

NT EXPOSITORY NOTES

2 CORINTHIANS

Second Series

Gordon Lyons

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(ESV)

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NEW TESTAMENT EXPOSITORY NOTES

2 CORINTHIANS*(Second Series)*

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

AUTHOR

The Apostle Paul, formerly known as Saul (of Tarsus).

Being a Roman citizen, Paul bore two names. ‘Saul’ was his original Hebrew name, but he was also given the name ‘Paul’—his Roman name. He was known formerly as ‘Saul of Tarsus’ (the city in Cilicia where Saul had spent much of his earlier years).

While associated with the Jewish faith, Saul had been trained in the Law and the Prophets at the feet of Gamaliel. Such intense training would have included tutoring in all aspects of the Mosaic Law and its moral, ceremonial and ritual elements, involving sacrifices and offerings, feast days, new moons and sabbaths. Under Gamaliel, Saul would have been instructed thoroughly in the knowledge and application of Jewish theology, principles and practices. In keeping with the usual Jewish practice, the fully-trained Saul would have become a Rabbi when about 30 years old. At some point, Saul associated with the Pharisees, of which sect he became a zealous and active member.

At this time, Saul was well aware of ‘the Nazarenes’ (the followers of Jesus, later known as ‘Christians’). As an ardent Pharisee, Saul was vehemently opposed to these Christians’ beliefs and practices, especially to their claim that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah or Christ. To Saul, the Christian’s assertion that Jesus was not only the Messiah (Christ) but also the Son of God was outright heresy and blasphemy of the highest order. To a monotheistic Jew like Saul, the Most High God [YHWH] could not possibly have a son—let alone one that bore all the attributes of God in heaven! That would make Jesus divine and equal with God (which, of course, he was!)

Utterly incensed that these Christians were spreading such a message far and wide, Saul approached the Jewish Sanhedrin seeking letters of authority to hunt down and arrest every one of these Christians throughout the region of Damascus in Syria (Acts 9:1-2). The enraged Saul intended that these followers of Jesus be arrested, tried and executed for blaspheming the ‘Name’ (‘YHWH’ –the Most High God). Had he succeeded in this enterprise, Saul might have achieved his first two objectives. However, Roman law forbade Jewish courts from implementing the third objective: executing the death penalty. Nevertheless, given the opportunity, this may not have prevented them from killing the Christians. In raging fury, members of the Jewish Council stoned Stephen to death (Acts 7:54 – 8:1).

Thus, armed with the necessary letters of authority from the Jewish Council in Jerusalem, Saul and his companions began their long journey northward to Damascus. Eventually, they reached the Damascus road, relieved that their long journey was almost over and that soon Saul would achieve his aims. However, as he and his companions continued along the Damascus road, suddenly, an extremely bright light appeared above them. Saul, terrified, fell to the ground, only to hear a voice addressing him personally in the Hebrew tongue:

Acts 26:14b-18 ESV

^{14b}...Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ ¹⁵ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Soon after this glorious encounter with the risen Lord Jesus and being temporarily blinded, Saul was assisted to a house within the city. Meanwhile, the Lord had already instructed his very reluctant servant Ananias to proceed to that location to provide Saul with further instructions (Acts 9:10-19). As a believer in the Lord Jesus, Ananias was well aware of Saul's reputation—hence his initial reluctance to meet Saul.

Saul, however, was no longer the zealous Pharisee that had begun the journey to Damascus. He had just seen the risen Lord Jesus in a vision. That encounter had resulted in his conversion to faith in Christ through the work of God's Holy Spirit. Saul's life and thinking had now been transformed totally. Now he was the servant of Christ. Now he was committed totally to a life of service for his Lord, Saviour and Master. First, though, Saul had much more to learn about the Lord Jesus, the gospel and the Christian way of life. In the weeks, months and years that followed, the Lord would reveal all these things to him. Then, the one who once persecuted the Lord's people to death would proclaim to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and the only way of salvation and life. This Saul (or Paul) proceeded to do in the power of the Holy Spirit, both by his preaching and by his letters to the churches and to individual believers.

...

Paul's letter that we are considering here is entitled 2 Corinthians in our NT canon. Second Corinthians is perhaps one of three or four letters written by the apostle Paul to this church.

Apparently, one letter preceded an earlier letter of Paul known as 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul intimates that he had already sent a letter to this church in which he had declared, *"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people...."* etc.

Following the sending of 1 Corinthians (the second letter (?)), a third letter may have been sent sometime between the sending of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians—possibly making four letters to Corinth in total. However, only two of these letters (those known as 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians) have survived and been added to the NT canon.

CORINTHIAN CHURCH BACKGROUND

The letters that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth were not intended for the main fellowship alone. Other fellowships existed in the city of Corinth and the wider regions surrounding the city. Some of these (smaller) fellowships took the form of house churches. However, all were affiliated with the main church or fellowship in Corinth, and all were included in Paul's letters sent in the first instance to the main church, where they would be read aloud to the congregation.

The congregation itself consisted mainly of Gentile converts, although it is highly likely that some Jewish Christians also would be present. Understandably, there were some distinctive religious and cultural differences between these two groups. Most of the Jewish Christians would have been acquainted with the Old Testament scriptures. They would have been familiar with the covenant that God had made with Abraham and with the Law given through Moses. Therefore, they would have understood much of what God required of his people under the old covenant terms. On the other hand, most of the Gentile converts had come from a non-religious or pseudo-religious pagan background. However, some God-fearing Gentiles now meeting with the church may have been worshipping previously with Jewish people in their synagogues.

Again, many different traditions and religions found expression in the multicultural city of Corinth. Furthermore, several different philosophical groups expressed their views at the public forum in the city.

Some of the Gentile Christians now in the church at Corinth would have been exposed to these other religions and philosophies. Again, some of these people may have absorbed elements of

those teachings. Perhaps, they were now attempting to introduce some of these elements into the Corinthian church, to augment the teaching provided by God's servants such as Sosthenes, Silas (Silvanus), Timothy, Apollos or by the apostle Paul. If so, this would produce disagreement and possible conflict between the apostle Paul—who held fast exclusively to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and to the teaching of the whole Word of God.

Thus, Paul would need to resolve issues arising in the church where it involved the possibility of false teaching or false doctrine; or threatened the assimilation of pagan or philosophical ideas and practices. More likely, however, was an attempt to incorporate teachings from the Mosaic Law and associated old covenant Jewish beliefs and practices into the Christian faith. This form of false teaching might arise from the members of the Jewish group within the church, perhaps in conjunction with visiting travelling preachers from the Judaizing party.

Essentially, Paul was walking a tightrope here. He had to resolve issues concerning his recognition by the Corinthian church as a genuine apostle of Christ. He had to deal with recalcitrant members of this church who challenged his authority and were attempting to modify the teaching that they had received initially and had believed. Again, the apostle had to resolve problems among certain Jewish Christians who were uncertain about Jewish ceremonial laws and customs having been fulfilled and abrogated by the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the apostle would need to deal with those Gentile converts who were still clinging to ungodly beliefs and practices with which they were familiar before their profession of faith and acceptance into the Corinthian church.

PURPOSES

- A. Paul asserts and defends the legitimacy and authority of his apostolic calling and commissioning by the risen, glorified Lord Jesus. This divine calling was not received from men or from any church but was duly recognised as legitimate and valid by the church at Antioch and other local churches.
- B. Paul seeks to resolve problems among church members relating to various apostolic claimants, not called by God, but asserting apostolic authority, rights, and privileges.
- C. Paul seeks to resolve issues between true and false apostles, helping the church distinguish between them and act accordingly.
- D. Paul seeks to expose and correct the acceptance of false or erroneous teaching by some of the church members at Corinth.
- E. Paul seeks to resolve previously unresolved issues in the church. Such issues involved sexual immorality and certain other sins still being practised by some Corinthian church members or adherents.
- F. Paul warns that he will discipline the few recalcitrant church members/adherents who continued to defy the apostle's appeals and instructions, persisting willfully and rebelliously in their sins.

At the time of writing, there had been much contention between the apostle Paul and some of the church members at Corinth. Despite earlier exhortations, pleas and remonstrances from the apostle, certain obstinate individuals within the church refused to heed Paul's injunctions and were openly hostile to his interventions. These rebellious individuals were being aided and abetted by several false apostles within the fellowship. These pretenders to the apostolic office not only misinterpreted and misrepresented the true gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, but they also contested Paul's apostolic authority over them, declaring that they—as much as Paul, if not more so—were also apostles of the Lord Jesus.

Together with several other unresolved matters within the Corinthian assembly, this state of affairs had led to Paul's earlier 'severe' letter to them and his warnings of discipline from him if they failed to heed his instructions. Paul, of course, was writing to them as a genuine apostle of the Lord, invested by the Lord Jesus himself with full apostolic authority over the churches for which he was responsible (including Corinth). However, with the false apostles now disputing Paul's authority and advising the church that although he wrote 'weighty' letters, Paul himself was weak and of no account. He would never have the strength of character to carry out the threatened discipline of these church members.

How wrong they were! Perhaps Paul did suffer from some bodily weakness or bodily affliction, but this was irrelevant to his calling as an apostle. In his apostolic capacity, Paul was not acting merely as a human church leader subject to failings and weaknesses. Rather, he was acting as the officially commissioned apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ—appointed by the Lord to speak, write, and act in his name with the full authority of the risen and exalted Lord Jesus himself. Thus, when Paul was writing, speaking, or acting in his apostolic capacity, he acted as the representative of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, those who disregarded Paul's instructions or teaching disregarded the instructions and teachings given through Paul by the Son of God himself.

Thus, the apostle Paul had been invested with all the authority required to oversee and discipline the churches wherever this was necessary—and he would certainly fulfil this task with the church at Corinth. However, the apostle was extremely reluctant to exercise his apostolic authority. Paul would do so only if all his other instructions, exhortations, pleas and guidance issued to the church in love and great compassion toward them failed to have the desired effect.

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 1

GOD COMFORTS AND DELIVERS US

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-2

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul introduces himself as the writer of this letter to the church at Corinth. Timothy was Paul's associate on this occasion, but Paul is not necessarily stating or implying that his co-worker, Timothy, was a co-author of this letter.¹

The city of Corinth lay within the province of Achaia (Proper) and was Achaia's Capital. Macedonia was a distinct province lying to the north of Achaia. Achaia included the towns or cities of Corinth, Cenchreae and Athens. Macedonia included the towns or cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

The letter is addressed principally to the church at Corinth, but it would not be confined to the main church alone. It would have included associated fellowships or house churches in the surrounding area. Indeed, the apostle indicates that he includes *all* the saints ² "*who are in the whole of Achaia*" with the main Corinthian church. This could have encompassed cities such as Athens, together with other towns and villages throughout that province. Some converts had been won to Christ in Athens. However, it is uncertain whether a church had been established there at this particular time. Also included would be the Corinthian seaport town of Cenchreae, where a local church did exist.

Paul declares himself to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, that is, one whom the Lord has called and commissioned to represent his name in the preaching of the gospel (Acts 13:1-2; Gal. 2:7). Like the other twelve apostles of the Lord Jesus, Paul had encountered the risen Lord Jesus in person. Again, in common with the other apostles who had met with the risen Christ, the divine origin and authenticity of Paul's apostolic office were confirmed by miraculous signs and wonders (Acts 14:3).

Paul reminds the believers at Corinth that he did not take the apostolic office upon himself. Nor was he appointed to that office by any man or body of men, or by any church fellowship, or even by the other apostles at Jerusalem. On the contrary, the risen Lord Jesus had bestowed this office upon Paul directly, and according to the Father's express purposes for this servant of God and his church (Gal. 1:1).

¹ *Timothy...co-author* (?): Paul often dictated his letters to an amanuensis or secretary, which could have included Timothy. However, the Apostle Paul remained the sole human author of these letters. Inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, Paul dictated to his secretary the words given to him by God (the primary author). Nevertheless, although the apostle was speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this did not hinder Paul from using his own distinctive styles or forms of expression throughout his letters.

² saints: lit., "holy ones"; Gk. ἁγίους, *hagiois*. In the present context, meaning 'consecrated', 'set apart [to/by/for] God', 'hallowed' or 'sanctified' in God's sight.

Paul needed to emphasise to the Corinthian church his divine calling and appointment as an apostle. At the time of writing, some individuals had come to or had arisen in this church claiming apostolic authority and demanding recognition as such. Paul had to make explicit that he was the genuinely appointed apostle to the Gentiles, commissioned by the Lord Jesus himself. Unfortunately, however, Paul's apostolic authority over the Corinthian churches was contested fiercely by a few outspoken apostolic pretenders at Corinth.

In an earlier letter, designated in our canon of Scripture as *1 Corinthians*,³ Paul had introduced himself together with his brother in the Lord, *Sothenes* (1 Cor. 1:1). On this occasion, Timothy replaces Sothenes. The name Timothy means “dear to God”. When he addresses Timothy directly, Paul sometimes refers to him as “my son” (i.e., “my spiritual son”). However, when he speaks of Timothy to others, Paul usually refers to him as a “brother”—or, here, as “*our brother*”. The use of “our” indicates that Timothy was well known to the Corinthian church.

Paul then makes it plain that he is addressing his letter to those believers who constitute the church of God at Corinth: The ‘church’⁴ consisting of all those people whom God has ‘called out’ or separated from the world to belong to him and to love, serve, and worship him. However, the ‘church’ is not only local (as at Corinth). It is also universal (catholic). It incorporates the entire body of God's redeemed and holy people worldwide.

The apostle continues by saying that he is including also all other redeemed followers of Christ throughout the whole province of Achaia (v.1). This would include not only formal assemblies like that at Corinth and Cenchreae but also the various house-churches that had sprung up across the province, usually in connection with the work and witness at Corinth and elsewhere.

Paul then prays that these dear saints may know the immeasurable grace and peace that comes from God above and which he bestows upon all his obedient and faithful children.

- *Grace* originates from God's unmerited love and mercy toward us in Christ Jesus. From God's abounding grace flow the wholly undeserved gifts and favour of God toward all those whom he is pleased to redeem, together with the effects of the Holy Spirit's regenerating, sanctifying and powerful influence upon the hearts and lives of each of his people.
- *Peace* is that peace that passes all understanding and that comes to us from our Father in heaven. This is the peace that Jesus imparted to his disciples. Unlike transient worldly peace, God's peace is enduring and truly pacifying. When we walk with the Lord and trust in his Word, we can continually experience this peace. The peace of God remains with us even amidst the most intense afflictions, persecutions, sorrows, griefs, distressing circumstances, trials, and difficulties. Grace and peace come to us from God the Father through his Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (John 14:25-27).

