

2 Corinthians

Apostle Paul loved his Corinthian church. He founded it around C.E.51, which we can date from independent sources. (Gallio's proconsulship, dated from material found in Delphi.) After that, dates and visits are uncertain. He probably wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, may be in C.E. 54 and that was followed quite quickly by 2 Corinthians which he wrote in Macedonia, possibly in Philippi.

But it is not as simple as that! It appears that after leaving Corinth, he wrote to them, but this letter, the "previous letter" is lost. So is the letter – the "painful letter" which he wrote on a subsequent visit, of which we have no record. There may even have been a letter from Corinth to him – we have no trace, although there is a letter, dated to the second century, claiming to be from the Church at Corinth to Paul. It clearly is not, nor is 3 Corinthians, which is claimed to be Paul's answer to this letter.

Does any of this matter? It could, as his travelling plans were part of the criticism levelled against him. As we shall see, Paul is answering much of the criticism which he had met in Corinth. But we only have his answers - we have to reason out what those criticisms were in many cases. But knowing them helps us understand Paul's responses more clearly.

Fortunately, in answering these criticisms, Paul teaches us many things, and opens up the heart of God and of the Christian faith to us. Each criticism brings us vast areas of teaching. We are blessed!

Abbreviations

B.C.E. - Before Christian era.

C.E. - Christian era.

LXX – Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament.

Cor. – Corinthians

N.I.V. - New International Version

A.V.- Authorised (King James) Version

2 Corinthians Chapter 1

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother. To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a very common beginning for a Pauline letter. **“Grace”** (Gk: “charis”) and **“peace”** (Gk: “eirene”) are the blessings he offers on many occasions. “Grace” means all that is of God can be ours, and “peace”, matching the Hebrew “Shalom,” means being in a right relationship with God - forgiven, loved and blessed. What more could any church ask?

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

There is a lot on the Apostle’s mind, as we shall see, but as always, he wants to encourage his church. Times were not easy for Christians in the first century C.E., and there was a lot of “affliction” about. **“Affliction”**, translated in this passage as **“troubles”** is the Greek word “Thripsis”. Afflictions (N.I.V. “troubles”) are not the everyday problems we all have - paying the bills, feeding the children, finding work and so on. It means those things which come to us as a result of our faith – the negative opinion so many have of us, the struggles to maintain our purity, holiness, morality, the struggle to stay alive, the threat of death, and even death itself. These are the “afflictions” of which the Apostle is speaking. A.V. translates “Thripsis” as “affliction”, and it is, in this case, nearer the mark.

How can God’s people withstand “afflictions?” With **“comfort.”** This is the Greek word “paraklesis”. This beautiful word, reminiscent of the “Comforter” (The Holy

Spirit: John 14:16)) does not mean being wrapped in a blanket. It reflects that deep conviction of being in God's presence, of knowing that all things are in his hands, and that he has a purpose for us and he is working those purposes out, whatever the circumstances appear to be.

As God "comforts" us in our sufferings, which will surely come ("**share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ**") so we will be able to comfort and strengthen others. There is great comfort in shared suffering, and as we suffer, and find the comfort of God, so we are well equipped to comfort others.

Suffering is, in Christian terms, a closed circle. We suffer, we are comforted, we help others, they suffer, are comforted, they help us and others. There is no room for the enemy to move in such an environment, nor is there any avoiding the struggle.

What is the point of all this "thripsis?" It is to produce **endurance**. Again and again in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and in his Corinthian correspondence, the Apostle comes back to this theme. Christians have to learn to endure, while we wait for the Lord's coming. All the sufferings and struggles help us learn to endure. Without it, the Faith, and our faith cannot survive. It's war, (Eph. 6) and we have to be tough fighters, so that in the end, we are still standing. Endurance is such a vital discipline and is neglected in our churches today. We give up far too easily. We need to hear the Apostle's challenge to endure to the end.

⁸ We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, ¹¹ as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Paul had been under "**great pressure**" – weighed down heavily like a beast of burden beneath too heavy a load. What had caused this "sentence of death?" It could have been his troubles in Ephesus, where he had to make a hasty exit, possibly after serious challenges to his life. We are unsure of the background to

this statement, but the passage leads us to this powerful insight- that we rely not on ourselves, but on God, who can do all things - even raised the dead. In a way, Paul is repeating himself. God allows thripsis so that we can know his comfort, and grow in strength and endurance. Here, God allows Paul to be in great danger, so that he can learn utter dependence on God. And, here is the point - God is utterly trustworthy. Our God is a deliverer! He can and will deliver us from all danger. Our God is a resurrecting God. He will raise us through all situations.

So if this is all true, what is the place of the church? Surely if God delivers, then let him get on and deliver. Fortunately, it does not work that way. Deliverance comes through the prayer of God's people. **"Prayer"** here is the Greek word "deesis", which means heartfelt prayer - the kind of prayer Hannah prayed. (1 Samuel 1)

Nothing is automatic in the Kingdom. We are not puppets and God is not a dictator. We are in this together, and our prayers release God to bless. (1 Samuel 7 - Mizpah) What a privilege prayer is and how often we fail to use this gift.

¹² Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace. ¹³ For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, ¹⁴ as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

The Apostle's relationship with the Corinthians is a sensitive area, as we shall see. He wrote to them a "hard letter", of which we have no trace, and this seems to have soured relationships. He also has opponents in Corinth, (more later about them) who would try to challenge his integrity at every turn. So he boasts (glories in) his integrity - an issue which had also come up in his correspondence to the Thessalonian church, although there it was to offer them an example, not to defend himself.

He writes in a way that readers can understand – perhaps that was one of the criticisms levelled against him. He wrote with sincerity and clarity. God will testify to all of this at the **"day of the Lord Jesus"** - the Parousia. (See 1 and 2 Thessalonians.)

¹⁵ Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. ¹⁶ I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. ¹⁷ Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both “Yes, yes” and “No, no”?

