to see how he handled the difficulties of his life by means of his faith.

In chapter 4, Paul twice uses the phrase, "we do not lose heart," to emphasize that in spite of all obstacles his ministry could continually be carried on because he had his ministry by the mercy of God" (v. 1). He recognizes that a human life is a mere clay vessel, but, more significantly he realizes that in that clay vessel God has placed an incredible treasure, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (v. 6). This is the secret: Paul knows Christ! He makes a similar comment in Colossians 1:21, where he rejoices in this mystery: "Christ in you, the hope of glory!" It is a mystery indeed - who can explain how it can be that Christ is in us? - but the result of that, he declares in II Corinthians 4:7, is that men may see that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to the vessel.

Death is the means by which this is accomplished. Paul speaks often in his letters (e.g., Romans 6) of the death in Christ of the believer to himself. This is a difficult concept and one that cannot really be explained, but Paul makes it more clear in this section from II Corinthians 4 as he points out the limits to which danger and tribulations can go (vv. 8-10). Each of the illustrations stresses that no trial goes beyond what can be endured (cf. I Cor. 10:13). These difficulties in life are transitory; they shall all pass away. The heavenly things, on the contrary, are eternal, and Paul looks to them for reality (4:17-18).

At the beginning of II Corinthians 5, Paul uses the word for tent or tabernacle in a different way from the way in which he uses the tabernacling idea in II Corinthians 12:9. Here, in verses 1-5 he contrasts

the temporariness of the tent with the eternal stability of the heavenly habitation which God is preparing for each person. The eternal habitation of which he speaks would correspond to the goal desired by Paul in II Corinthians 12:9. In his weakness he longs for the permanent dwelling of God within him.

In II Corinthians 4:10, and again in verse 11, Paul proclaims the manifestation of Christ in his mortal body. The context of these assertions is highly significant for the purposes of this study, for he says that such demonstration is possible because he was always being given up to death. It is death that enables him to know the power of God through him. Rather than fighting the weakness that threatens him, he submits to it and therein derives God's strength.

This is the ringing declaration of II Corinthians 12:9: that in his bowing to God's all-sufficient grace, in submitting to the perfect Will instead of fighting for his own, in yielding to the wisdom of God which seems folly to men, power is brought to its end. And when God no longer has to exert power over His people (by means of difficulties or thorns or whatever it takes to cause them to discover the joy of apprehending His perfect will), then His power can be manifested through them on behalf of others.

The context of II Corinthians 12:9 makes this much more clear. Paul has had to defend his position and ministry and person as an apostle, but he asserts in the midst of his defense that what he really glories in is not any of the things associated with authority or prestige, but rather in his weaknesses. An incident which set the tone for his whole ministry involved a fly-by-night escape by means of a basket let down over a wall - hardly the normal thing to boast about!

Paul had had marvelous experiences of great ecstasy; he had been transported to the very heavens in order to receive special encouragement and insight from the Lord. But these experiences did not determine the strength of his ministry. It almost seems that we could dichotomize and say that such uplifting experiences provide the content of ministry while the difficult ones provide the means and quality.

Paul declares that his thorn in the flesh was specifically given to him so that he would not be too elated over these experiences. Yet the difficulties experienced because of the thorn serve to give to him his greatest source of elation since in them he discovers the most significant principle of his ministry - viz., that when he is weak, then he is strong.

II Corinthians 13:4 gives the perspective that puts everything into proper focus. In weakness Christ submitted unto death; consequently, He lives by the power of God. This is the message that we learned from John, for he records the triumph with which Jesus cried, "It has been finished," and then laid His head down to rest while handing over His spirit. If we live in Christ, then, with the same submission in weakness to death, God's tabernacling can take place.

The same totality of life, the same holiness of every moment, the same manifestation of the Spirit's power that characterized the life of Jesus are actually available to all those who believe in Him, for these characteristics existed, not because He was God (and therefore it was not easy for Him), but because He was completely submissive to the Father's will. The power of God could rest upon us totally if we could but allow His tabernacling to take place.

The frustration of the matter is, however, that we are still hu-

man, and it is our nature to strive for power, to justify our own existence, to attempt to prove our worth. Consequently, the tabernacling of God in our lives cannot be complete. It approaches completeness - the verb is episkēnoō - and the more we let God have His way with us, the closer to the full tabernacling God's dwelling with us can become. It happens in our weakness, for then, as God's power is brought to its finish - i.e., as God has to exert less and less power on us when we become more and more weak and yielded to Him - it can gradually come to the point of resting on us.

The way to handle the problem of human pain and suffering, therefore, is to submit to it so that God can bring His good purposes through it. The way to find strength to carry us through the difficulties of life is to give up trying to find that strength in ourselves and to take it from the One Who is the true Source of strength and life. Christianity does offer the resource which enables its adherents to emerge from struggles triumphantly - and yet perhaps not triumphantly according to the world's perspective. Triumph occurs when God's purposes are fulfilled. This may necessitate a seemingly negative answer to a petition for healing or rescue or power, but underneath the apparent negative action on the part of God is the positively deep movement of His grace, accomplishing far more significant victories than human wisdom can begin to comprehend. His grace is indeed sufficient for all our needs!

Once in the past - about 2000 years ago - God tabernacled perfectly in a human being, Jesus Christ. Someday in the future - only God knows when - He will tabernacle perfectly in all of His people. Now in the present - when they are weak - God begins to tabernacle in His own, for then His power can come to its end and rest upon them.

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