³ Many commentators believe that Paul may have written either three or four letters to the church at Corinth, although only the two found in the New Testament remain extant. However, a hint that Paul may have sent a letter to the Corinthian church prior to his sending 1 Corinthians is found in that letter itself. There, Paul declares: “*I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people*—” (1 Cor. 5:9). This seems to imply that an earlier letter had preceded 1 Corinthians, although this letter no longer exists. (Gordon Lyons)

⁴ *church*: Gk., ἐκκλησία, *ekklesia*.

Paul continues by exalting and praising the name of God for all his goodness toward his people—especially amidst their deepest trials and afflictions.

Thus, in verses 3 and 4, the apostle writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Paul had been enduring unspeakable afflictions for the sake of the gospel (2 Cor. 11:24-33). Yet, in all these trials and distresses, the apostle can still express his heartfelt thanks and praise to God for saving him—a former blasphemer and zealous persecutor of the church (1 Tim. 1:13)—and for calling him to his service; even although that meant great suffering and persecution for the apostle. However, God, who appoints his people to the place of trial and danger, always provides the grace to stand and to live from moment to moment, always rejoicing in the name of the Lord.

The Lord, of course, knows how much his people can endure (1 Cor. 10:13). He is a loving and compassionate God. As a father and mother comforts and protects the children they love, so—as our Father in heaven—the Lord our God comforts and protects his children. He upholds us and surrounds us with his everlasting arms (Deut. 23:37). Thus, as Paul declares in verse 4, we who receive such comfort from the God of all comfort ⁵ are then much better able to sympathise with and comfort other people in their times of greatest need.

In his First Epistle, the apostle Peter expressed similar words:

1 Peter 5:10 ESV

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

In verse 5, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:5

⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

This verse does not imply that we can augment the sufferings of Christ by our sufferings in his name. Christ's work at Calvary was perfect and complete. Nothing further can, or needs to be, added to that work. The work of atonement and reconciliation was finished once-for-all at the Cross. It was validated fully and finally by the Lord's resurrection and exaltation to glory (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:10).

Firstly, the reference in this verse is to the sufferings that Christ endured personally. Christ suffered everything for us—both through his perfectly holy and righteous life and through his vicarious and atoning sacrifice unto death—that we might be redeemed and reconciled to God.

⁵ The nouns and verbs translated “comfort”, “comforted”, etc., in these verses are related to the Greek word, *paraklētos* (hence, “Paraclete”). This is the word used of the Holy Spirit when describing him as the “Comforter”, “Helper”, “Counsellor” (or our “Advocate”; i.e., with the Father) (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7 KJV). In this context, a comforter or advocate is one who draws alongside another to aid them or defend them, or to provide them with consolation, encouragement, and support (cf. 1 John 2:1). (Gordon Lyons)

Secondly, however, those whom God has called and redeemed are called not only to believe in him but also to suffer for his sake (2 Cor. 4:10; Rom. 8:17; Phil. 1:29-30). In this sense, Paul declares, “*we share [or participate] abundantly in Christ’s sufferings....*”

For the believer, suffering is part of belonging to Christ, part of what it means to take up the cross daily and follow him, part of the cost of living to the glory of his name. It is not possible to be a faithful follower of the Lord Jesus and not to experience some measure of suffering for the sake of his name. Just as surely as the Lord Jesus suffered for us, so surely must the believer expect to experience real suffering for him. In the form of trials, tribulations, distresses, persecution, harm, false accusation, physical or psychological pain in the name of our Redeemer, suffering is all part of a faithful believer’s commitment to Christ and his gospel.

Nevertheless, throughout all our sufferings, afflictions and trials, we, the beloved children of God, experience our Father’s everlasting love, comfort, and compassion. Moreover, out of the abundance of comfort we receive from God springs a fountain of comfort and consolation for our fellow believers—superabounding or superabundant comfort (1 Pet. 4:13).

Without suffering, a believer cannot experience fully the level of comfort that the Lord bestows on those who endure affliction for the sake of his name. Conversely, those who experience suffering for their Lord and Master experience the superabounding fulness of God’s grace as he provides relief, consolation, and comfort for every one of his sorrowing and suffering children.

Thus, in verse 6, Paul cites himself as an example of this principle:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:6

6 If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

Paul had suffered many previous afflictions and was still suffering intensely when he penned or dictated this letter to Corinth—arising partly because of the distressing issues that had developed between him and individual wayward church members at Corinth. However, more significantly and as he will relate shortly (v.8), the apostle and his co-workers had suffered very severely while ministering in Asia [Minor]. Indeed, they still had not recovered fully from their traumatic experiences there.

Paul saw these afflictions (severe trials, tribulations, and fiery ordeals) as something that God had permitted or ordained for his good purposes. Thus, the apostle welcomed anything that might ultimately benefit him or the church. In this case, the superabundant comfort and deliverance that Paul had received from God during the apostle’s extremely distressing and life-threatening circumstances in Asia had the effect of enabling him to bring exceptional comfort to those who supported him in their prayers. Several of the faithful saints at Corinth were themselves suffering. These believers did not, of course, find comfort from Paul’s sufferings as such. Instead, they experienced God’s comfort in their prayers for Paul’s deliverance and preservation. They knew that their omnipotent and sovereign God would keep Paul even in his darkest hour, and—in this—the believers took great comfort.

Similarly, the Corinthians’ faith in God regarding Paul strengthened these believers in their faith and thus confirmed the reality of their salvation. Paul’s sufferings, of course, could not add to the completeness of their salvation. However, the apostle’s sufferings would cause the Corinthian church to become more actively involved in praying for Paul and other aspects of their faith. Thus, they were working out or practising the salvation that God had freely bestowed upon them by his grace (cf. Phil. 2:12-13).

Through Paul’s example, those who were genuine believers in the church at Corinth learned how to bear suffering. They learned how to see suffering as part of God’s eternal plan and how to endure steadfastly—sustained by God’s everlasting love, mercy and grace toward them.

In verse 7, Paul continues by saying:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:7

⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.⁶

Paul's hope in the Corinthian believers remained steadfast and sure. He knew that they were praying earnestly for him and his co-workers. The apostle was confident that the church at Corinth was so involved in their prayers for him and their fellowship with him that they could be said to share in his sufferings. Thus, too—just as Paul received superabundant comfort in his trials from the God of all grace—so the believers at Corinth shared in God's boundless comfort.

To demonstrate just how severe his hardships were, the apostle writes in verse 8:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:8

⁸ For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers,⁷ of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

“...utterly burdened” “...beyond our strength” “...despaired of life itself...”

These expressions demonstrate something of the horrendous afflictions or persecution that Paul and his co-workers had experienced while ministering in Asia. They show the absolute despair—almost to the point of death—to which this intense suffering had driven these faithful servants of God.

The apostle wanted the saints at Achaia to fully understand the severity of their sufferings in Asia, i.e., Asia Minor (now, Turkey). Thus, they would be better able to pray for him and his associates and to pray for the churches among whom they laboured.

Paul declares that he and his companions were under extreme pressure; they were being burdened severely by brutal trouble and persecution. This is possibly a reference to the iniquitous, strident, and at times, life-threatening hostility that the apostle and his friends encountered from those who were enemies of the cross of Christ.

So intense were these persecutions and troubles that they almost completely overwhelmed the apostle and his associates. Indeed, Paul concedes that they were far beyond their power or ability to endure. So unbearable was the pressure upon them at these times that they began to despair even of life itself. Paul must have wondered whether they might not be called upon to lay down their lives in the cause of the gospel.

⁶ 1:7 “our sufferings” ... “our comfort”: It may be better to understand “sufferings” and “comfort” here (without the pronoun “our”) more generally as “*the* sufferings or simply “sufferings” rather than “*our* sufferings”. Similarly, “our comfort” might be better understood as “*the* comfort” or simply “comfort”.

⁷ 1:8 Or *brothers and sisters*. The plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) refers to siblings in a family. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, *adelphoi* may refer either to men or to both men and women who are siblings (brothers and sisters) in God's family, the church. [ESV footnote]

Thus, Paul continues by writing in verse 9:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:9

⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

Humanly speaking, Paul felt that he and his co-workers were languishing under a death sentence and that it was only a matter of time before the execution of that sentence. However, Paul was very well aware that their lives were not in the hands of evil men or subject to their malice or caprice (Ps. 31:15). Despite all appearances to the contrary, the apostle remained convinced that God controlled all events and that their lives and circumstances could never be plucked from God's almighty hands (John 10:28-30; cf. Heb. 9:27). Thus, through all their intense sufferings, sorrow, and persecutions, Paul and his co-workers learned not to rely on the arm of flesh but on the faithfulness, love, and power of the Lord, their Sovereign God. The God who raises the dead and restores them to life can most certainly deliver the living and keep them secure.

In verses 10-11, Paul continues:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:10-11

¹⁰ He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. ¹¹ You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

Paul's hope in God remains resolute. Humanly speaking, Paul and his companions could not have survived the intense persecution that wicked men inflicted upon them, especially throughout the province of Asia. Nevertheless, from these grave dangers, God had delivered them. Not only so, but Paul also remains confident that the same God who delivered them in the past will continue to deliver them in the future. Thus, Paul sets his hope on God, knowing that the One who loves them and who called them to his service will not forsake them but will accomplish for them and through them everything he has planned. Thus, we learn that those whom God calls to his service can remain confident that the Lord will never forsake them in their trials and tribulations, which they may be called upon to endure for the sake of Christ's name.

However, the apostle fully acknowledges his indebtedness to the Corinthian believers for their prayers on his behalf. He knows that they remember him regularly and consistently before God and agonise with him in his sufferings. Thus, Paul freely acknowledges that the deliverance God has granted him from afflictions and dangers has also been in answer to the prayers of his people. Thus, too, we learn that God hears and answers our earnest petitions and entreaties whenever they accord with his will.

Again, Paul's deliverance from so great an ordeal had become a matter for considerable praise and thanksgiving to God. From this, we observe that we ought always to thank the Lord with deep gratitude and praise whenever he responds to our prayers—whether for ourselves or others.

PAUL DESIRES TO SPARE THE CHURCH

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-18

In verse 12, Paul continues by writing:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12

¹² For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity⁸ and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.

When Paul declares that this is his “boast”, he is not talking about self-boasting. Rather, he means that this is the reason for his (and his co-workers’) confidence in God and of his glorying or rejoicing in the Lord.

Paul and his co-workers possessed clear consciences regarding their dealings with the Corinthian believers and with the Lord’s people everywhere. They had conducted themselves among the Corinthians in purity, honour, holiness, and godliness—providing no occasion for stumbling, gossip, or scandal.

However, as we shall learn subsequently, several people who opposed Paul had invented malicious and false allegations concerning the apostle and his associates and had propagated these false charges among the churches. Nevertheless, the reality was vastly different from what Paul’s enemies had been asserting. Paul had remained blameless and sincere in the sight of God and men. He had not conducted himself by human standards or by “earthly wisdom”⁹ (the wisdom of this age or this world), but by the wisdom and grace that comes from God above.

Again, in rejecting his use of earthly or worldly wisdom and by emphasising simplicity and godly sincerity through the grace of God, the apostle may be alluding to some of the false teachers. Some of these men had embraced philosophical ideas and incorporated these concepts into their teaching and practices. These individuals presented a real danger to the truths of the gospel. The Corinthian saints had received and believed the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ proclaimed to them through the teaching of his apostles and other faithful servants of God. However, if that teaching were now modified or augmented by applying “earthly wisdom” or philosophical concepts, then the truth of God’s infallible Word would be contaminated and compromised.

Paul needed to oppose such false teaching rigorously and without compromise. However, to do this, he needed first to persuade the Corinthian believers that—unlike the false apostles—he was a genuinely commissioned apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ and that he and his co-workers¹⁰

⁸ 1:12 Some manuscripts *holiness*. [ESV footnote]

⁹ *earthly wisdom*: Paul here is repudiating any idea that he makes use of the wisdom of this world, i.e., a combination of personally acquired or developed natural wisdom and the accumulated wisdom handed down through the ages by fallen, fallible and finite men and women. Whatever relative good may be found in unsanctified worldly or earthly wisdom and knowledge, it is of absolutely no significant value in matters spiritual and divine. Wisdom from God—to which Paul is alluding—originates from our omniscient God’s perfectly righteous and loving character and is immeasurably superior to fallen mankind’s unspiritual wisdom. It is God-given wisdom, granted by the Holy Spirit, that Paul relies on in all his plans and decisions concerning his apostolic commission, including the furtherance of the gospel and the building up of the church in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ *co-workers*: Although they were genuine servants of God, appointed by their local churches, co-workers such as Timothy, Silvanus (Silas), Sothenes or Apollos had not received an appointment and commission directly from the risen Lord Jesus to act in the capacity of an apostle. Directly commissioned apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit to act, preach, and teach infallibly in relation to the churches that they served.

held to and taught the truths of God's inerrant and unchanging Word. This was true also of Peter and the apostles at Jerusalem. However, the risen Lord Jesus had not commissioned or authorised any other 'apostles' (so-called) to proclaim the gospel or teach God's Word to the churches—despite the claim by some to have experienced visions and revelations from the Lord.

Thus, the apostle Paul needed to bring the Corinthians to the point where they recognised their spiritual danger from the influence of the false apostolic claimants. The church leaders needed to deal with these false claimants appropriately. They also needed to hold fast to the teaching of the risen Lord Jesus Christ and that of his personally appointed and commissioned apostles alone.

In verses 13 and 14, the apostle writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:13-14

¹³ For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand— ¹⁴ just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

Everything that Paul had said and written to the Corinthian believers had been expressed in fully intelligible and easily understood language. Perhaps, however, it was not Paul's terms or expressions that some of the Corinthians found difficulty in accepting—because they knew precisely what the apostle intended to say. Rather, it was the fact that Paul was encouraging and exhorting them to do things that several of their members did not wish to do.

For example, as Paul's First Letter to the Corinthian church reveals, some of their church order, service and worship practices needed to be corrected.¹¹ Paul had pointed this out clearly to them. Perhaps, however, certain individuals at Corinth were unwilling to heed the apostle's instructions and pretended that his language was hard to understand. Nonetheless, Paul prays that the church at Corinth may come to understand fully—and accept—everything that he had said to them as an inspired apostle of the Lord Jesus. Then—when they sought earnestly to become more like the Lord—both they and Paul would be able to boast (or glory or rejoice) in each other in the day of the Lord Jesus.

The apostle Paul had intended to make a double personal visit to Corinth; firstly, on his outgoing journey to the adjacent province of Macedonia, and, secondly, on his return journey from the churches of Macedonia.