¹⁸ But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not “Yes” and “No.” ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not “Yes” and “No,” but in him it has always been “Yes.” ²⁰ For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. ²¹ Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, ²² set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

²³ I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

One of the issues which Paul had with Corinth was his change of plans. His opponents accused him of being indecisive, promising things, especially visits, which he did not fulfil. So here we are again - **“I planned to visit you..”** But as he explains he didn’t make his plans **“lightly.”** This is a good instruction to us in our high speed 21st century life. We must take time to plan, seeking God and obeying his instructions, not our own personal will. In the light of his prayers, Apostle changed his plans. He must have been disappointed that his Corinthian Christian friends could not trust his integrity in his plan changing. Surely they should know that he would never do so “lightly?” Apparently not. I have found that God’s people have short memories. They quickly forget the integrity of those who have worked among them and seem willing to believe the worst. The Christians in Corinth were, as we know, struggling with some incoming group of teachers, who were keen to blacken Paul’s name. God’s people should have known Paul better, and trusted him.

Verses 18-23 are so typical of the Apostle's writing style. From defending the failure to make a visit, his mind takes off into a beautiful theological statement. We will see this over and over again, and it's what makes his letters so exciting.

* **"Yes!"** Everything in Christ is **"yes!"** For Paul, Jesus is absolute truth, and he built his life on this consistency. "A-men" is the only possible answer – indeed God himself is the great "A-men"

* God **"makes us stand firm."** Endurance is one of the apostle's abiding themes. We are not to be like a ship in a storm with no rudder. We are fixed, solid, built on, and growing from the rock. We must develop "rock likeness" in our faith. Anything less will give the enemy access, and cause us to stumble. No one is saying this is easy, least of all Apostle Paul. He is just saying that this is the way it must be. But how can we hope to endure?

The "Charismata" used to fall on the Judges, and this was God's sign that he had anointed them for service. In the New Covenant, we are all anointed with the Spirit, as a sign that we belong to God. In the end, if we are faithful, he will guarantee our endurance. The Spirit lives in us, and we can be confident that we will last the course. This is God's desire - but for it to come to pass, we must unite our spirit with his, and commit ourselves to endure. There is no magic wand to guarantee endurance. Our spirit must unite with his. Then, whatever the circumstances, all will be well.

The Corinthian issue is still with him, and now he almost warns them - **I didn't come back for a reason - to spare you strong discipline which I certainly would have brought.** This strikes us as odd, but we must not make the Corinthian mistake. We must trust him. His Pastor's heart was stirred, and he didn't want to hurt them. He longed only to bless. Pastors and leaders should take careful note of this.

2 Corinthians Chapter 2

¹ So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. ² For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? ³ I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. ⁴ For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and

with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

We are back to the Corinthian correspondence issue. “Another painful visit” is one we know nothing of, nor do we know of the “painful letter” referred to here. The painful letter, from Paul’s perspective, was an attempt to put things right. The saying “never put it in writing” comes to mind, because this letter didn’t achieve its purpose. Or did it? Titus brings a good report, but I suspect Paul made too much of this report. He was always ready to believe the best of people. Things had not sorted themselves out in Corinth. I wonder if Paul is here regretting the “painful” letter.

What is vital to grasp is the reason he had for writing – so that they could see he was doing so out of love and not out of anger. It may have been an unfortunate letter, but it came from a Pastor’s heart. Sadly the Corinthian Christians seemed ready to think ill of Apostle Paul, whatever he tried to do. How short their memories! Christian leaders take note!

⁵ If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. ⁶ The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. ⁷ Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.

So it appears that only one person is involved, and who has caused the trouble. (We may see later that it was more than one.) The person concerned has caused grief to everyone. The punishment on this offender is now sufficient. Note that it is a majority decision – not so encouraging for the Apostle. But now is the time to show compassion and love – to show that forgiveness really is a “forgive and forget” experience. This kind of attitude is not easy. Our human nature won’t let go, but this is not the way of the Kingdom.

⁹ Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

The Corinthians appear to have passed the test. What test? The test of obedience to the word of God as spoken by Paul. It's done now, and forgiveness must be exercised for the good of the community. Otherwise Satan's schemes (Ephesians 6:11) will achieve their desire.

¹² Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, ¹³ I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶ To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? ¹⁷ Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.

Two wonderful pictures here of the Christian life. We are in **“triumphal procession in Christ.”** “Triumphs” were given to Roman generals who had won a great victory. They were allowed to march through Rome with their legions and the prisoners they had captured. This was a statement of their power and victory. For us, we are walking every day in the victory procession of Jesus. Power and authority are ours, because our “general” is marching at the head of us. Victory is ours! At the same time, we are spreading the **“aroma of Christ among the world.”** One writer put it this way:- “The gospel and those who preach it are well pleasing to God, whether men receive it and are saved, or reject it and are lost.”

It's all too easy to get weary, and an attitude of defeat can come on us. But we have no need to feel like this. We are the victors (Rom 8:37), but we are so much more. As we live our Christian lives, however simple, we are testing all those who come into our path. They “smell” Christ on us, and immediately decide their destiny. But as Apostle says, **“who is equal to such a task?”**

2 Corinthians Chapter 3

¹ Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³ You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

It's possible that others had presented letters of recommendation to the Corinthians, but Apostle Paul has no need to – the Corinthians are his letters of recommendation. What a beautiful picture, and one I have always adhered to. I can present all the letters any church leader might need, but for me, God's ministry through me is my recommendation. If that isn't good enough, then no letter can make up this deficit.

⁴ Such confidence we have through Christ before God. ⁵ Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶ He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant— not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Such recommendation as our ministries may have come from God and not from ourselves. A simple truth, but one I see many ministries in this century ignoring. Glowing reports are given about ministries, which focus on the man or woman involved. But God gives the recommendation by blessing his work in us. That cannot be captured in a picture or a glowing report. It is written by the spirit in our hearts. As usual, the Apostle puts his finger right on the issue – whose glory is it and who gets the fruits of that glory? This is a question every leader should answer daily.

“We are ministers of a new covenant.” This expression launches us into more powerful theology.