The apostolic office—including infallibility in teaching and writing—was reserved to the Twelve apostles (including Matthias) and Paul alone. Others, such as Timothy, Silvanus and Sothenes were church messengers rather than commissioned and inspired apostles. Although the same Greek word (*apostolos*) translates as 'apostle' or 'messenger' the latter translation reflects more accurately the nature of the office granted to those servants of God who had not received a direct commission from the risen Lord Jesus.

¹¹ *needed to be corrected*: E.g., In relation to the following: a proper understanding and use of the Holy Spirit's gifts; church leadership issues; church order, service and discipline; resolving factions within the fellowship resulting in competing leadership claims; dealing with specific sins among some of the church's members, including sexual immorality; a refusal to acknowledge and submit to genuine apostolic authority, and a lack of love, peace and harmony within the church.

Thus, Paul writes in verse 15:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:15-16

¹⁵ Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. ¹⁶ I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea.

Paul was confident that the letters he had sent to the Corinthian church previously had been understood fully and acted upon—at least by the majority. Thus, he believed that the church would be ready for his promised personal visit. To this end, the apostle had originally planned a double visit to Corinth. After that, he would travel to Judea with the collection for the saints. However, these plans remained subject to the will and providence of God. Therefore, any change of plans would not be due to any indecision or fickleness on Paul's part. Rather, it would be wholly to spare the church and accommodate God's greater plans for his life and work.

Believing, however, that Paul was about to change his original plans *without good reason*, some Corinthian fellowship members began to question Paul's resolution and fidelity to his word.

In response to this, the apostle writes in verse 17:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:17

¹⁷ Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time?

The apostle Paul was not given to doing anything lightly or without due regard for the consequences on others. Most certainly, Paul would have been meticulous and circumspect in making plans for a return visit to the church at Corinth, especially in the light of what he had said to them in his letter. However, the apostle to the Gentiles would also have made it plain to them that everything he did—including his proposed plans—was done according to God's will. Paul had revised his plans to spare the church at Corinth from a problematic and unpleasant encounter with himself over certain unresolved matters.

However, this course of action did not reflect lightness, inconsideration, or applying worldly standards to his decision-making. It reflected an absolute willingness to yield to the will of God and to obey his will wholeheartedly. Furthermore, the Corinthians did not seem to realise that if Paul was postponing his visit, it was to spare them from coming to them with explicit but necessary commands from the Lord. Had these particular Corinthian 'believers' appreciated these facts, perhaps they would not have inferred that Paul's promises were unreliable. However, their lack of understanding demonstrates that some individuals in the Corinthian church were themselves thinking and acting in a worldly manner and had not yet matured spiritually.

Because, however, these Corinthians believed that Paul had changed his plans needlessly and without due consideration for others regarding his proposed visit to Corinth, some people suggested that the apostle's word was unreliable. Indeed, it seems that they even began to infer that his message and teaching were also subject to change at different times and in different places. This contention represented a grave, unjust and unfounded allegation that had the potential to do great harm to God's church and the faith of his people.

Thus, the apostle immediately seeks to refute this false allegation or innuendo by writing in verses 18 and 19:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:18-19

¹⁸ As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes.

The word translated “Yes” ¹² in this passage is an emphatic affirmation meaning “of an absolute certainty” or “absolutely, yes”. It is akin to the word elsewhere translated as “truly, truly” or “verily, verily” commencing a statement or as “Amen” (or “Amen, Amen”), usually concluding a statement. Thus, when Jesus used this word in the form “*Verily, verily, I say unto you...*,” he was introducing a most solemn truth or was about to speak words of the utmost importance.

Paul uses this word concerning the gospel message and truths he had brought to the Corinthians. However, the apostle reinforces the emphatic “Yes” by preceding it with the phrase, “*As surely as God is faithful...*” ¹³ (v.18).

The apostle had not changed or modified the message that he had brought to Corinth. The same message that Paul was preaching was being preached by Silas (Silvanus), Timothy, Apollos, and others at Corinth and everywhere else. Thus, Paul asserts emphatically that he and his co-workers have preached nothing but the unchanging and unchangeable word of Christ and his eternal gospel.

Some individual members of the Corinthian church had been suggesting that Paul was a waverer—uncertain and unable to make concrete decisions one way or the other. In essential matters, they intimated, the apostle vacillated between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and ultimately failed to reach a settled decision, or at least had failed to act on decisions that he had announced previously. ¹⁴

Of course, in his letters to the churches, Paul’s words were unambiguous, both concerning the instructions and exhortations he had given them and what he had planned for them. The apostle had made known his plans regarding the Corinthian church, and he would fulfil these plans as intended, subject to God’s will and purposes. In line with God’s express plans for the church at Corinth, the recent changes to Paul’s original itinerary had been found necessary to spare certain individuals within the church fellowship. Had Paul visited when initially planned, he would have needed to discipline particular recalcitrant church members, which he was ultimately still prepared to do. However, the delay would permit some time and space for the Corinthian church leaders to deal with this matter themselves, without the necessity of apostolic intervention. Such

¹² yes: Gk., ναι, nai.

¹³ *faithful*: The Greek word translated “faithful” (πιστός, pistos) can also mean ‘reliable’ or ‘trustworthy’.

¹⁴ In the Graeco-Roman culture of the time, vacillation or wavering over decision-making was considered a serious and unacceptable flaw in a person’s character. This was especially so in any person occupying a position of leadership, whether religious or civil. Thus, indecisive government leaders were considered unreliable and untrustworthy—and indeed not fit for high office. This attitude toward wavering or vacillating behaviour prevailed among Jewish groups (who considered vacillation in a person to be an offensive character trait). This same attitude toward indecision in a person’s character prevailed also among the Gentile population. Hence, at least some of those in the church at Corinth probably would have considered Paul’s change of plans as a sign of the apostle’s wavering in his promises; thus, causing them to disparage the apostle and accuse him of inconsistency. Of course, the Corinthians had failed completely to comprehend Paul’s real reasons for changing his plans, according to the will of God, and for their benefit. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the kind of cultural attitudes and mindsets that were common among the people of this era. (See further on Keener, C. S., *1-2 Corinthians*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (2005: 159) Cited in Guthrie, George H, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Academic, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, MI., (2015: 107, fn.13))

intervention would have been an embarrassment to the church leadership, calling into question their competency as overseers of God's flock and their inability or unwillingness to exercise due diligence in applying church discipline.

In verse 20, Paul continues by saying:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:20

²⁰ For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

The promises and pledges that God has made in his Word are certain of fulfilment. No one and nothing in heaven or on earth can hinder or thwart the purposes of God or interfere with any promise he has made. Thus, Paul declares that all of God's promises are "Yes" in Christ: they are certain of fulfilment in, and for the sake of, Christ.

The word "Yes" emphatically affirms the truth of this statement—on this occasion, concerning the promises of God. Given the certainty of God's promises being fulfilled, Paul declares that he and others can confidently offer the "Amen"—fully accepting the truth of what God has said and thereby glorifying his name.

However, implies Paul, since God remains unfailingly faithful to every word he has spoken, we, his servants, must also remain faithful to every promise we make to you. This we fully intend to do.

Paul now moves on from the absolute certainty of God's promises being fulfilled to the absolute security of all those who belong to Christ Jesus.

Thus, in verses 21 and 22, the apostle writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:21-22

²¹ And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.¹⁵

The One who cannot fail to keep his word cannot fail to keep his people secure. The Lord God Almighty—our Father in heaven—makes us stand firm and immovable in his Son, Christ Jesus. He is the Rock of our salvation. He is our protector, our shield, our shelter, and our firm foundation (Ps. 18:2; cf. 1 Cor. 10:4).

Not only so, but when—by his Spirit—God called us, regenerated us, and adopted as his children, he also set upon us his seal of ownership. By the anointing of the Holy Spirit, God identified us as belonging to him as his separated and holy people.¹⁶ To this end, he placed within us the Holy Spirit to carry on the work of sanctification and to seal us formally and finally as God's redeemed and holy people (Eph. 1:13).

The Holy Spirit is the pledge or deposit that guarantees more to follow in the future: namely, the completion of our salvation in glorification. Then, by God's grace, the Lord Jesus will present us faultless and blameless before his father's presence with great rejoicing (Col. 1:22; Jude 1:24).

¹⁵ 1:22 Or *down payment*. [ESV footnote]

¹⁶ *separated and holy people*: Gk., ἅγιος *hágios*; "saints" or "holy ones". In the Bible, the Greek word is applicable to the redeemed children of God or to the holy angels.

Great will be the day when we see the Lord in his glory and when we can worship God and his Son in the majesty and glory of his immediate presence and in unison with all his holy angels. What a joy, too, it will be to live and reign with him who loved us and who gave himself for us, that we might be redeemed and reconciled to God. Glory to his name!

Paul concludes chapter 1 of second Corinthians by writing in verses 23 and 24:

2 CORINTHIANS 1:23-24

²³ But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

Paul was concerned deeply about the believers at Corinth. He had visited them and written to them already. He had learned of the disorders, disputes and immoral practices among some members, and he had instructed the church to resolve these issues.

As an apostle, Paul had the authority to command the church to resolve the various problems, difficulties, and ungodly practices among its members and correct the disorder in the worship services. However, Paul loved these believers intensely, recognising them as his brothers and sisters in the Lord. Thus, rather than commanding them, the apostle preferred to exhort and persuade the church to follow his instructions.

However, if anyone in the church refused to acknowledge and obey Paul's exhortations, the apostle warned them that he would not spare them. The rejection by some of Paul's apostolic authority over them is one of Paul's main reasons for deferring his proposed return visit to Corinth. He wanted to provide ample time for the church to resolve its problems for itself. However, if Paul returned to find certain matters outstanding, he was prepared to deal with these matters and with the individuals responsible, firmly and authoritatively.

Of course, Paul had no intention of exercising dominion or lordship over the Corinthian believers' faith. They shared a common faith and stood on the same ground before the Lord, their true Master. However, in matters of discipline, the Lord Jesus had authorised the apostle to act in his name when necessary for the church's moral and spiritual well-being.

Even when applying discipline—or corrective teaching and godly practices—however, Paul aimed to set the church firmly on the teaching of Christ and his apostles. Then, both they and he would be able to rejoice together in the things of the Lord. Thus, when these wayward Corinthian believers within the fellowship turned from their worldly ways to trust and obey the Lord, they would find themselves firmly and securely established in their most holy faith.

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 2

PAUL'S REASON FOR DEFERRING HIS VISIT

2 CORINTHIANS 2:1-11

As with all other parts of God's Word, there were no chapter or verse divisions in the earliest manuscript copies of 2 Corinthians. Verse 1 of chapter 2 continues without a break from the last sentence of the previous chapter. Thus, continuing what he had just been saying, Paul writes in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 2:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:1-2

¹ For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ² For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?

Paul had resolved not to cause any further distress to the Corinthian church if he could avoid it. On a previous visit, the apostle had found it necessary to speak directly and painfully to certain members of that church. Furthermore, the apostle had corrected or disciplined this church by his earlier letters.

Now that Paul was planning to return to Corinth, he did not want to do so while some issues remained unresolved. The apostle had provided clear instructions already about resolving these matters in a godly manner, and he did not want to return to the church only to find some of the same problems persisting. Then, he would have needed to use his apostolic authority to apply discipline in person. Such a measure would have proved extremely painful, both to the church and to Paul himself. Thus, the apostle concludes that both parties should expect only a grievous encounter if such measures prove necessary. This, of course, was the last thing that Paul desired. For this reason, he had decided to postpone his return visit to allow more time for the church to resolve these distressing issues.

In verse 3, Paul refers to his earlier letter and to the tone he had adopted in writing to the Corinthian church on that occasion:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:3

³ And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all.

Paul wrote his earlier grievous letter to Corinth so that the church would be fully aware of his concerns over them and allow the church to put matters right. He had visited them in person already, but he did not want to return to them until they resolved the problematic issues to which he had referred. Then, the apostle would be able to return to them confident in the knowledge that they had obeyed his instructions as from the Lord. Then, Paul would be ready and willing to share with them in a joyous reunion.

The apostle had taken no pleasure in writing to them as he had done. Indeed, it had caused him very great distress. Thus, in verse 4, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:4

⁴ For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

The apostle Paul had agonised deeply over the painful letter that he had sent to the Corinthian church. Yet, because of his love and faithfulness to God and out of this intense love for God's people, the apostle found himself bound to act. God had appointed him as the apostle to the Gentiles. Consequently, it was his responsibility to deal with moral and spiritual matters in those churches that the Lord had committed to his charge (Gal. 2:8; 1 Tim. 2:7).

Where disputes and divisions arose, Paul had to ensure that the church leaders resolved these issues and healed wounds. He had to ensure that these leaders were assuming their duties and responsibilities for their flocks. Where disorder in church worship arose, the apostle had to correct the church and exhort the leadership to maintain order, decency, and due reverence. Where the church had become stained with pernicious evils or immoral practices, Paul had to ensure that these evils were rooted out, the offenders disciplined, and the church instructed in purity, holiness, and righteousness (1 Cor. 4:14-21; see also 1 Cor. 5:1 – 6:8).

Where these and other serious problems came together under the roof of one fellowship—as at Corinth—the grief that it cost the apostle must have been unimaginable. Here were several of the professing people of God behaving as though they had never been redeemed. They were acting as though they had never been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. They were living as though they had never been washed and sanctified from their former sins and sinful way of life (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

Thus, out of his great love for God's wayward and rebellious people, the apostle had been compelled to write to the Corinthian church expressing his utmost dissatisfaction and disapproval of their conduct. Although he knew his letter would cause them intense grief, he longed to see them shocked to their senses, brought to godly repentance, forgiven and restored to full fellowship with God. Thus, to heal them, he must first wound them—but only so that the Lord may bind up the open wounds and heal the broken hearts (cf. Job 5:18; Ps. 147:3).

The situation prevailing at Corinth had caused intense grief to the apostle. This was true particularly concerning one individual who had been causing offence by his ungodly attitudes and behaviour. Apparently, this individual had opposed Paul vigorously and defiantly during the apostle's visit. The apostle loved the Corinthian believers dearly, but he was not prepared to condone their indifference toward this offender or any others. These individuals had already caused Paul considerable grief, and Paul, in turn, had caused grief to the Corinthian church by sending his "severe" letter to them.

However, in his "severe" letter, Paul had been referring also to several other offenders. Probably, it was one of these other individuals that the apostle refers to in this passage.

Thus, the apostle writes in verse 5:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:5

⁵ Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you.

Concerning the offender alluded to by the apostle in these verses, we should perhaps mention that this individual is probably not the same person to whom the apostle refers in 1 Corinthians chapter 5:1-6 and who was guilty of incest. Unlike some earlier commentators, many modern commentators see several differences and incompatibilities between the two situations. They believe that the person to whom Paul refers here in 2 Corinthians may (or must) be a different person. Possibly, this offender may have been guilty of an entirely different kind of sin, although nevertheless of a profoundly serious nature. Many modern commentators believe that this man had vehemently opposed the apostle Paul during his last visit there and that this is one of the more serious offences in the Corinthian fellowship to which the apostle alludes.

At any rate, Paul had explicitly directed the Corinthian church leaders to deal with this matter and to ensure that the fellowship duly disciplined this offender. However, this same action had caused grief to the church, partly because it had proved necessary in the first place and because they had failed to act themselves until expressly directed to do so by the apostle Paul. Thus, the Corinthian leadership must have felt ashamed and embarrassed that they had proved ineffectual in managing their church affairs. However, Paul recognises this situation and does not wish to be too harsh with them or cause further pain or embarrassment. Here again, we see the wisdom, love, and discretion of the apostle in being prepared to postpone his promised return visit to Corinth to spare them further distress.

However, Paul now considers that his instructions, and the resulting discipline imposed on the offender by the Corinthian church, have served their purpose—at least concerning this particular individual.

Thus, in verse 6, the apostle writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:6

⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,

Paul is intent on ensuring that discipline is applied where and when discipline is necessary. However, the apostle has no desire to prolong such correction or punishment unduly and certainly not beyond the point of true and godly sorrow and repentance (cf. 2 Cor. 7:9-13). God always tempers judgment with mercy, and his servants must do likewise. Paul considers that the punishment inflicted by the majority has indeed produced true sorrow and godly repentance and ought not, therefore, to be prolonged.

When Paul says that this punishment was inflicted by the “majority”, he may be using the word *majority* to indicate the full body of the church. However, it is also possible that the use of this word implies the presence of a minority group within the fellowship who, in some way, dissented from the majority action. These may have been a more radical group seeking continued punishment and possible permanent exclusion of the offender—even after his repentance. On the other hand, it may have been a small minority who opposed any form of punishment on the offender and who resented Paul’s intervention and the church’s willingness to obey the apostle’s injunctions, as from the Lord. (We know, of course, from 1 Corinthians that cliques did exist in this church.) Lacking any further information, however, we cannot come to a positive conclusion about this issue one way or the other.

However, Paul is determined to ensure that the repentant offender is not subjected to further painful discipline and that the church does not ostracise him.

Thus, the apostle writes in verse 7:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:7

⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

Instead of prolonging this man's agony, Paul exhorts the church at Corinth to receive him back into their fellowship as a fully participating member of God's church and as one whom the Lord has forgiven and reconciled to himself. However, since the Lord has forgiven that person—even although his offences were serious and harmful to the church—then the church itself must also be prepared to forgive him. They must no longer harbour in their hearts any suspicion, resentment, or ill-will toward this man, for the Lord has cleansed him of his sin. Instead, they must receive him fully as their brother in Christ, comfort him in his godly sorrow, and help to guide and keep him in the way of life, truth, and holiness. By God's grace, he has experienced forgiveness, and by that grace, he stands. Nevertheless, we, too, must remember that it is by God's grace that *we* experience forgiveness and that it is by God's grace that *we* continue to stand.

Thus, Paul exhorts the believers at Corinth to comfort, console and encourage this individual, standing by him and coming to his aid in his time of need. Then, as the church ministers God's grace to his soul, the repentant believer would not find that he was overwhelmed by excessive and unbearable grief and sorrow.

To this end, Paul writes in verse 8:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:8

⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

Paul beseeches the believers at Corinth to ratify or confirm their affection and love in Christ Jesus toward this repentant and contrite brother. The apostle desires that he be received back among the people of God. Paul also implores the church to comfort this man in his deep and genuine contrition and surround him with their love and compassion.

Thus, we see that God had accomplished his purposes through Paul when he had inspired the apostle to take issue with the Corinthian church over this former offender and send the church his severely worded letter. (Paul will take issue with some other unrepentant offenders later in this letter.)

Thus, Paul explains in verse 9:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:9

⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.

Paul sent his strongly worded letter to the Corinthian church, instructing them to deal with this particular offender (among others) in their midst and discipline him as his deeds deserved. However, from 1 Corinthians, we learn that certain people within the Corinthian church resented and resisted Paul's apostolic authority and aligned themselves with certain other church leaders. Some even tried to align themselves directly with the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 1:10-12; 3:3-9). However, by doing so, they were effectively bypassing the church authority or leadership that the Lord had instituted via his apostles: the church authority to whom the Scriptures enjoined submission and obedience (Heb. 13:17).

Paul had dealt with these and other matters in 1 Corinthians. Also, he would have raised these and other issues during his visit to the church following the writing of that letter. However, the apostle would not have known how effective his instructions had been until after sending his strongly-worded epistle (no longer extant) requiring that the church obey his instructions to deal with this offender.

The Corinthian church, however, had stood the test. In everything Paul required of them, they had proved obedient and more than willing to follow his instructions. Thus, they had the joy and blessing of seeing a former offender turn back to God in true godly repentance and contrition of heart (2 Cor. 7:8-12).

Thus, too—and except for some vociferous and recalcitrant individuals to whom Paul will allude in chapters 10 to 12—the Corinthians had proved to Paul that, although they still existed in some measure, the cliques and divisions were gradually becoming less prominent in their church. Rather, with some notable and strident exceptions, the believers at Corinth were becoming increasingly united in Christ Jesus.

The majority were also beginning to recognise that the Lord Jesus had ordained the apostles—including Paul—to act authoritatively as the Lord's representatives. The apostles provided teaching and guidance to the local church pastors, shepherds or overseers. God required these shepherds ¹⁷ to rule, teach, warn and guide his sheep, but do so without domineering over the flock, of which Christ alone is the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 2:25; 5:1-4).

¹⁷ *shepherds*: pastors / ministers, bishops / elders / deacons, and other church leaders appointed after prayerful consideration by each local church to assist in that fellowship's oversight and instruction. Only those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and who are living consistently honourable and godly lives should ever be considered for or appointed to any of these offices.

In verses 10 and 11, the apostle continues:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:10-11

¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Paul had instructed the church to forgive and restore the repentant brother, and the apostle believed that the church as a whole would do so. Therefore, since *they* have forgiven this man, Paul himself articulates *his* willingness to forgive the man concerning his offences against the church. Additionally, Paul infers that he is willing to forgive this brother of any personal wrong he had committed against himself as an apostle.

Either way, the apostle extends forgiveness in the sight of, and for the sake of, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul, and the church, can only bind or loose that which the Lord Jesus has already bound or loosed in heaven. On this occasion, the forgiven offender is being “loosed” or released from sin and guilt on the authority of the Lord Jesus. Acting on the apostle Paul’s directives, the church exercises this authoritative declaration of forgiveness upon the offender’s genuine repentance and godly sorrow (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; 2 Cor. 7:9-10).

Thus, Paul’s action, and the church’s action, were carried out in the sight of the Lord Jesus, or as though the Lord himself was personally present in their midst—which, of course, he was (Matt. 18:20).

In verse 11, Paul intimates that—left unresolved—Satan could quickly have taken full advantage of this situation and used it to further his evil and perverse ends. Thus, discipline needed to be applied speedily—albeit in love, and with much prayer for the offender’s repentance and spiritual reformation. Now that God had brought about repentance and reconciliation, however, Satan’s aims had been thwarted, and his evil devices or schemes had been defeated.

Thus, we see how important it is for us to deal with secret or personal sin and for the church to deal with open or public sin at the earliest opportunity. Only in this way can we prevent Satan from furthering his evil aims against our personal lives or the life of the church. Only thus can we ensure that these perverse aims are well and truly thwarted. Thus, each one of us must look to the Lord to help us overcome sin, temptation, and the evil one himself. By God’s grace and his Holy Spirit’s power, this we will certainly do—to the glory of his name!

THROUGH CHRIST, THE GOSPEL TRIUMPHS!

2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-17

Paul now resumes his remarks from verse 4 (verses 5–11 had been a digression). Thus, in verses 12 and 13, the apostle writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-13

¹² When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

Before this, Paul had served the Lord at Ephesus (in Asia Minor; now Turkey). Subsequently, however, he had moved north to Troas,¹⁸ where the Lord had opened the door for him to preach the gospel. At some point, the apostle Paul had sent Titus to Corinth carrying the “severe” letter to the Corinthian church, and probably with final instructions concerning the collection for the saints at Jerusalem.

Paul arranged to meet Titus at Troas in Asia Minor on the latter’s return from Corinth. However, when Paul arrived at Troas, the apostle could not find Titus anywhere. This situation caused Paul considerable anxiety as he became deeply concerned for the welfare of his brother in Christ. Thus, before long, Paul bade farewell to the believers at Troas and made his way across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia.¹⁹ Perhaps the apostle Paul hoped he might find Titus there since the apostle had planned to visit this province on his journey to or from Corinth. The city of Corinth lay to the south of Macedonia in the adjacent province of Achaia.

At this point, Paul launches into another and extended digression from his present remarks. Indeed, the apostle does not return to this theme until chapter 7 of this epistle, by which time he had crossed the Aegean Sea from Asia and had arrived at Macedonia. We learn from that chapter that Paul was overjoyed when Titus also arrived at Macedonia, and the two were finally reunited.

¹⁸ *Troas [in modern day Troad region]*: Built on the ancient city of Troy in the former Asia Minor—present-day Turkey.

¹⁹ *Macedonia*: The province of Greece adjacent to, and north of Achaia. The churches at Thessalonica, Philippi and Berea were in the northern province of Macedonia, while the church at Corinth was in the southern province of Achaia. At this time, Achaia also included churches at Cenchrea and (possibly) Athens.

Now, however, as Paul digresses once again, he declares in verse 14:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:14

14 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.

Here, Paul breaks out in an exclamation of gratitude, praise, and thanksgiving to God. In this instance, the apostle visualises the gospel's power, victory, and glory by drawing an analogy from the well-known military victory parades. Here, Paul sees the Lord God as leading the gospel messengers, including the apostles, in a triumphant victory procession through all the lands that Christ is conquering and subduing by his gospel. Thus, as the "procession" bearing the glorious gospel message advances through cities, towns and villages, the incense-bearers in the train cast abroad the sweet fragrance of the gospel message wherever they pass by. (All these elements of this analogy formed part of the military victory processions (*pompa triumphalis*) of this era.)²⁰

Continuing this metaphor, the apostle writes in verses 15 and 16:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:15-16

15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient 21 for these things?

The aroma of Christ is the 'sweet smell' of the gospel of Christ. This same sweet smell—or same gospel message—comes to both those who were being saved and those who are perishing. However, to those who are perishing, the sweet smell of the gospel seems repulsive and repugnant, for they have chosen wilfully to love their sin and sinful way of life. Consequently, their sin has led to spiritual sickness and disease—a disease that causes them to consider sweet things as bitter and good things as bad (cf. Isa. 5:20). This reversal of good and evil is an example of moral and spiritual depravity. Scripture refers to this condition as 'spiritual blindness' or 'spiritual death' (Eph. 2:1-5). All unregenerate people worldwide live in this sinful condition, and therefore all are abiding under God's wrath and judgment (Rom. 1:18-32); a portent of God's wrath and judgment yet to come upon all the finally ungodly (Matt. 25:31-46; Rev. 20:11-15).

To those, however, who—by God's grace and mercy—he has called and delivered from such a state, the aroma of the gospel produces a sweet, welcome, and joyously received fragrance. These responsive individuals welcome the gospel and its messenger with open arms. The message of Christ proves fully effective in the lives of everyone who receives it and believes it. It is indeed the aroma or fragrance that leads to life—abundant and eternal life in union with Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:5-10).

At the end of verse 16, Paul finds himself overwhelmed by the magnitude of such a great and honourable task. "*Who is sufficient for these things?*" the apostle exclaims. God has committed to him the message of the everlasting gospel. Through that gospel's message alone, can those spiritually dead in trespasses and sins be led to spiritual life and forgiveness of all sin. A person's

²⁰ Commentators are divided on how verses 14-16 should be interpreted. For an example of one view, see Guthrie, George H., *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Baker Academic, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, MI. (2015: 152-175). For an example of an opposing view, see Seifrid, Mark, A, *2 Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentaries, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. (2014: 82-92).

²¹ 2:16 Or *competent*. [ESV footnote]

eternal destiny is at stake, and it is incumbent on the messengers of the gospel to declare the only way of salvation through repentance and faith in Christ Jesus.

At times, Paul felt overwhelmed by this immense responsibility, but he rejoiced in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of salvation led him victoriously from region to region with the glorious message of forgiveness and eternal life.

Paul concludes this chapter by writing in verse 17:

2 CORINTHIANS 2:17

17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Even in Paul's day, many false teachers had infiltrated the church of God or had arisen from among local church adherents. These individuals, of course, were not the servants of Christ or God. They professed to be speaking in the name of the Lord Jesus, but they had corrupted or adulterated the pure message of the gospel. Furthermore, as if this were not bad enough, a number of these wandering impostors turned their versions of the 'gospel' into a means of financial gain—material gain or profit for themselves (1 Tim. 6:3-5; 2 Pet. 2:1-22).

Paul and the other genuine servants of God had written about these false teachers or bogus apostles and had warned the churches to be on their guard. In verse 17 of 2 Corinthians chapter 2, however, Paul emphasises that he never peddled or sold God's Word for profit, nor did he ever corrupt or adulterate the pure gospel of Christ. Rather, the message he proclaimed was the absolute and uncompromising truth that he had received from the Lord Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23). God was witness to this, for Paul and his companions spoke not only *like* men sent from God but also *as* men whom God had *called* and *appointed* for this very task.

The point Paul is making is that the false teachers were never appointed or commissioned by God. The Lord never called them to minister the gospel. Men lacking spiritual discernment may have appointed and approved of them. However, without a distinct calling from God, these individuals had no authority to minister in God's name. Nor had they any right to claim to be commissioned apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ.

By contrast, God had called Paul distinctly and directly to preach the gospel. The apostle had been appointed to this task by the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord had commissioned Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles.²² Thus, when he had been sent forth by the local church at Antioch and elsewhere, these churches recognised and responded to Paul's divine calling to the apostleship. Consequently, they commended him as one called by God to the gospel ministry and authorised by the Lord Jesus to proclaim God's word to the people. However, none of the false teachers or apostles (so-called) ever held this divine authorisation and commission to preach the gospel.

²² ...*apostle to the Gentiles*: The Lord Jesus commissioned Paul as an apostles to the Gentiles (*predominately*). However, as Acts 9:15 reveals, Paul's commission extended to "rulers" (Gentile and Jewish authorities, including governors, emperors, kings, etc.) and also to "the people of Israel".