⁷ Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹ If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰ For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with

the surpassing glory.¹¹ And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

It seems a bit harsh to refer to the Old Covenant as one which brought death, but Paul is speaking theologically. What the Old Covenant did was convict people of their failure to keep God's laws. This sin was uncleanseable, and led to spiritual death. Elsewhere Paul explains that this was the very purpose of the law. Its function was to bring us to the point where we know that we need something else. This ministry, which led to death came with glory so bright, (Exodus 34:29-35) that Moses was forced to veil his face. Paul draws two conclusions here – that the old covenant was God's will at that time, (because he put his glory in it) and that it was delivered with a strong transitory implication, because it would be surpassed by Christ. This new covenant would be accomplished by even brighter glory, - **"surpassing glory,"** and this glory lasts! The old covenant led to death, the new leads to forgiveness and new beginnings. What a glory, and we live in it! Sometimes I wonder why we get so downcast. Yet remember Apostle is also prone to being downcast. (He was very downcast when he got to Corinth. Acts 18:9-11)

We seem a long way from the troubles at Corinth, but this is the way Paul writes. He moves from the mundane to the sublime in a few verses, and he hasn't finished yet:-

¹² Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³ We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. ¹⁴ But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

"Hope" and **"boldness"** go together. Our hope is in the promises of the Lord - all of them. He "was and is and is to come." This certainty is the solid rock on which we can be bold - bold to live, bold to claim the promises and bold to testify. Our hope is certain. Unlike the old law, which gave little hope or boldness, Christ has taken away the veil, and hope can flourish.

¹⁷ **Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.** The Holy Spirit and the Lord are uniquely combined. It is through the action of the Holy Spirit, working with and through the Lord, that our hearts can be changed, and this leads to freedom:

*Freedom from the law. (Gal 5:18)

* Freedom from sin. (Romans 6:7)

*Freedom from fear. (Romans 8:15)

* Freedom from absolutely anything that binds, and destroys. We are “more than conquerors through Christ.” (Romans 8:37)

The work of the Holy Spirit is transforming us more and more every day, as we walk with Jesus, and see his glory. It’s a daily process, lasting a lifetime. But just pause and think - each of us is reflecting the Lord’s glory to those around us. What an honour!

2 Corinthians Chapter 4

¹ **Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.** ² **Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.** ³ **And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.** ⁴ **The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.** ⁵ **For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.** ⁶ **For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.**

“We do not lose heart.” This is easy to say, but hard to accomplish - at least I have found it so. But Paul is not just making a statement here - he is speaking from his heart. When he arrived in Corinth, he was very near losing heart. But he didn’t, because it’s God’s ministry, entrusted to him. If “he who calls you is faithful” (1 Thess. 5:24) then it will work out. Again I have found this easy to read but not so easy to do. I often feel like giving up! I have to draw strength from the Apostles life and testimony.

“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers..” Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last, the Apostle reminds us that there is a spiritual dimension to all this – that Satan is active in obstructing the Gospel, by blinding the minds of unbelievers. It’s all there for them to see, but they **“are perishing”** and this is encouraging. They “are” perishing - they haven’t perished, and there is still the chance of salvation, as long as we preach Jesus Christ as Lord, and live in such a way that his glory is shining through us. We really can make a difference!

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

The Apostle is only too well aware of our weaknesses, and he brings them to the front of his teaching **“We have this treasure in jars of clay.”** How very encouraging, and especially coming from him, who was a really tough character, and lived to endure. I am always alarmed at those Christians that seem to be invincible, untroubled by any circumstance and for whom everything seems to go well. They make me feel inadequate – why can’t I be like them? Apostle Paul says that this is living a lie. We are all jars of clay – poor quality, and subject to being easily broken. Why has God made us like this - so that it is clearly seen that the power to galvanise and empower us is his alone. Being a clay jar is safe, just as being a servant is safe. Then everyone knows, including the clay jar, who is the Lord, who has the power, and to whom the honour should be given.

“We carry the death of Jesus in our body.” This is a repeat of the teaching in chapter 1 about dying and being raised up. By repeating it the Apostle is warning us that this will be an on-going process. We will seem to fail, but by being raised, we show the life of Jesus - the resurrecting power which Jesus can release into us. This is the cost which goes along with the privilege of being the reflection of the glory of God to the world. It doesn’t always feel so - it’s not much fun when death is being revealed, and everything is falling apart. But every “death” is an opportunity for the Lord to reveal himself. I suppose in the end, we just have to

pay this price, and get on and endure. No one said following Christ would be easy, and from this passage it is clear that it is not going to be easy.

¹³ It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. ¹⁵ All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

The purpose of Paul’s sufferings would not have been obvious to the Corinthians, but that just showed how much they still had to learn. He has a big enough heart to say that his suffering was for their benefit - and for the benefit of all that followed them, even to this day. It’s easy to teach that suffering leads to the expansion of the kingdom, but a lot harder to live it.

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal

But the Apostle did walk the walk, and because his theology was secure, he did not lose heart. How I long to have that same understanding – I will have to pray hard for it. It was, for him, a real suffering - wasting away every day outwardly, but inwardly being renewed by the hope generated by the Holy Spirit.

Then comes the climax of this phase of his teaching – the **“light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all.”** God’s people must keep their eyes fixed on the prize - the hope of glory, for which we are being prepared daily. In our day, too much attention is paid to the here and now, yet this part of our existence is minute compared to eternity. That’s where we will live, and that’s where the glory is being stored up for us. If we keep our eyes fixed there, then the troubles of this world, hard though they are, will fade into obscurity.

But in our day, few of God’s people spend any time thinking about or studying eternity. So they are ill prepared, both for their journey beyond death, and to face and conquer the **“momentary troubles.”** If these troubles become all

conquering, the power of God is not revealed in them, and the gospel does not spread.

The final challenge from a man who has faced it all - keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

2 Corinthians Chapter 5

¹ For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ² Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, ³because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Paul continues his teaching on suffering and endurance with the realisation that his earthly house (tabernacle) might not endure until the Lord returns – it faces being “dissolved”. But that doesn’t matter, because he has, and we have, an **eternal house** in heaven. (Jesus - “many rooms.” John 14). What is this eternal house? The Bible has plenty to say about it, but Paul chooses not to describe it here, except to tell us that it is the place from which all the glory comes. To be in the presence of the cloud of glory forever will do me!

But how do we know we will get it? The Spirit guarantees it to us - he has put down the **deposit** for us. I don’t understand why Christians have any problem with this teaching. Jesus came to “bring many sons to glory”, (Hebrews 2:10) and to bring us to our eternal home.