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NEXT CHAPTER FOLLOWS

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 3

PAUL'S 'LETTER' OF COMMENDATION

2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-6

Paul had been explaining his position concerning the church at Corinth. However, although some still contested it, most Corinthian believers were already aware of Paul's apostolic authority. Thus, they ought not to have needed any further 'letters of introduction', either from the apostle himself, from the apostles at Jerusalem, from other local church leaders, or from the church in Antioch that had commended him originally (Acts 13:2,3).

To this end, the apostle writes in chapter 3 verse 1:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:1

¹ Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?

Paul did not need to 're-commend' himself to the church at Corinth or present them with letters of commendation from the church that sent him (Antioch). The apostle was well known already at Corinth, both by his letters and by his personal visits to and ministry within that city (Acts 18:18,21). Therefore, the church was aware of his apostolic commission and authority. They also knew that, during his ministry among them, Paul had been instrumental in pointing many people to Christ in that city and establishing them in their faith (Acts 18:1-11).

In Paul's case, letters of commendation would have been superfluous. Nor did the apostle require letters of introduction from Corinth to other churches, for the churches throughout that entire region knew and recognised Paul as an apostle whom God had sent.

Paul's remarks, however, were probably not intended for the Corinthian church in general, who were well aware of his apostolic status. Rather, the apostle would be directing these remarks to a few individuals among their number who had been questioning his apostolic authority. These individuals may have included the false teachers that had arisen or had come down from Jerusalem unofficially.²³ Such individuals had been attempting to discredit Paul's ministry because he had been proclaiming the message of salvation through God's sovereign grace apart from works of the law. These individuals had wormed their way into God's church, perhaps bearing letters of commendation from the Judaizing groups that had sent them. However, they omitted to say that their letters had not been sanctioned or authorised at Jerusalem by the apostles, Peter, James or John (2 Cor. 10:7-18; 12:13).

Although not necessarily the same group, the Judaizers were from the same party against whom Paul had taken issue in his letter to Galatia and whose teaching the apostle consistently exposed and condemned as "another gospel". For this reason, perhaps, this party now sought to do everything in its power to discredit Paul by questioning his apostleship, his authority, and the authenticity of his message—the message of God's sovereign grace through faith in Christ Jesus (Gal. 1:6-9).

²³ ...*from Jerusalem unofficially*: An official delegation sent from the church at Jerusalem would have carried letters of authority from Peter, James, John et al. commending these 'apostles' to the church at Corinth. That no such letters were produced either by the church at Corinth or by the false claimants in defence of their claim, refutes the notion that these men were authorised apostles commended by the Jerusalem church. They may, however, have received letters of commendation from the Judaizing party at Jerusalem, although unauthorised by Peter, James, John or any of the other recognised apostles.

What, then, does Paul say in response to these people's demand for letters of authentication? In verse 2, the apostle says of the Corinthian believers:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:2

² You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.

Most of the believers at Corinth accepted Paul for who he was and needed no further letters of introduction from him or on his behalf. Nor did Paul require any letters of commendation from Corinth to other churches. Such letters may have proved necessary where a servant of God was unknown to other churches. In this case, however, the church at Corinth itself was a testament to the truth of Paul's apostleship and commendation by God. By God's grace, many of these Corinthian believers had found Christ or had been established in their faith through Paul's ministry in that city. (Other faithful servants of the Lord, such as Apollos, had also laboured there.) However, because of the influence that Paul's ministry had had on this church, the apostle could say that the resulting converts constituted "*our letter of recommendation*" to all.

God had inscribed this spiritual letter on Paul's heart. Nevertheless, it was also true that other churches had come to know about and acknowledge it as a work of the Lord. Thus, seeing how God had worked through Paul at Corinth, they required no further evidence that Paul was a genuine servant and apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul confirms this in verse 3, where he writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:3

³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

The proof of Paul's apostleship was the fruit of his ministry in the Corinthian believers' lives. By that ministry of God's grace and power, the Holy Spirit—working through Paul's message—had drawn and regenerated many of them, bringing them to repentance and faith in Christ.

This outcome was all the evidence that Paul needed. Insofar as Corinth was concerned, the believers within that church constituted Paul's letter of recommendation. However, this letter was not written with ink, which fades over time. Rather, it was written with the Spirit of the living God. This inscription never fades, for it is engraved eternally on the hearts and souls of every believer.

Nor was it written on brittle tablets of stone. On the contrary, God's Spirit wrote Paul's letter of commendation on tablets of human hearts. God's work of grace had softened and converted the formerly hard and stony hearts. The Spirit of grace and glory had inscribed the words of life and the seal of salvation on hearts that God had forgiven and reconciled to himself through faith in his Son.

These believers, then, constituted Paul's letter of recommendation to and from the churches of Christ.

In verse 4, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:4

⁴ Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.

Paul's confidence, however, by no means lay in human achievement or even in what God had accomplished through him in pointing others to Christ. Paul placed no confidence in the flesh or in human endeavour to accomplish the work of God. He recognised that only the Spirit of God could accomplish the work of God, and it was by the Spirit that men and women were convicted, convinced, and converted to Christ. Thus, Paul's confidence is not in his own strength or abilities but in what Christ has done through the instrumentality of the apostle's ministry. Paul did not glory in human endeavour or achievement but in what God has accomplished through his Son and by his Holy Spirit.

In verse 5, Paul confirms this interpretation when he writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:5

⁵ Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,

Here, Paul clarifies that he is not speaking of human self-confidence or confidence in his own abilities or qualifications detached from God's grace and power in his life. On the contrary, Paul depends utterly on God's grace and power for everything that he does in proclaiming the gospel of Christ. Thus, the apostle asserts that he claims nothing as originating from himself but that all his competencies—his abilities and qualifications to serve God—originate from God himself.

This thought is strengthened in verse 6, where Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:6

⁶ who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

God is the one who calls, qualifies and equips his servants to minister the gospel of his Son. Without these God-imparted gifts and qualities, no one ought to be ministering in the name of Christ.

Paul states that God has made him (and every other servant of Christ) a minister of a “new covenant”—commonly, although somewhat less accurately, known as the “*New Testament*”. The *Old Testament* (or, better, the *old covenant*) was essentially a covenant of works (not inferring, however, that God's grace and mercy were absent).

The old covenant is referred to as a covenant of the letter. This is partly for the following reasons:

- a. Because it required obedience to the letter of the law [i.e., God's Law].
- b. Because it was essentially a moral and legal covenant or contract.
- c. Because—in its Mosaic form—the letters were engraved originally by the finger of God on tablets of stone [*The Ten Words*, or the *Ten Commandments*].

In contrast to the old covenant of the letter, the new covenant is a covenant of the Spirit. Again, in complete contrast to the *covenant of works*, the new covenant of the Spirit is a *covenant of grace*.

Paul then says that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. The old covenant of works—represented as the covenant of the letter or a legal covenant—brought death. There was nothing intrinsically wrong or inadequate with the old covenant. It was God-given and therefore holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12). It set forth God's perfect or glorious standard of righteousness for the children of Abraham and indeed for all humanity.

However, because of mankind's fallen, sinful nature, men and women found themselves totally unable to keep God's law or come anywhere near God's holy standard of righteousness (Rom. 3:23). Thus, instead of experiencing life (spiritual and eternal) through the covenant of works, the Hebrew people—and all humanity—found that they stood accused and condemned in God's sight for failing to keep his law or deliberately breaking his law.

Since the penalty for sin was death, all human beings soon discovered that God's law condemned everyone everywhere. This death sentence imposed upon all humanity comprehended spiritual, physical, and eternal death (Rom. 5:12; 6:23). Thus, the letter—or the law expressed by the letter—is said to kill. It cannot provide salvation for anyone. The reason for this is because no one—except Jesus himself—was able to keep God's law *perfectly*.

Furthermore, even if a person could keep God's Law *perfectly* throughout his or her entire life, they could not attain forgiveness of sin and eternal life by that means. This is because they have inherited Adam and Eve's sin and thus incur the guilt and punishment of that sin, which is death.

If, therefore, a person is to be delivered from the condemnation of his sin and guilt, it cannot be by works of the law, by good deeds, by self-effort, by self-achievement or by any combination of these, but only by another completely different method.

THE GLORY OF THE GOSPEL

2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-18

Here enters God's sovereign grace. No one can earn salvation by good works, human endeavour or achievement, because all our best efforts, good deeds (or "*works of righteousness*") are as contaminated as "*filthy rags*" in God's sight (Isa. 64:6). While we remain in an unregenerate state and condition, our greatest endeavours are wholly polluted and rendered morally and spiritually unclean and completely unacceptable to God because they proceed from our fallen, unregenerate sinful nature.

However, although we cannot earn salvation by our personal good works or endeavours, God offers it to us as a free and unmerited gift of his sovereign grace. God grants this gift to everyone whom the Holy Spirit convicts of sin and judgment and whom he convinces of the need of redemption and leads to faith in Christ: That is, to everyone without exception who repents and believes on the Lord Jesus. All those individuals (an innumerable multitude) whom God the Father has given to his Son call upon the name of his Son (John 6:37; 7:37,38; Rom. 10:13). This expression of repentance and faith is in response to the Spirit of God, who first calls and regenerates them. By the Spirit's work in effectual calling, these individuals become able and willing to repent and receive Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

Thus, the letter kills (i.e., our inability to observe the law perfectly results in spiritual death and alienation from God). However, the Holy Spirit imparts life, resulting in reconciliation with God together with the gift of abundant and eternal life through faith in Christ.

We have noted already, however, that the inability for men and women to find salvation through keeping the law does not lie with any defect in God's law. That law is holy, righteous and good. Rather, it lies with fallen and sinful humanity's rebellion against God and with their total failure or refusal to honour God's law. Therefore, we see that the perfections of the moral law set

forth the absolute glory of God. It also reveals to all people everywhere the standard of behaviour that God requires of every human being. Thus, because of fallen humanity's failure to acknowledge God and observe God's law in its entirety, it has become an instrument of death for everyone.

Thus, James writes:

(James 2:10 ESV)

¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

Concerning these things, the apostle Paul writes in verses 7 and 8 of 2 Corinthians:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-8

⁷ Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?

On the holy mount, Moses met with God. There, the LORD wrote with his own "finger" on tablets of stone the Ten Words or Ten Commandments (Exodus 31:18; Deut. 9:10; cf. Luke 11:20). While Moses remained on Mount Sinai, receiving all the law of God for the people of Israel, the glory of the LORD shone with an exceedingly intense brightness upon the whole mountain area (Deut. 5:22-27).

Before Moses had ascended the mount on the third day, the people of Israel had witnessed something of God's unapproachable holiness and glory from the foot of the mountain. So awe-struck and terrified were the people at that moment that they stood trembling or fell prostrate on the ground in abject fear near the base of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16).

However, the LORD would not permit that which was impure or unholy to tread on holy ground or come near the holy mountain. Therefore, the LORD commanded Moses to ensure that the people remained at a distance before he ascended Mount Sinai once more to meet with the LORD (Exodus 19:12,13, 21-25; 20:18-21).

This, then, was the background to the giving of God's Law. It came with glory—the inexpressible glory of the Almighty and Sovereign Lord God. This Law presented God's glorious standard of righteousness for all the people. Such, however, was the reflection of God's glory upon Moses' face—even although Moses did not see the LORD face to face—that the people of Israel could not bear to look steadfastly at Moses' face while any trace of God's reflected glory remained.

Now, says the apostle Paul, if the ministry of the law came with such overwhelming glory, how much more glory must attend the ministry of the Spirit? —for he is *the Spirit of holiness*. If the effulgent glory of God attended the ministry of the law written in letters of stone, how much greater glory must attend the ministry of the Spirit written on the hearts of God's redeemed and holy people?

To this end, Paul writes in verse 9:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:9

⁹ For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.

In the ministry of the law, *God remained afar off* from the people, delivering his law and ordinances to Israel by the hand of a mediator, i.e., Moses (Gal. 3:19). In the ministry of the Spirit, however, *God draws near* to the people in the person of his Son. Through his Son, God provides grace and mercy abundantly to everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Son of God, the Lord of Glory, is our Mediator—the Mediator of the *new covenant*. Furthermore, the exalted and glorified Lord Jesus is also our Great High Priest, who intercedes with the Father on our behalf (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 12:24; Heb. 4:14).

Thus, the ministry of God's law was attended with inexpressible glory and spoke of God's ineffable and eternal glory. In contrast, however, the ministry of God's Spirit is attended by even greater glory—an indescribable, unfading, and everlasting glory. This ministry speaks not only of God's inherent and eternal glory but also of that glorious righteousness from God that he grants to each of his redeemed people through faith in his Son. Also, it speaks of the glory that is yet to follow in the future, in our Father's home.

In verse 10, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:10

¹⁰ Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it.

In and of itself, God never intended his law of commandments to serve as an instrument of salvation, except insofar as that Law exposed and condemned men and women's sinful condition. The purpose of the Law was to demonstrate to fallen men and women what the Most Holy and Righteous God required of them and prove to fallen humanity that they could never meet God's requirements by their sin-tainted efforts. Thus, by showing humanity their total inability to attain God's holy and righteous standard—or God's glory—the Law condemned all human beings as guilty sinners. The standard of God's Law proved to every man and woman on earth that their salvation could not come by *observing God's Law* but only by *experiencing God's grace* (Gal. 3:23-25).

The Law judges and condemns sinners, showing them that they cannot achieve salvation through their observance of the Law. However, now, Christ has fulfilled every requirement of God's Law *on the sinner's behalf*.

Nevertheless, the moral principles embodied in the Ten Commandments remain in effect, requiring their observance as an obligation and duty—but *not as a means of or aid to salvation*. The surpassing glory of God's grace to sinners now far outshines the law, just as the glory of the sun far outshines its reflected light in the moon.

We cannot properly compare the glory of God in Christ Jesus with the glory of God through Moses. Moses' glory was but an *indirect and very pale reflection* of God's exceedingly glorious presence. Furthermore, Moses' glory faded away with time. Moses could not and did not behold the fullness of God's glory (effulgent or Shekina glory). Christ, however, shows forth *the indescribable fullness of God's glory*, and—unlike Moses—Jesus' glory is inherent and eternal (John 1:1-4, 14-18).

Paul confirms this in verse 11, where he writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:11

¹¹ For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

God established his Law of commands to set forth his glorious standard of righteous character, behaviour and attitudes for the people. For hundreds of years, God's Law remained in effect—but it could never save anyone. It could only place them under a sentence of death for their sinfulness and direct them to seek the LORD's mercy. Salvation could not be experienced or effected through the Law. Nevertheless, even during this era, all those who by God's grace turned to the LORD in genuine repentance and faith did find mercy and forgiveness (Isa. 55:1-7). Such people included Abraham and Sarah together with a multitude of other OT believers—all those whom the Lord God had set apart for himself from before the creation of the world.

Now, in this present era, God reveals his glory to us in and through Christ Jesus (John 1:14,18). His gospel sets forth the all-surpassing glory of God's grace and mercy. The gospel declares to men and women that the only way of salvation comes not through observance of the Law but through repentance toward God and faith in Christ Jesus. The Law still exposes and condemns fallen humanity's sin and reveals their total inability to live righteously before God. However, it also fulfils its true purpose in pointing sinful men and women to Christ that they might experience eternal salvation and life through faith in him. The command to perfect obedience through the Law represented a temporary arrangement. By contrast, the invitation to receive God's gift of repentance and faith, granted through Christ the Redeemer and by the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit, will endure for as long as this present age endures. The words and promises of the Lord will never fail or pass away (Matt. 24:35).

Paul, therefore, exults in the hope of the glory of God—a hope of assurance of salvation that the Holy Spirit reveals and confirms to all who believe the gospel. In this connection, the apostle writes in verse 12:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:12

¹² Since we have such a hope, we are very bold,

God has committed to Paul and the other apostles the ministry of the Spirit: the ministry of reconciliation with God through faith in his Son. Through Christ, God has promised that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved—not, however, by good works but purely by God's grace.

Having such hope in Christ and the gospel message, therefore, Paul declares that he is very bold: i.e., he presents the message of Christ and God's grace openly and confidently for everyone to see, hear and understand—as the Spirit enables them. The perspicuity and simplicity of the gospel message stand in marked contrast to Moses' message to the people of Israel. Although Moses was God's spokesman, much of what he said to the people proved—to their benighted minds—challenging to comprehend or obscure, or it was presented to them under the forms of types and symbols, of which—at the time—they lacked an adequate comprehension. However, this sometimes profound lack of understanding did not so much lie with Moses or with his presentation of God's truth, as it did with the people for their hardness of heart and spiritual insensitivity due to sin.

In verse 13, Paul contrasts the ministry of the new covenant—the covenant of grace—with that of the old covenant or covenant of works:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:13

13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end.

The resplendent glory of God attended the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. Subsequently, every time Moses entered God's presence—latterly, within the tabernacle—that glory would again be reflected in Moses' face.

So radiant did the face of Moses become after having spent time in God's presence, however, that the people of Israel could not continue to look at his face when he returned from the holy place in the tabernacle to speak with them. Thus, to conceal the radiant glory reflected in his face, Moses wore a face-covering or veil while speaking to the people (although he removed this veil while in God's presence (Exodus 34:34)). Additionally, however, the veil prevented the people from realising that Moses' radiant glory was only temporary and fading.

Unlike the intrinsic and eternal glory of God's Son, Moses' reflected and transient glory could not last. Similarly, the era that Moses represented—that of the Law—could not last. Ultimately, it must fade away once it was superseded by One greater than Moses. By contrast, the glory of God's Son and the era that God's Son represents and embodies—that of grace—lasts forever.

We may say that the veil represents that which is hidden from the mind or cannot be understood by the mind apart from God's grace and the light of the gospel. Thus, the veil ²⁴ speaks of a people who cannot fully or adequately comprehend the spiritual significance of God's truths, depending, as they do, on their natural faculties alone.

With this in mind, Paul writes in verse 14 concerning the people of Israel:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:14

14 But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.

Engaging their rational faculties alone, when the people of Israel listen to the reading of the Old Testament Scriptures, they cannot understand the full spiritual significance of God's holy Word. Because of the effects of sin and because of their refusal to yield to God's truth as applied to their hearts, minds and consciences by the Holy Spirit in common grace, a spiritual 'veil' darkens their minds. By resisting the work of God's Spirit in common grace and by refusing to acknowledge the truth of God's Word as it stands, they have rendered their minds insensitive to the glorious truths of God's salvation. This 'veil'—or spiritual insensitivity—is removed only by turning to the Lord Jesus Christ, acknowledging him as the promised Messiah. For he alone is the Light of the nations. Christ alone is the Light of the world and the only way of salvation for both Jew and Gentile.

Paul confirms these thoughts in verses 15 and 16, where he writes:

²⁴ *veil*: Gk., κάλυμμα. BDAG 505.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:15-16

¹⁵ Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. ¹⁶ But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

Even today—as it was in Paul's day—that same veil covers the hearts and minds of the Jewish worshippers whenever they hear the reading of the Torah or Books of Moses. However, for everyone—whether Jew or Gentile—who turns to the Lord Jesus Christ in godly repentance and faith, that veil has been removed immediately and permanently. Thereafter, they rejoice in the truth, light and life of God's eternal salvation.

Paul had just said that when anyone turned to the Lord, the veil covering their minds was taken away so that they were able to understand the gospel and believe. Then, in verse 17, the apostle writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:17

¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

In this verse, Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as “*the Spirit of the Lord*”. As a person, the Holy Spirit is equal in power, glory and eternity with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Again, the Holy Spirit may be designated “*the Spirit of the Lord*” because either God the Father or God the Son may be said to send or give the Spirit to his redeemed children.

The work of spiritual illumination regarding the truths of God's Word, the heartfelt conviction of sin, and conversion, is a work of God's Holy Spirit. Without the illuminating, convincing, convicting and converting power of the Holy Spirit on a person's mind, that person would remain in spiritual darkness, unable to comprehend spiritual truths. This is the situation to which Paul refers in connection with the Jewish people when he said that a veil covered their minds (John 16:8-11; 1 Cor. 2:14).

However, whenever the Spirit of the Lord brings light and understanding to a person's mind, God's Spirit enables that person to comprehend spiritual truths, repent, and believe the gospel. Thus, by God's grace and by the work of his Holy Spirit, a person who formerly remained in bondage to sin and spiritual darkness now finds himself forgiven, released from bondage to the Law's demands, and free to serve Christ in faith and loving obedience. Through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, that person has experienced a spiritual transformation or renewing of their mind.

This mind-changing experience, however, marks only the beginning of his new life in Christ. There is much more to follow through the Spirit's ongoing work of sanctification and ultimately glorification. To this end, Paul writes in verse 18:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Here, Paul refers to all those from whom the Spirit of God has removed the veil over their minds and has shone into their hearts with the full light of the gospel. In the gospel, we see Christ. Furthermore, in Christ, we see something of the Father's glory and the glory of his Son. The more we behold that glory, the more it changes our character, making us increasingly more like Christ himself. From day to day, we grow in grace and the knowledge of him.

One day, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:3). Until that day, however, the Spirit of God must continue to sanctify us, removing the remnants of sin and impurity from

our lives, enabling us to honour and glorify God by producing the fruit of the Spirit in ever-increasing measure. We are dependent entirely on God's grace and the Spirit's ongoing work in sanctification for this process. Thus, the more we grow in grace and the Spirit, the more we reflect the glory of Christ from our lives and the more the outside world apprehends something of God's transforming power in and over our lives.

This is not to imply that the redeemed child of God need not do anything except rely on the Holy Spirit to sanctify them without any personal involvement in the process. Although sanctification is a work of God's grace and is applied to our lives by the Spirit of holiness, it is still incumbent on the believer to put into *practice* everything he learns from God's Word. Sanctification is the work of the Spirit, but the Lord expects each believer to put off the old lifestyle and put on (put into practice) all the teachings relating to their new life in Christ Jesus and consistent with godliness and holiness of life. In other words, they must bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in their everyday lives (Gal. 5:22-23).

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 4

GOD'S TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-18

We come now to 2 Corinthians chapter 4. In verse 1 of this chapter, the apostle Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1

¹ Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

God has removed the veil from the hearts and minds of everyone whom he has called to believe on the name of his Son. This included the apostle Paul.²⁵ Paul had the dramatic experience of finding the veil removed while travelling on the road to Damascus. Before the Lord Jesus halted Paul (or Saul) in his tracks, this former fervent Pharisee had been on his way to Damascus with letters of authority from the chief priests to persecute and arrest the followers of Christ in that town. In his mercy, however, God intervened. His Son appeared to Saul on the Damascus road, challenging him for attempting to fight against the Anointed One of God, i.e., the Lord Jesus, and against his conscience (Acts 9:1-16).

Now—for the first time in his life—Saul of Tarsus could see (or understand) the truth. God had lifted the veil covering his mind: a 'veil' that had been making spiritual truths incomprehensible to him. Saul possessed an extensive knowledge of Jewish Law and theology, having studied at the feet of the Jewish teacher, Gamaliel. However, the study of theology, law and ethics alone—apart from a saving knowledge of Christ—does not qualify anyone to teach God's truths correctly or explain correctly to others the message of God's salvation. The indwelling Holy Spirit is required to grant a person the necessary spiritual comprehension.

Thus, now recognising his spiritual blindness and in great fear and trembling, Saul the Pharisee submitted to the Lordship of Christ. Because of the brilliance of Christ's glory in appearing to Saul, Saul had lost his *physical* sight for a time. However, he had gained *spiritual* sight (insight), and—with his Spirit-enlightened mind—he could now see and understand the gospel clearly (cf. Gal. 1:11-17).

This was the glorious light and life-giving message that—in his mercy—God had now entrusted to the apostle Paul. Now, Paul declared to men and women everywhere the same gospel of light, life, and salvation that had been the means of his spiritual deliverance (cf. Acts 9:28).

Thus, Paul does not become discouraged or lose heart as he makes known this glorious gospel. On the contrary, the apostle rejoices insofar as God has called and appointed him as a messenger of the gospel. The apostle's only desire is that many others also will experience a lifting of the veil presently covering their minds. His concern is that they will be able to see (i.e., comprehend with their minds) the magnificent glory of Christ and his gospel. Moreover, his earnest prayer is that God will save them from the power, penalty, and consequences of their sin.

²⁵ *Paul*: Prior to his conversion, the apostle would probably have been referred to as 'Saul' (of Tarsus). 'Saul' was his Jewish name. However, as a Roman citizen, he had assumed or been given the alternative name of 'Paul'; a name common in Graeco-Roman society and among Gentiles in particular. 'Paul' was the name the apostle used almost invariably in his NT epistles.

In verse 2a, Paul continues by saying:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:2A

2a But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, ...

On this occasion, when Paul says that he had renounced “*disgraceful, underhanded ways*”, he is not referring to his past manner of life. While it is certainly true that Paul did renounce all his past ungodly practices when he acknowledged Christ as Lord, this is not what he is referring to here. In the context of the present passage, the apostle appears to be referring to something quite distinct, as the remainder of verse 2 makes plain.

In verse 2a, Paul mentions “*disgraceful, underhanded ways*” (ESV) (or “*the hidden things of dishonesty*” (KJV). These expressions appear to allude to the doctrine and practices of the false apostles or false teachers. Paul and his associates have utterly renounced or dissociated themselves from the kind of teaching and practices employed by these deceivers and peddlers of false doctrine or distorted forms of the truth (2 Cor. 11:4,13-15).

In verse 2a, the apostle continues by saying “*...we refuse to practice cunning*” (ESV) or “*we do not use deception*” (NIV)... i.e., we do not mishandle or misinterpret God's Word, nor do we engage in philosophical niceties or subtleties concerning the meaning of God's Word. Nor again do we engage in any form of cunning or craftiness while teaching or applying the Word of God.

In the next part of the verse, the apostle continues by saying “*...or to tamper with God's word*” (ESV) or “*...nor do we distort the word of God...*” (NIV). The verb “to tamper with” (δολόω, doloō) stems from a word meaning ‘to beguile’, ‘to falsify’ or ‘to adulterate’.²⁶

Paul declares that he does not distort God's truth to make it mean something that the Lord never intended it to mean, thus ensnaring the people of God in error. He does not handle God's Word deceitfully, nor does he misapply its sacred and imperishable truths. In each of these respects, Paul and his companions utterly renounce or dissociate themselves from “*disgraceful, underhanded ways*”—or from subtle and deceitful misapplications of God's eternal Word.

In verse 2b, Paul continues by saying:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:2B

2b ...but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

There was nothing secret, disgraceful, underhand, or questionable about Paul's presentation of the gospel message, nor his conduct. Everything that Paul said and did was open and above board. Anyone could hear and understand Paul's message—as the Spirit enabled them—and could examine the Scriptures for themselves.

By being completely open and honest with God's Word, Paul was commending himself to the conscience of every honest and reasonable individual. Their consciences confirmed to them that everything Paul said was true and worthy of full acceptance. Thus, through Paul's preaching, that of his companions and the other apostles, the revealing light of the glorious gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ shone in all its fullness and power into the hearts and minds of people everywhere.

²⁶ BDAG 256

In common with every other genuine servant of Christ, Paul proclaimed the gospel of the Lord Jesus clearly, and in language that everyone could understand. Nevertheless, although the apostle presented the gospel plainly to all his hearers, not everyone could comprehend its spiritual truths or see the gospel's real significance.

To this end, Paul writes in verse 3:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:3

³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

Paul presented the gospel unambiguously and in the full power of God's Holy Spirit. Thus, there was no fault in the gospel message itself that prevented people from understanding its truths or in the one who proclaimed that message. This was demonstrated clearly by the large numbers of people who heard the gospel and responded to its message, doing so as the Spirit convinced and convicted them of their sin and their need for God's redemption.

Nevertheless, the gospel remained an enigma for many others—or a message that made little or no real sense to them. This inability to comprehend the gospel correctly was because a 'veil' covered their minds. This 'veil' hid the truth from their intellect and will, blinding them to the glorious message of God's salvation. Everyone on 'the broad road leading to destruction' (i.e., all *those who are perishing*) find themselves thus blinded to the gospel's truths by the 'veil' covering their hearts and minds. This situation applies to all unregenerate men and women worldwide: That is, all those who presently are abiding under God's righteous and holy wrath (Rom. 1:18 – 2:16). However, by sovereign grace, God intervenes to remove the veil from the hearts and minds of all his elect people.

Who places this veil of moral darkness and spiritual insensitivity over the minds of fallen and sinful humanity? Who prevents them from seeing, understanding and believing the truth that the gospel so clearly reveals?

Paul answers this in verse 4:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:4

⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Here we see the cause of this moral and spiritual blindness, or the insensitivity of men and women everywhere to understand and believe the gospel. The "*god of this world*" (lit., "god of this age")—*Satan*—has blinded their minds to the truth (cf. John 12:31; Eph. 2:2; 6:12).

Thus, people are unable to understand the gospel message so long as this blindness prevails. Similarly, a blind person remains unable to see the light and glory of the sun and the multiple colours of the world around him unless and until his physical sight is restored. So it is with those who are lost and perishing. Satan has veiled or blinded their minds to spiritual truths. He does this by influencing their rational faculties, making them incapable of comprehending spiritual truths, even when someone explains these truths to them clearly.