⁶ Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ For we live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

“We live by faith” - faith in Jesus, and in his promises and guarantees. This is the secret of Paul’s ability to endure, not to lose heart, and to be confident. He is totally committed to living “in Christ” - to living a Christ-centred life, where the life of Jesus reveals itself in him. His whole life is focused not on pleasing the church at Corinth, or any man, but in pleasing Jesus. Yet again, I have to say that this looks good in writing, but in reality can cause many problems, especially in a church which is not hearing from God, does not want to focus and commit totally to God, and isolates those who do want to live this way. It seems that there is as much suffering in wanting to please him as there is in not wanting to please him, and sadly, much of this pain is inflicted by the church of our day.

¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. ¹² We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. ¹³ If we are “out of our mind,” as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Paul **“fears the Lord”** - holds him in awe and reverence, and he wants others to do the same, and to do this he speaks plainly, not adjusting his words to suit his hearers. (Reading his letters, and knowing his character, I find that hard to imagine!) This ought to give his Corinthian Christians cause for pride, but apparently it did not - some said he was out of his mind. It seems that the god of this world can also blind the minds of believers.

“Constrain” (N.I.V. “compel”) is the Greek word “sunecho”. It also occurs in Luke 12:50 – “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed (constrained) I am until it is completed!” It’s a compulsive urge, rooted in God’s agape love for us, to which we try to respond. “Constrain” produces a passion for the Lord, which is very infectious. Yet sadly, so many Christians and so many churches are not “constrained” but “neither hot nor cold.” (Rev. 3:15) Sometimes I wonder how the Lord must feel when he sees this lukewarmness.

The Apostle is constrained by the Gospel – that one died for all. We find nothing amazing in this, but in Paul’s day, there was a powerful struggle between his gospel, and other interpretations of the death of Jesus. He taught that Jesus

chose “to be sin”, so that we might be put right with God. (For Christ’s sinlessness see also Romans 8:3 and John 8:46) Christ stood in the place of sinners, knowing all the consequences of sin, without sinning that we might be ambassadors of the message of reconciliation. There may be higher points in Christian theology, but this one takes some beating.

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We now enter the heart of Paul’s ministry. Once he judged people from a worldly point of view. Then he met Jesus, and everything changed. And the change was nothing less than a **“new creation.”** We are walking the mountain peaks of faith here. To belong to Jesus means that everything is new. The old has gone – gone for good. We now stand in the pure stream of agape love, which showed itself at Calvary. We are **“reconciled”** – (Gk “katallasso” –see also Romans 5:10) – to God. He no longer **“counts our sins against us.”** The veil of the Temple is torn, and we are free.

This in itself is startling, but it gets even better. We have been reconciled, and now, as Ambassadors, we are to offer that same reconciliation to others - what a privilege and an honour to serve the Lord in this way. Put bluntly, **“God is making his appeal through us.”** So Father reconciles us, because of his agape for us, allows us to offer that same reconciliation to other, and makes his appeal through us. Wow!

2 Corinthians Chapter 6

¹ As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. ² For he says,

**"In the time of my favour I heard you,
and in the day of salvation I helped you."**

I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.

Everything he has said so far Paul urges the Corinthians to accept. This is a little difficult for us to understand – were there people in the Corinthian Church who had not received God's grace? The challenge to them is to make their decision now – for **"now is the day of salvation."** This also has implications - does that mean that the day will come when it is no longer "now?" In the run up to the second coming of Jesus, there will be a great outpouring of evangelism, but if we believe that the church will be taken away to be with the Lord before the final judgment, then during that period there will be no one to preach the gospel anymore. It wouldn't be good to be an unbeliever during that time. That certainly would not be a time of God's favour.

³ **We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.** ⁴ **Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; ⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ⁶ in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; ⁷ in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; ⁸ through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; ⁹ known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.**

¹¹ **We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you.** ¹² **We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.** ¹³ **As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also.**

The Apostle now offers his credentials – those written in his own hard and painful experience. It has been suggested that they break into the following groups, and this is as useful a division as any:-

1. Trials of a general nature- **“troubles”** (afflictions - thlipsis) **“hardships”** which cannot be avoided, and **“distresses”** - frustration
2. Sufferings inflicted by others – **“beatings, imprisonments, riots.”**
3. Inner struggles – **“hard work, sleepless nights, hunger.”**
4. Love for the church, which is not easy to do or maintain over a long period – **“in purity, understanding, patience and kindness.”** To do this he has had to rely on the **“power”** of God, which we have already encountered in this letter, and the **“weapons of righteousness”**. In other words, Paul’s life and ministry are, and have always been, a fight against the powers of darkness. This has been hard for him, and not helped when his churches fail to recognise his integrity, but will accept that of others who, while having letters of recommendation, exercise ministries which lack all the things Paul is speaking about.
5. **“In the Holy Spirit.”** Paul has always obeyed the voice of the Spirit, but this is the reason why he is in his own difficulty with Corinth. Obeying the Spirit on a daily and lifetime basis is a hard line to take.
6. **“through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”** I have included these verses in full, because they are a powerful reminder of what it really means to serve the Lord. Not only will there be a variance of opinion about us, but there will be no consistency. To some we are wonderful and to others we are awful, and those who think we are wonderful can so quickly change their minds, forgetting the good things we have done, and being willing to change a good report for a bad one. The mood swings of the people of God hurt those who minister. We are, after all, real people, not theological punch bags! But we have to push on, constrained by the love of God, confident in his promises, and willing to endure every kind of disgrace and shame in the eyes of the church, so that we can be agents of reconciliation. This is a very hard position to occupy, and even harder to hold on to. Any of God’s servants who achieve this deserve at least respect, if not

love and support. In my experience, we can expect neither, rather rejection and ridicule. It's a privilege to serve, but it is never easy.

¹⁴ Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵ What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

**“I will live with them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they will be my people.”**

¹⁷ Therefore,

**“Come out from them
and be separate,
says the Lord.
Touch no unclean thing,
and I will receive you.”**

¹⁸ And,

**“I will be a Father to you,
and you will be my sons and daughters,
says the Lord Almighty.**

In typical Pauline fashion, we jump from the mountain top to the valley. We might wonder why the change, but this is how Paul thinks and writes. Becoming married to unbelievers was, from his perspective, unacceptable in Corinth, and contravened God's law. Elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul outlines the relationships between believers and unbeliever in a much fuller way. As far as this letter is concerned, the Corinthian church should not do it.