Granted, people themselves may contribute toward their spiritual blindness and moral insensitivity by having resisted the truth on many previous occasions and ultimately hardened their hearts and minds against the truth. Indeed, perhaps because of a person's willful and repeated sin and wickedness, that person may have experienced God's hand of judgment upon his or her life. Such people find that God hardens them in their sin and gives them up to the consequences of their sinful way of life. In this manner, God hardened the heart and mind of Pharaoh when he

absolutely, wilfully and repeatedly refused to obey God's commands (Exodus 9:12; see also Rom. 1:21-32).

Thus, we see that, for one reason or another, unbelievers' hearts and minds have been blinded so that they *cannot* understand the gospel. Nor can they see or comprehend the beauty of Christ, the Saviour of lost and sinful men and women. Nor again can they comprehend the truth that Christ himself is the very image of the eternal God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

To all these and every other spiritual truth, they remain in total darkness. Indeed, unbelievers are not only spiritually *blind*, but they are also spiritually *dead*. God's Word tells us that—before our regeneration—we remain dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-5). Thus, being spiritually dead, we are *completely unable* to respond to the gospel message or to react in any way to the challenge of the gospel.

Nevertheless, this does not provide anyone anywhere with an excuse. Nor does it mitigate their guilt, responsibility or accountability to God. The responsibility for sin, guilt, and moral and spiritual blindness and death remains ours because—apart from any other reason—our sin and sinful nature have brought the death sentence upon us. As the Scripture declares, “*The wages of sin is death*” (Rom. 6:23).

Thus, those who remain in their sins remain in a lost and perishing condition. They are without hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). They face only the certainty of final judgment before the throne of God and eternal separation from God's loving and glorious presence. They also face eternal separation from the presence of all those whom they have loved and from everything in which they took pleasure, including the sins in which they delighted. The Lord Jesus spoke of such a situation as “outer darkness”, or a place of “fire and sulphur”—so dark would be the eternal night and so intense the sufferings perpetually endured in that place (Matt. 8:12; 13:42).

If we would see sinners saved from their sin and its dreadful penalty, we must bear in mind that they remain incapable of doing anything that would contribute toward their salvation. In their present state of spiritual blindness, death, and alienation from God on account of their sin, they remain totally helpless and incapable of responding positively to the truth or of believing the gospel. Nor can they do anything else to contribute toward or assist in their salvation.

Thus, if those dead in sin are to experience salvation, that salvation must come from beyond themselves. Furthermore, it must come to them completely without their aid or co-operation. In their fallen and sinful condition, they cannot help themselves any more than a dead person can actively assist in their restoration to life. Clearly, then, salvation can come only through God's free and sovereign grace and according to his own good will and pleasure.

Thus, if anyone is to be saved, God himself must initiate and effect that person's salvation. By his Holy Spirit and by his living Word, God must restore spiritually dead sinners to life. God does this through effectual calling and regeneration. This irresistible calling is effected in the hearts and minds of individuals by the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit of God must then enable that person to *seek* the truth, *see* the truth (following the veil's removal), and grant them the opportunity to *understand* the truth. Thereby, the Holy Spirit leads them to repent and believe with all their hearts and souls on the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, they respond to God's call *freely and willingly*—because, by his grace and mercy, God has now granted them the *ability* and *willingness* to exercise faith and love and trust his Son, bringing them to experience his full and free salvation.

All this, however, is a work of God. The sinner is dependent entirely on God's love, grace and mercy for his salvation—for unless the Lord intervenes in the sinner's life, that person will remain under the just sentence of sin and death. However, to all whom God calls by his Holy Spirit, he makes his adopted children. They become heirs of God and joint-heirs with his Son. At one time, these believers were sinners abiding under God's wrath and judgment. Now, they have

been forgiven and redeemed solely by the free and unmerited grace of God. Now, they are the beloved children of God.

Thus, the apostle declares elsewhere:

Romans 6:23 ESV

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In verse 5, Paul continues by saying:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5

⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

Paul assures the believers in the church at Corinth that he is not seeking self-aggrandizement through preaching the gospel—as certain false teachers were doing. Rather, the apostle seeks only to exalt and glorify the name of Christ the Redeemer, the only source of light and life for lost humanity. Thus, asserts Paul, we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. He is Lord of all. He is Lord of the entire universe. Thus, by God's grace, everyone who would believe on him must submit themselves to Christ's rule over their hearts and lives. He alone is Lord. We who preach Christ are merely his obedient servants and your servants for his sake.

Thus, we note that gospel preachers must never seek to magnify or exalt themselves, their abilities, their scholarship or their offices. They are the humble servants of the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ. His person and work alone must be magnified and exalted.

In verse 6, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:6

⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

In the latter part of verse 4, Paul had said that Christ was the "*image of God*"; i.e., the exact replication or likeness of the Father, an expression that implies full equality of the Son with the Father (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Now, in the latter part of verse 6, the apostle says that we experience the glory of God in the face of Christ: That is, when, in our minds, we look on the Son, we see the fullness of the Father's transcendent glory. The Son embodies and reflects the Father's glory and reveals it to men and women (John 1:14,18; 14:8,9).

Thus, if a person is to understand the truth about God and to see the light of God's glory, he can do so only by beholding—and believing on—the Son. No one else can or does reveal to men and women the glory of God or make known to them his eternal truths. Thus, if a person does not believe on Christ, that person will remain in spiritual darkness (John 1:4-5; cf. Matt. 11:27).

This, then, is the situation to which Paul refers at the beginning of verse 6. Alluding to the creation of the universe, Paul declares that it took an act of God's will and omnipotence—executed through his Son and the Holy Spirit and by his express command—to cause light to shine out of darkness (Gen. 1:3). So it is in the hearts and lives of sinners. It needs an act of God's will and omnipotence—executed through his Son and his Holy Spirit and by his living Word—to cause light to shine in the moral and spiritual darkness of our lives. Only then can we see, understand, and believe the truth of the gospel. Thus, if ever we are to see the light of life and salvation, we are wholly dependent on God's will and omnipotence and on his sovereign grace and mercy.

Thus, the message that Paul proclaims is not only supremely glorious in and of itself, but from it also shines forth the light and the glory of the eternal God and Jesus Christ his Son. Paul, however, sees a distinct contrast between the *message* and the *messenger*. The former is the message of glory, light and truth. The latter—the gospel messenger—is wholly unworthy to bear such an indescribably glorious message.

Thus, in verse 7, the apostle writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

The gospel is indeed a treasure of incalculable worth or immeasurable magnitude. However, those who bear the gospel message do so in frail, weak human bodies. Originally, God had created Adam and Eve's bodies perfect (although finite) in every respect. However, because the first pair sinned, their bodies and minds suffered from that sin's effects. They also suffered from God's righteous punishment for their sin and the effects of God's curse upon the earth. Thus, their once-perfect and glorious bodies became something much less than what God had created and what he had intended for humanity. In this context, we should understand Paul's use of the expression "*jars of clay*" as intimating the nature of the fragile and finite body itself and the fragile, finite, fallible and now diminished rational and emotional capacities. All these were affected adversely by the Fall of Man.

Nevertheless, God chooses these "*jars of clay*"—these fragile earthen vessels—to bear the message of eternal salvation. Furthermore, through such frail and feeble messengers, the Holy Spirit brings the life-saving gospel to bear on the hearts and minds of men, women, and children everywhere. However, the fact that God can so use frail and sinful human beings to proclaim his pure and glorious gospel redounds only to the praise, honour and glory of God himself, and certainly not to any merit or worth in the messenger. The power that draws men and women to Christ through hearing the gospel does not arise from any man's powerful preaching or presentation of God's Word. Rather, it comes from the preceding, attending and following grace and power of Almighty God, operating through his Holy Spirit.

Those who bear the message of salvation and eternal life faithfully and uncompromisingly often find themselves subject to many external pressures. Thus, in verses 8 and 9, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:8-9

⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

Those who proclaim the gospel of Christ may experience all kinds of pressures from without and within. Paul says, "*We are afflicted in every way....*" Frequently, when we preach or witness to others of Christ, we find ourselves assailed from all directions by those who oppose the gospel message. Indeed, our contenders desire to press in upon us and so coerce us that they may forever silence the gospel message. Nevertheless, by God's grace, they do not and cannot succeed in crushing us or hindering us from proclaiming Christ.

Even so, the apostles faced these and many other arduous situations on a daily basis, often giving rise to great perplexity and concern in the minds of God's servants. Paul's chief concern, however, was not so much for himself but for the churches. Should Paul's enemies succeed in their wicked endeavours, the churches of Christ might be prevented from hearing God's Word expounded truthfully, consistently and faithfully. Furthermore, those to whom God had sent the apostle Paul to proclaim the gospel of eternal salvation might no longer hear this glorious message.

Therefore, at times, Paul became greatly perplexed when he considered the magnitude of the task and the extent of the opposition and hostility to the gospel and its faithful messengers. Nevertheless, despite all these concerns, the apostle did not despair. He knew that the sometimes vicious and violent attacks of men could not succeed against or overcome the purposes and power of Almighty God. God's Word and God's purposes would prevail, despite the evil intentions and purposes of wicked men and women.

In the first part of verse 9, Paul writes, [we are] “*persecuted, but not forsaken....*” So great, at times, was the hostility to and opposition against the gospel messengers that Paul concedes that he was tempted sometimes to flee from such cruel suffering. However, despite such intense persecution from the enemies of the cross, the apostle had absolutely no desire to desert his ground. He remains utterly convinced that God will not allow his adversaries to crush him or deflect him from his path. Nor will the Lord ever forsake his faithful servant. Thus, for as long as it is humanly possible, the apostle will continue preaching Christ until God has accomplished his purposes, and regardless of the persecution. Only if it becomes completely impossible for him to continue without exposing his hearers and himself to the most extreme dangers will the apostle heed the words of the Saviour: “*When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next...*” (Matt. 10:23 ESV).

Paul concluded verse 9 by writing, [we are] “*struck down, but not destroyed*”. Such was the extent of opposition to Christ and his gospel by certain people that Paul and other gospel messengers often found themselves ‘struck down’ temporarily by the force of their adversaries. Like a wrestler who throws his opponent forcefully to the ground, so Paul found himself thrown down or vigorously rebuffed by his opponents. Nevertheless, despite these strenuous moves and blows by his opponents, the apostle did not concede defeat. Although at times wounded and bruised by these painful experiences, he rose again to continue the fight—reinvigorated by the unfailing promises and word of God. His adversaries may have sorely wounded Paul, but they would not and could not destroy him—for his times were in God's hands (Ps. 31:15).

Thus, Paul and his companions found themselves exposed continually to the very real dangers of serious injury or death. Nevertheless, this was part of the sufferings that God had called Paul—and all other servants of God—to endure for the sake of Christ's name (Acts 9:15-16).

Concerning these things, the apostle writes in verse 10:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:10

¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

The frail, weak human body was the subject of much pain and suffering. For the apostle, external persecutions and hardships added greatly to the normal experience of human suffering. Thus, Paul declares that—like Jesus in his state of humiliation—so he and his companions endured in their own bodies the same *kind* (although not the same *degree*) of pains, afflictions, and persecutions that the Lord himself endured. Indeed, in the case of the holy Son of God, these unjust and wicked persecutions resulted ultimately in his cruel and ignominious death on the cross. So, too, would Paul suffer and die one day for the sake of his Master's name. In the meantime, however, the apostle ‘died every day’ (so to speak). He carried about in his own body the death or dying of the Lord Jesus.

However, Paul's experiences were by no means purely negative. On the contrary, by proclaiming the gospel, Paul set forth the Saviour in all his glory, and, in this, he greatly rejoiced. Although Paul was preaching the Redeemer's sufferings for our salvation, he also shed light on his perfect and holy life and teaching. Furthermore, through his message, Paul extended the hope of salvation and eternal life to all those who, by God's sovereign grace, would place their trust in Christ—the crucified, risen, and glorified Redeemer of sinful men and women, and the eternal Son of God.

Thus, in all these ways and more, Christ's life and work were being revealed constantly and positively through the apostle's life and preaching. This was augmented by the witness to Christ's power seen in Paul's personal life and conduct, especially in the face of intense and persistent persecution.

In verse 11, Paul continues by saying:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:11

¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

This verse confirms what has just been said in the notes above. Paul and his companions risked their lives daily for the sake of the gospel so that others may hear and believe the precious words of life. Thus, Paul and his co-workers had endured riotous mobs, beatings, imprisonment, false accusations, slander, shipwreck and much more—all for the sake of the gospel.

The apostle and his co-workers hazard their lives daily for Christ's sake. Thereby, however, they share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, and, by these sufferings and their faithful endurance, they manifest something of Jesus' life on earth.

In verse 12, Paul concludes this thought by saying:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:12

¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

In his service for the Master, Paul fully realises that his ministry could ultimately result in death. Even on a day-to-day basis, the apostle constantly sensed the sentence of death upon him as he battled against Christ's enemies—the servants of the evil one himself. Yet, whatever the consequences and whatever the cost, Paul did not intend to yield to his adversaries' pressures and threats. The same message that could be the cause of his death was—at that very moment—the cause of life and peace to everyone who heard and believed the gospel message. Thus, Paul would press on so that the message of life would continue to work in everyone's hearts and minds who responded to the message of God's grace.

In verses 13 and 14, the apostle declares:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-14

¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

In verse 13, Paul is quoting from Psalm 116:10. That Psalm speaks of God's delivering grace and power, even from the jaws of death itself. This threatening condition was the very situation in which Paul and his companions found themselves at present.

Using the Psalmist's words, Paul declares, "*I believed, and so I spoke*". Paul believed everything God had revealed to him concerning his Son and the gospel of eternal salvation through repentance and faith in Christ. The apostle was now totally committed to the truth of this message. Therefore, as the Spirit enabled him, Paul declared the truth of the crucified, risen, and returning Lord Jesus in all his glorious and almighty power.

Paul was convinced of the truth concerning Christ's glorious resurrection. The apostle was also convinced that all those united to Christ by faith would be raised to be with him forever upon the

Lord's return in glory. That which God had accomplished in raising his Son bodily from the dead, he would also accomplish by raising the bodies of all his redeemed children from the dead. The Son would present them to his Father to stand before him irreproachable, rejoicing in his presence. Nor would those still living at Christ's return in glory find themselves excluded. Those still alive would be 'translated' and caught up to meet their Lord in the air, thus to be with him forever (1 Thess. 4:17).