2 Corinthians Chapter 7

¹ Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. ² Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no

one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one.³ I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you.⁴ I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

⁵ For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.⁶ But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus,⁷ and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

The troubles in Corinth are never far from the Apostle's mind. They are the driving force behind this letter. So here we are again. Paul had sent Titus to Corinth, possibly with a letter, and he was anxious to see what response he got. Titus gave him a good report, which gave him peace. Apparently the Corinthians had repented of their attitudes, and were filled with longing for the Apostle, so that **"my joy was greater than ever."** I think there are two things to reflect on here:

First, the Apostle is truly a pastor who loves the church. Despite all that had happened, and all he has had to say so far about recommendation, the promises of God and his ministry, he longed most of all to restore good relations with them, on the basis of good theology. There is no trace in him of winning an argument. He just longed with all his heart for his children to come back to him. Those who have leadership roles in God's church would do well to copy him – and we all know how hard this is to do!

Second, the Apostle always tried to see the best in every situation, and he thought the best of people, whatever they had done to him. But sometimes that can cloud our judgment. As this letter proceeds we will see that all was far from well at Corinth and much harder things will have to be said. It's always a difficult balance between thinking the best, and recognising the worst and knowing it needs changing, however painful.

⁸ Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—⁹ yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to

repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. ¹⁰ Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. ¹¹ See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. ¹² So even though I wrote to you, it was neither on account of the one who did the wrong nor on account of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. ¹³ By all this we are encouraged.

“Godly sorrow brings repentance.” This is the heart of Paul’s correspondence with Corinth. He wants to restore them to their position under God. “Godly sorrow” is the first step along the path – knowing that something is wrong. His letters and his visits have tried to bring them to this position. Once there, it is a short step to repentance. Being sorry is a step on the way to repentance, but repentance is so much more than being sorry. It is confessing sin, turning away from it and walking in a new way with the Lord. Being a good Pastor, this is what he wanted, and this seemed to be what he has got. But true repentance must lead to a different lifestyle and a change of attitudes - whether he has got that from Corinth we have yet to discover.

“The one who did wrong” – This is not the first mention of this person. Previously Paul told the Church not to punish him too harshly. So was it just one person who poisoned the church against Paul? Jesus warned that just a small amount of leaven can sour the whole batch of bread. There may have been more people involved – more of this later.

In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. ¹⁴ I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well. ¹⁵ And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. ¹⁶ I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.

Everything seems fine in Corinth.

2 Corinthians Chapter 8

¹ And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. ⁶ So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

From the very beginning of the history of the church, there had been tension between the Jewish Christians, who wanted all converts to continue to follow Jewish ways and customs, and the Gentile missionaries, who did not see that this was necessary. As our knowledge of the first centuries of the church grows we are seeing that this was possibly a much bigger issue than appears from the documents we have. Acts of the Apostles hammers home the Gentile mission, and gives us Paul's Gentile messages. Paul's own writings expand on his teaching to the gentiles, where there is neither "Jew nor Greek, slave nor free." There was an altercation with Peter, recorded in Acts, but the Gentile missionaries are described as winning out in this dispute.

But the Apostle, seeing good in everyone, wanted to try and bridge this gap, so he conceived the idea of the "Collection." The Christian church in Jerusalem was very poor, so he had the idea that the gentile churches would have a collection, to support their Jewish Christian believers.

Was it a good idea? History must be our judge here. The centre of the Christian faith soon moved away from Jerusalem, to Antioch, Rome, Alexandria and Istanbul. The "Jewish" Christians in Jerusalem soon fade from the picture – the faith being a Gentile-led one from early on. So was the collection worth all the effort? We can wonder how the Macedonian churches felt about it, and Paul has to write much about it, encouraging the giving which, we can tentatively imagine, might not have been so well received.

Paul tells his Corinthian Church how much others have given, and encourages them to complete the collection among them. This collection became an issue in itself – some accusing Paul of not being honest with it. In the middle of this, he shares another great pearl of faith with us – **“see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”**

Giving is a privilege, and giving is a work of God’s grace within us. God not only gives us the desire to give, so making it a God-centred experience and not a man centred one, but encourages us to “excel” in this grace gift. To give is a joy, a grace and a blessing. This teaching lifts the collection from out of the mundane and makes it a spiritual blessing. It is disappointing that in our day, much of God’s fruit rots on the vine for want of the exercise of this grace gift. Paul will teach later that small sowing will lead to small fruit - a lesson which is becoming a reality to God’s church today.

⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

There is some powerful theology here. We also see it in Philippians 2:11. But the context between these two passages is very stark. In Philippians we have a statement of the kerygma, the doctrinal creed which the church was developing about Jesus. Here Christ’s poverty is being used as a spur to giving. Personally, I am not sure that it works here, but who am I?

¹⁰ And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. ¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

¹³ Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

The more Paul writes about the collection, the more we can sense the problem with it. If it were going well, would he need to devote so much time to it? It's possible that the collection in Corinth stopped as part of the campaign against Paul. Perhaps he was being accused of dishonesty? He uses a verse from the Exodus narrative, but like the verse about Christ's poverty, it is an effort to make it fit, the collecting of the Quail having very little to do with giving!

¹⁶ Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. ¹⁷ For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. ¹⁸ And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. ¹⁹ What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honour the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. ²⁰ We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. ²¹ For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man.

²² In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. ²³ As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ. ²⁴ Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

Wow - a deputation! Titus will visit with two brothers to back him up. The first "brother" has a specific function, and gives support to the idea that there were those who criticised the Apostle's use of the collection. **"We want to avoid criticism"** strongly suggests that there was criticism.

What is going on here? We need to remember the underlying uncertainty of the Corinthian "repentance." Paul is sure of it, and Titus has brought a report of it. But perhaps there was a nagging doubt, so Paul sends a high powered delegation, just to make sure that all is well. Why didn't he go himself? May be he was unsure of his reception. His previous visit had been very painful, and he had not been received or treated as he would have expected from a church that owed its existence to him. He was not going to walk into that again, and so sends a preparatory delegation.

See how special Titus is - **“my co-worker.”** Like all ministries, Paul needed colleagues to share the burden of the work - the true burden of the work, as outlined in Paul’s sufferings. Titus had to be willing to share in all that, and take the heat from places like Corinth. In my experience, it is not easy to find co-workers. Helpers can be found, but few will share the burden and agony of the work, the frustration and defeat, the despair and hopelessness, to the point of death. Such people are rare, and once found, are more precious than gold.

2 Corinthians Chapter 9

¹ There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord’s people. ² For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. ³ But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. ⁴ For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. ⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.

On it goes - more encouragement to be generous in the collection. It’s becoming a dominant theme, which is why we have to start wondering about the Corinthian behaviour towards the collection.

⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written:

**“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever.”**

¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous

on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift

Paul feels that he has to lay out some principles of giving, and they are very practical and useful. May be it is worth all this writing on the collection, just to get them!

1. Sow generously.

Giving is investment in the kingdom, and the more we invest, the more blessing we will see. This, for me has always been the reason for giving. I have been entrusted with finance, and I want to get maximum return for the Lord. So I give as much as I can. This is very satisfactory - and in no way feels like an imposition on me.

2. Give what you feel is right.

There has been an emphasis on tithing in the churches, and it's a good way of measuring our giving, but it is only an aid to measure. We should give **"What we have decided in our heart to give."** What a blessed and simple measure this is! We seek God, we get the right feeling about what we should give, and then we give it. Simple!

3. **"Not reluctantly"**. (Gk "not of grief")

If we feel reluctant to give or feel any sense of compulsion, we have got the principles and the amount wrong. **God loves (Gk "Agape") a cheerful giver!** (Psalm 22:8)

4. God blesses to enable giving.

All that we have comes from him, so he will enable us to do what in our heart we feel we should do.

5. Thank you!

Here is an amazing truth, so often overlooked. God is exalted in our giving. We see giving as something we do for him, as he enables us. But it exalts him. Giving is, in a subtle way, spreading the aroma of Christ, spreading the message of reconciliation, bringing people to Christ. How does this work? As we give, others are blessed. They will give glory to God, and tell of His amazing provision. This challenges those who do not believe in him. They see that God, far from being in a very old book, is alive and active today. It opens the way for them to respond to him. If any readers have ever felt that they do little for the Gospel, but they give what they have planned in their heart to give, with a cheerful heart, then they are in the forefront of spreading the good news. Exciting isn't it?

2 Corinthians Chapter 10

There is an amazing change of tone at this point in 2 Corinthians. From warm encouragement, we move to a chapter which is very dominant, even almost aggressive towards those who have challenged him. The one opponent has become a group, and Paul launches into an impassioned defence of his ministry. How do we explain this change or tone? It has been suggested that Chapters 9 and following are the "painful" letter which Paul wrote, and it has got tacked on here to the original 2 Cor. 1-9. Or it is possible that during the course of writing 2 Corinthians, some new information arrived from Corinth, suggesting that things were not resolved, and Paul changes his tone accordingly. Either way, chapters 10 and following are very powerful, and full of lessons for us to learn. In the end, that is what really matters to us.

¹ By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you, but "bold" toward you when away! ² I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. ³

This chapter has an awkward start - almost as if the Apostle is lining himself up for what he has to say. He appeals to them on the basis of Christ's "**humility and gentleness.**" Taken together these two words suggest a tolerant attitude towards others. This is the attitude Paul has as he unleashes his thoughts.

"**Timid**" is translated directly from the Greek as "humble." We might read "cringing". Here we are probably seeing another of the accusations against Paul. He was unimpressive when with them, but very "bold" in his letters.

“When I come.” The Apostle is fired up. The next visit was going to be a fiery one – Corinthians be warned!

“Some people” is the first direct indication that he is not just dealing with one person. The “some people” levelled the accusation that he was living by worldly standards. Chrysostom and other early church theologians suggest “according to the flesh.” This fits well with Paul’s attitude - he is very opposed to living by worldly standards. He, on the contrary, lived according to the Spirit, and took no advantage of his hearers - as those at Corinth appeared to be doing.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. ⁶ And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

One commentator has put this very well: “As this warfare is spiritual, so the weapons with which he fights must be bestowed by the Spirit.” Worldly weapons will be of no avail. We have to deploy all the weapons of Ephesians 6, the blood of Jesus and intense intercessory prayer to break the enemy’s schemes.

The Apostle certainly sees what is happening at Corinth as part of Satan’s plan to destroy the church. Spiritual weapons must be deployed to break that attack. It can be done – we have divine power to pull them down. “Not by might, nor by power but by my Spirit says the Lord.” (Zech. 4:6)

So, from his perspective, the behaviour at Corinth represents disobedience, and as this is a mark of the enemy it has to be pulled down, and if that demands hard words, he will not hesitate to say them. But they must not mistake his purpose – to bring them back into a right relationship with the Lord. He is speaking hard spiritual words, in order to generate a spiritual response, which will bring everything back to right relationships. Then he can rejoice with them again. We have seen many times already. Paul has the heart of a Pastor. He longs only that things should be put right, and takes no delight in speaking harsh and hurtful words.

⁷ You are judging by appearances. If anyone is confident that they belong to Christ, they should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as they do. ⁸ So even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it. ⁹ I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. ¹⁰ For some say, “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.” ¹¹ Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present. ¹² We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.

“**Judging by appearances**” – something we still do today. The Apostle is saying, in effect, “Stop looking at the messenger and start listening to the message!” Maybe Paul was less forceful in person, (hard to imagine) but if he was, it came from his inbuilt servant nature, and desire to build up and not to harm. It seems as if they are about to meet a different side of him. If they were, they had brought it on themselves.

¹³ We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the sphere of service God himself has assigned to us, a sphere that also includes you. ¹⁴ We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. ¹⁵ Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand, ¹⁶ so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in someone else’s territory. ¹⁷ But, “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” ¹⁸ For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

Paul boasts in the Lord, and nothing else. His hope is that Corinth could become a centre from which the Gospel might be spread. With his missionary heart, he takes a very serious view of what is happening in Corinth.

2 Corinthians Chapter 11

¹ I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, please put up with me! ² I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. ³ But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

The Apostle is very jealous for his Corinthian Christians. He wants them to be pure. But something or someone, (or "someones") have done the following:-

* **"led astray."** The church has been deceived by Satan, (we have read this already) and **"sincere and pure devotion"** has been damaged. Single hearted devotion to Christ is easily destroyed. The false Apostles have added to the Gospel, robbing it of its elegant simplicity.

* **"Another Jesus..different spirit"** (See Galatians 1:6) These verses are not easy for us, because of so much that we do not know. Were those preaching **"another Jesus"** (not another "Christ") Judaising preachers? Or were they just travelling preachers who had a different view of the Lordship of Christ? Apostle Paul had a very humble view of himself, seeing this as a reflection of Jesus. (Phil 2: 5-11) Did these "visitors" want more glory for themselves and so interpreted Jesus in grander terms? They taught another Jesus and a different spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit was not in their preaching, so whatever response was generated in the listeners, it was not a response of the true Spirit of God.

***"You put up with it.."** This is the sadness - God's people in Corinth were unable to tell the difference between the true Gospel and the false one. The root of this error lay in their attitude to Paul, and his true Gospel. They were disregarding him, and consequently they were wide open to any false teaching. They had rejected their father. Now they were drifting away from the true Father. So many of God's people today are in the same position. They want experience, but know little of the Faith. This makes them prey to any number of false and heretical doctrines.

⁵ I do not think I am in the least inferior to those “super-apostles.”⁶ I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way. ⁷ Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? ⁸ I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. ⁹ And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. ¹⁰ As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. ¹¹ Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

Now we are beginning to get an insight into what Paul was up against – the **“super-apostles.”** We assume now that this is a reference to some other Apostles at Corinth, who have come in and misled the church, challenging Paul’s authority and lifestyle. Previously he had referred to one man – now we see a group of apostles has come in. We can see some of what they were saying. They said Paul was **“untrained as a speaker.”** (“untrained” from Greek “idiotes”) He admits this - he had no formal training in oratory, but in knowledge (Gk “gnosis”) Paul refuses to yield. In speaking plainly the truths of the revelation of Jesus he is unparalleled, as they should have known. He **“robbed the Churches.”** On the contrary, he claimed none of his dues, (as the false apostles were certainly doing) and supported himself, as they should have known.

¹² And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. ¹³ For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. ¹⁵ It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

Gloves off! Paul really lays into the false apostles, because he sees that they are such a danger to God’s people. They are **“false apostles”, “deceitful workers”** and they pretend to be apostles of Christ. I think we can say that Paul could not have expressed his feelings more clearly. It is the task of the leaders of the churches to challenge and defeat the enemy, (1 Samuel 17:34-35) and Paul sees these false apostles as the enemy – he even places them in Satan’s camp, in the disguise of

angels of light. **“Their end will be what their actions deserve.”** Be warned false apostles, and anyone who tries to pretend to be what they are not

¹⁶ I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then tolerate me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. ¹⁷ In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. ¹⁹ You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! ²⁰ In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face. ²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!

The Apostle is really very passionate here - and he administers a very sharp rebuke to a church which **“gladly put up with fools.”** This is not his usual style. He has a Pastor’s heart, and longs for the restitution of all that have fallen. But a shepherd’s crook has two ends - one to rescue and one to administer a sharp poke! Here, the Corinthian church are getting the sharp end, but only because the apostle is so desperately worried for them - that they will not listen (they haven’t so far) and will stray ever deeper into danger.

Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

At last we have got to the heart of this letter - at least I have always seen it as the heart of the letter. Again and again Paul has been attacked and ridiculed, mocked

and ignored. Again and again he has refused to give any recommendation, except his own life and ministry. Now, finally, he gives us the best and finest recommendation that any person could hope for – the sufferings he has endured because of his commitment to the compelling urge of the gospel. It is an awesome and challenging list of recommendations, which should comfort any who are struggling and challenge any who are tempted to walk puffed up in their faith.

“Besides all this”. The list of hardships is staggering, but it almost seems as if, in the Apostle’s mind, they are small compared to his anxiety for his churches. The burden for them - all of them - weighs heavily on his spirit. **“Who is weak that I do not feel weak?”** Could there ever be a better verse to mark the life of every church leader. There is no shadow of enjoyment in the struggles of others, but that total identification which Jesus shows par excellence in Gethsemane. Every fall into sin raises his intense anger at satanic activity.

Here we see deep into the heart of the Apostle. His sufferings and all that he has had to endure, and his passion for God’s people - this is his recommendation. Could there ever be a better one? This is a good lesson for the modern church which seems addicted to celebrities, size and worldly power. True ministry finds its commendation in the struggle and pain to stay true to the Lord, and the willingness to sacrifice everything to a church which doesn’t really deserve it, and will often reject those who choose to walk this way. This is the way of the cross, the true recommendation which is the work of the Spirit. Against this, little else matters.

The Apostle Paul has earned our respect and our trust.

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

More detail here of Paul’s escape from Damascus than we get in Acts. (Acts 11:25) Paul remembers it here after the list of what he has endured because it was his first experience of persecution- the harbinger of all that was to follow.

2 Corinthians Chapter 12

¹ I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— ⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

Paul continues to speak of his own experiences as an Apostle. Obviously those who were opposing him were disparaging his spiritual experience, probably saying that all he could do was to speak, badly, about Christ in an empty way. He had no Spirit in him! (Now where have we heard that before?)

As we look at these verses, take note of **“revelations from the Lord”**. All that Apostle describes has happened because the Lord allowed it, not because Paul made it happen. **“Visions”** (Gk “optasiai”) and **“Revelations”** (Gk “apokalupseis”) are not easy to distinguish. They both belong to the spiritual experience. **“Caught up”** - (See Philip in Acts 8:39. **“Third heaven”** - the Jewish writers spoke of seven heavens. (The testament of the Twelve Patriarchs). But would relatively new Gentile Christians know of this teaching? Perhaps Paul was trying to convey a supreme condition of bliss. Calvin suggests this.

“Paradise.” From a Persian word meaning “Park”, and used in LXX of the Garden of Eden. The penitent thief is promised a dwelling there. (Lk. 23:43)

O.K. – that’s the theology, but what is this all about? Firstly, we need reminding that the heavenly places are there, that they are accessible, and that one day we will be there forever. Our fixation with our earthly years is a serious error, and robs us of our joy. The Apostle is given a foretaste of what he will receive, for his and our encouragement. Our logical western minds, locked in by enlightenment principles, find this kind of experience hard to handle. But if we give our spirits

free rein, then any and every one of us can have a foretaste of what is to come for us. Alleluia!

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

This has always been a difficult and controversial passage. What was this thorn? What does Paul mean by saying that it was to keep him from being conceited? What is the meaning of the messenger of Satan? Why wasn’t he healed?

There are as many explanations as there are theologians! The best we can come up with is that Paul had been entrusted with such great revelations that there was a danger of him becoming proud. We have to accept that Paul knows himself better than anyone, and the dangers inherent in his nature. The Lord had to provide a remedy for this danger of conceit – the thorn.

But the final statement is a very precious truth, spoken by a man who had known much weakness in his suffering.

“When I am weak then I am strong.” It’s into this context and against this verse that we can better understand **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** What an encouragement to all of God’s people, as we face our times of weakness.

¹¹ I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the “super-apostles,” even though I am nothing. ¹² I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles. ¹³ How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

“I have made a fool of myself” – perhaps he has, but we are eternally grateful for Paul’s foolishness, as it has given us some of the finest biblical teaching we have, and a host of encouragements in our struggles. **“I ought to have been**

commended by you”- of course he should. They had treated their Apostle - their founding Apostle, who loves them with agape love - as inferior. They had shown the capacity for short memories, and quickly abandoned his secure foundation for something flashy and shallow. But there is more – Apostle outlines the marks of a true Apostle – **“signs, wonders and miracles.”** An apostolic ministry is not a ministry only in words, but also in power. **“Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.”** (1 Thess. 1:5)

¹⁴ Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?¹⁶ Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! ¹⁷ Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent to you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not walk in the same footsteps by the same Spirit?

Paul reveals his plans to them - he is planning to make his third visit to them. This time he is coming as their father, and he wants their love, not their possessions. But how will he find them? **“If I love you more will you love me less?”** It’s a shame that we cannot hear the tone of this verse. Maybe there was a tone of hope, disappointment, longing, apprehension? It’s a very powerful appeal to his children to respond by loving him more. We must never forget that we are dealing with real people with real feelings. From what we have experienced of the Apostle, we cannot doubt how hurt he has been by this whole experience. He hopes and longs for more love, but will he get it? We will never know.

Some of the pain comes out in the following verses. He didn’t trick them - what loving father would ever do such a thing? He was never a burden to them, as they should well remember. He never used his co-workers to exploit them. As we read these verses, we have to wonder how deep the damage was in Corinth. We are a long way now from the return of Titus with his glowing report. As we thought in those distant verses, Titus might have been a bit too positive, and while Apostle Paul was glad to hear good news, he must have wondered how good it really was. Now as we approach the end of the letter, we can see that the good news Titus brought really wasn’t that good. Painful realism now describes our letter.

¹⁹ Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. ²⁰ For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. ²¹ I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.

Now, finally the truth is out. The Apostle is quite clear that when he comes, he will not find things as he would like them to be. **“That there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.”** Is he still thinking of the mess the super Apostles have created, or is there more to it. Have factions broken out - they were certainly there in his first letter. **“and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.”** It gets worse, and he gives them fair warning - **“and you may not find me as you want me to be.”** A loving father might be bringing a hand of discipline to his children. The future for Corinth looks stormy. Unfortunately we do not know how things progressed.

2 Corinthians Chapter 13

¹ This will be my third visit to you. **“Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”** ² I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: **On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others,** ³ since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. ⁴ For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him in our dealing with you.

These last passages have revealed the true state of Corinth, and the toughness with which the Apostle is planning to deal with them. These verses continue that theme. **“Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” (Deut. 19:15)** So Paul is planning to investigate many things, using this Deuteronomic law, which was also supported by Jesus. (Matt 28:16) Times

are not going to be easy in Corinth. The one they accused of being weak was going to show his tough side - but only to put things right. There is no vindictiveness in the Apostle's heart. Jesus was both weak and strong, and Paul intends to be the same. Tough times ahead, but the lesson for leaders is clear - peace at any price is not the principle which can govern the church. Issues which are ungodly have to be dealt with, or the whole body suffers.

⁵ Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? ⁶ And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. ⁷ Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong—not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. ⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹ We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored. ¹⁰ This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

Paul's accusers have been submitting him to an examination. Now he turns the tables on them. It is they who will have to submit to an examination from him. Let them look to themselves, and see whether they are pure in faith. His prayer for them is that they should be "**fully restored.**" (Gk: "katartismos", which suggests the idea of repairing what is broken and restoring what is lost.) We have seen this desire in Paul over and over again, but it is worth repeating over and over again - the leaders of God's people should long only for "katartismos". The agape which God has for us we have to radiate to those we lead. This will prevent us getting proud or arrogant. The same idea is seen in this - **the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.** This has been the issue – who has the authority? The super apostles claimed it, but their work had torn down the church. Paul has authority for building up the fellowship.

¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All God's people here send their greetings.

The final words are just what we would expect – words to build up.

“Rejoice!” A positive attitude to God is essential.

“Strive for full restoration”. “Katartismos” has to be at the heart of faith, if we are ever going to right the errors. (A.V. “be perfect” does not capture the nuance of the Greek.)

“Encourage one another”. This is an obvious command, but one we so easily ignore. We all need encouragement, and we should never lose the opportunity to exercise this blessing.

“Be of one mind, live in peace.” Harmony should be the aim of God’s people. Anything which breaks the harmony must be dealt with biblically. This has been the whole thrust of this letter. If we do this, the **God of love** (Gk “agape”) and **peace** (Gk “eirene”) will bless his people.

Then the final blessing, which cannot be improved on: - **“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”**

If readers have found this material useful, then other biblical books, including 1 Corinthians are, or will soon be available on the BIBLE TEACHING page of www.visionworld27.org

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