In verse 15, Paul continues by saying:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:15

¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Paul exults in that God has called him to proclaim the gospel of his Son. Nevertheless, in preaching Christ, the apostle has endured tremendous hardships, suffering, pain and distress. Even so, his faith in Christ and faithful obedience to God will not permit the apostle to desist from making Christ known. He *must* preach Christ and the message of the cross faithfully, even although this often leads to personal suffering and abuse from those opposed to the message of truth and life.

All this, however, was for the benefit and ultimate blessing of the Corinthian church. It was also for the benefit and blessing of many other companies of God's people throughout those regions. The more Paul preaches the gospel message, the more people hear of God's redeeming love and way of salvation through faith in Christ. Furthermore, the more people who hear the way of salvation, the more are touched by the Holy Spirit of God. By that Spirit, many experience the fullness of God's everlasting grace and mercy. To this end, the Holy Spirit convicts them of their sin, regenerates them and enables them to turn in repentance and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus, the church increases in numbers and an ever-increasing number of believers overflow in their prayers and praises to God, thanking him for all he has done for them through his Son. In this way, they glorify the name of God. Regardless, therefore, of the undeniable sufferings and hardships endured by him and his fellow workers for the sake of the gospel, Paul is not about to become disheartened or discouraged by affliction or adversity.

In this connection, Paul writes in verse 16:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

Paul rejoiced insofar as the Lord had counted him worthy to suffer for the sake of his name. Far from becoming dispirited by opposition from the enemies of Christ, the apostle was greatly heartened when he saw what Christ was accomplishing among the Gentiles through his ministry. By the power of God's Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, sinners were being brought to acknowledge Christ as Saviour and Lord. Thereby, God was reconciling them unto himself. By God's grace, he had delivered them from moral and spiritual darkness to the liberty of light and life in Christ Jesus. Those formerly alienated from God and in bondage to sin and Satan experienced release from Satan's power and from their slavery to sin (Acts 26:18).

Yes, Paul was enduring much pain and suffering in his ministry. However, even although his physical life was to waste away or to be destroyed externally, yet inwardly, his spiritual life in union with Christ could not be destroyed and indeed was being renewed daily. Besides, Paul's times—as with all our times—were in God's hands (Ps. 31:15). God had determined the number

of his days. By God's sovereign will and purposes, these days would be fulfilled and could not be shortened by the malice of man. Only when Paul had fully served God's purposes on earth would the apostle be taken to rest in peace from his labours in the presence of his Lord and Master in heaven. There, he would join with all the redeemed children of God in everlasting glory.

Concerning these things, the apostle writes in verses 17 and 18:

2 CORINTHIANS 4:17-18

¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

From shipwrecks to personal physical and verbal attacks, including beating and stoning, Paul had suffered all kinds of afflictions for the sake of his Lord and Master. At times, his very life had been in great danger from those who were vehemently and violently opposed to the message of the gospel. They hated Christ and despised the truth and light that Christ and his apostles shed abroad in this sinful world. Therefore, they determined to destroy or discredit those who proclaimed the name of Christ and the truths of God's holy and unchangeable Word. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ is Lord. He is Sovereign over the affairs of all humanity, and indeed over all creation. No one—human, angelic or demonic—could lay a hand on Paul to destroy him so long as the Lord protected him.

Paul realised that all his sufferings on earth would lead one day to great reward in heaven, although the apostle's only thought of reward was the joy and satisfaction of serving his Lord and Master faithfully during his life on earth. Even so, at times, he longed to enter his promised reward in heaven. However, the apostle knew only too well that God needed him to complete his ministry on earth. Nevertheless, while Paul continued his earthly ministry, he fixed his sight or mind on things above. The apostle recognised that all the things of this age are transitory, whereas everything in the age to come would be eternal.

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 5

AT HOME WITH THE LORD

2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-10

2 CORINTHIANS 5:1

¹ For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Paul does not permit the believer to entertain any doubts: “*For we know,...*” asserts the apostle. Paul is making it abundantly plain that when this earthly tent or tabernacle (our body) in which we now dwell shall be destroyed, a new building awaits us from the hand of God. A tent is a temporary dwelling place, and so also are our earthly and mortal bodies.

One day, this body will perish, i.e., the body, as we now know it, will succumb to ageing, death, decay and dissolution (although, being immortal, the soul will never die). Yet, this same body will not remain in death, nor will it abide in a state of decomposition or final dissolution. God, who raised his Son from the dead, likewise will raise the bodies of his redeemed people from the dead.

Nevertheless, the body that the Lord brings forth from the earth or the sea will not be of the same nature as that laid to rest previously. Rather, it will be a glorious *spiritual* body. It will be an immortal body—fitted to be united forever with our immortal souls. This spiritual body is the “*house not made with hands*”, which will abide for all eternity in the heavens, or, rather, in the new creation—the new heaven and the new earth.

In verse 2, Paul continues by saying:

2 CORINTHIANS 5:2

² For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling,

Like a tent, our present earthly body is not a final abiding place. Unlike the soul, it lacks permanence; it lacks ultimate security. In its present earthly state, our mortal body cannot fully enjoy all the glories that God has prepared for those who love him. It is a temporary abode, subject to many distressing circumstances and the vagaries of life and earthly living. Thus, the children of God groan (in the sense of sighing inwardly). They long to depart from this present mortal body in order to enter the fullness of blessing and joy associated with the new spiritual and eternal body.

However, God’s people recognise that—while this is their heart’s desire—their life and service is required here on earth for as long as the Lord determines. Thus, although they anticipate eagerly and joyfully the glories awaiting them in their Father’s house, they are not unmindful of their duties, responsibilities and privileges of their calling and election while they remain on earth. While in their mortal bodies, they are the Lord’s servants: and they must remain faithful in their Master’s service during the time of their sojourn on earth.

Paul continues the thought of future glory by writing in verse 3:

2 CORINTHIANS 5:3

³ if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked.

Laying aside this present earthly tent or tabernacles does not mean that we will be found naked or stripped of a body. On the contrary, when the believer “falls asleep” in Jesus, their soul enters immediately into the presence of the Lord in his glory. However, that soul will not remain alone. It will be reunited with its own body. However, it will be reunited with the body that God has transformed. It will be a spiritual body—a body eminently suited to the soul, which also is spiritual and eternal.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:4

⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

While the believer remains in this temporary body, he groans—or sighs deeply within—feeling the burden, weight or weariness of this present, frail and mortal frame. Yet, the child of God has no wish to find himself without a body. His only and most earnest desire is that his present perishable physical body will be replaced with the glorious spiritual body that God has prepared for all his redeemed people. Then, all longings will be realised. Then, the body will be burdened no longer with the frailties of this life or with the effects of sin. Then, it will be a glorified body—fit to offer worship and praise in the presence of God most High.

In making these remarks, we must not imagine that the human body—as created by God originally—was in any way defective or sinful. As it is now constituted, the body was created originally perfect and adapted for life on this earth. However, by their sin,²⁷ Adam and Eve brought death upon themselves and consequently upon all humanity by virtue of their now sinful nature. Thus, now, the body became subject to ageing, decay and—eventually—physical death.

Death is the wages of (or punishment for) sin. When the Bible speaks of death in connection with sin, “death” comprehends *physical*, *spiritual* and *eternal* death. Only by Adam and Eve’s sin, therefore, has the human body become subject to death. Only by this original sin and by our own personal sin does the body become subject to illness, disease, and decay. It is from this mortal, fallen condition that the believer now longs to find release or delivery. This delivery will indeed occur at the resurrection and translation of the body to its glorified and spiritual state. Then, what is mortal will be swallowed up or ‘overwhelmed’ by life—life everlasting and glorious.

²⁷ *their sin*: disobedience to God’s express command (Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-7, 17-19).

2 CORINTHIANS 5:5

⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

Not only has the Lord God prepared this glorious future for his people, but he also has prepared his people for their inheritance in glory. The Son of God has gone to prepare a place in his Father's house for each of his redeemed children. At the same time, the Lord is preparing each of his people for their future inheritance by sanctifying them day by day through his Word and by the Spirit he has given to us. (John 17:17) Ultimately, the Son of God will present each of his people faultless and blameless before his Father's face, with great rejoicing (Col. 1:22; Jude 1:24).

To guarantee to the believer that he will certainly attain to his promised inheritance in glory, God has bestowed upon each of his redeemed children his Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God acts as a signet and seal, certifying that all those whom the Holy Spirit indwells are the sovereign possession of God Most High and his Son (2 Cor. 1:22); that they are being sanctified and kept secure in his everlasting arms, and that they can never perish or fail to attain to their inheritance in glory, or the place prepared for them in heaven by the Son of God (John 10:28-29; 14:1-3).

In verses 6 and 7, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-7

⁶ So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight.

In this life, the believer may suffer much sorrow, pain or distress. Nevertheless, he knows that this body is not his abiding dwelling but only a temporary abode. Like the apostles—and despite the sufferings on Christ's account—the believer inwardly is of good courage. This courage is based on God's unfailing promises. Regardless of all the obstacles, trials and tribulations, the believer remains confident that what the Lord has promised he will fulfil.

Throughout their Christian life, the believer lives by faith. Yet, it is a faith founded on the absolute certainty of God and of his eternal Word. It is a faith resting on the absolute certainty of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, of his exaltation to his Father's right hand, and of his coming again in glory. Thus, the believer lives by faith—knowing that Christ lives within him and will remain with him forever in the person of his Holy Spirit. He does not set his mind, or his hopes, on the things that are seen—for the things that are seen are transient, and that which is transient cannot endure. Rather, the child of God sets his heart and mind on the things that are unseen—where Christ is seated, at the right hand of God. There, he knows, he will dwell one day in his glorified spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:42-44; 2 Cor. 4:18; Col. 3:1).

Although, as we have said, the Lord Jesus is present in Spirit with all his people, while they remain in this life, they are nevertheless at home in the body and therefore away from the visible, actual and glorious presence of the Lord Jesus.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:8

⁸ Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Understandably, the Lord's people desire earnestly to leave their present mortal bodies and be taken to their home in glory, resplendent in their new glorified and spiritual bodies. Then, they will be at home with the one who has loved them with an everlasting love. Then, they will meet their dear Redeemer face to face. Then, they will be like him, for they will see him as he is (1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2).

Concerning all these things, the child of God remains absolutely sure. Based on his faith and confidence in God and his Word, he remains courageous and steadfast in the face of adversity and trial, sorrow and grief, pain and anguish. These are but for a moment while we are away from the Lord. All these things will pass away, never to return, when the Lord Jesus comes or when he calls us to be forever with him in glory.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:9

⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

Therefore, whether we are at home in this body or away in the presence of the Lord, we live to please him and glorify his name, either on earth or in heaven.

While we remain in this body, it is our heartfelt ambition to conduct our lives in such a way that the Lord's name will be honoured and glorified. For Paul and the other apostles, this involved serving the Lord wholeheartedly and uncompromisingly in preaching and teaching the gospel and building up the churches in love. For other believers worldwide, it means living their whole life to the honour, praise and glory of the one who loves them and died for them, and who even now is present with them in the person of his Holy Spirit. The aim of all God's people should be to please the Lord Jesus in everything that they think, say and do, and to bring no dishonour or discredit to his great and holy name.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:10

¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

One day, each of the Lord's people will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to answer for the way they have conducted their lives and to account for how they have served the Lord Jesus while on earth. Each person's life and conduct will be scrutinised most carefully by the holy Son of God. Every idle word spoken and every deed performed will require an accounting before the Judge of all the earth. Everything that the believer had *failed* to do when he had the opportunity to do it will require an accounting. Every aspect of his personal life will be searched.

Also, God's people—and especially those who have engaged in any form of teaching or preaching (spoken or written)—will be called to account for how they have presented their teaching or preaching. They will be held accountable for how they have presented God's Word to the people, and especially to God's flock, the church. Those who prove completely faithful in their service to the Lord will receive their due reward. This will amount to additional blessings as their service has deserved. Those, however, who have proved negligent in their duties or who have not served the Lord as faithfully and diligently as they ought to have done will also receive their due reward. However, in their case, they will lose some or all the additional blessings that the Lord bestows on his faithful servants. Genuinely born-again believers will not, however, lose their salvation. This is because salvation is not a *reward* earned for faithful service but a *gift* bestowed on

undeserving sinners by God's sovereign and unmerited grace (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 4:5; Rev. 20:12; see also Rom. 14:10).

This passage speaks of the judgment seat of Christ as it relates to believers only. Paul is not speaking of the judgment of unregenerate men and women in this verse. He does this in several places elsewhere.

CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21

2 CORINTHIANS 5:11

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.

The apostles served the Lord faithfully out of genuine and deep-seated love for God and his Son. So also should each of his people. Nevertheless, we must all bear in mind that—one day—we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Given this, each of the Lord's people should hold fast to a healthy fear or reverence for God in their lives and worship. Furthermore, we must anticipate something of the nature of the coming judgment.

This holy judgment seat will be such as strikes awe-inspiring *reverential fear* into the hearts of the Lord's people—in the knowledge that their every thought, word and deed will be exposed (although they will not be condemned). However, when—separately—the unregenerate appear before the Judge of all the earth, the solemnity of these proceedings will strike utter awe-inspiring and *abject terror* into their hearts as they wait to hear the final sentence of condemnation and committal to the lake of fire (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:14-15; 21:8).

Because of this coming final judgment, the apostle does all in his power to persuade, convince, or appeal to others concerning their duties and responsibilities before God and to warn unregenerate men and women of the judgment to come while also presenting to them the gospel of God's love, grace and salvation.

Concerning the apostles' actual conduct, God witnessed their yearning to honour, please and glorify his name and the name of his Son. Again, the Lord was fully aware of their intense desire to faithfully present the gospel to everyone, without respecting persons and without favouring any person, race, creed, colour or nationality above another. God knew this to be true, and Paul earnestly hoped that the believers at Corinth, and in other places, also knew this to be true in their hearts and consciences.

Granted, those who vigorously opposed Paul would endeavour to misrepresent his name and attempt to discredit him and his apostleship by their unfounded and scurrilous accusations. These men, however, were the servants of darkness—ministers of Satan. These false teachers and pseudo-'apostles' thought nothing of turning the truth of God into a lie to further their own ends or to misrepresent and malign the true and faithful servants of the Lord Jesus. So it is today. False teachers abound throughout Christendom (so-called). They repeatedly attempt to misrepresent the Word of God and to malign the faithful servants of God. However, God will judge them as their evil and perverted words and deeds deserve.

In everything, God's true servants must be careful to remain faithful to God and the truths of his Word. Under no circumstances must they compromise the truth to make it more acceptable to fallen and sinful human beings or to endeavour to 'modernise' the unchanging and unchangeable Word of God or the message of the gospel.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:12

¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.

In asserting his faithfulness to God and his Word, Paul does not intend to boast of his spiritual achievements or attempt to commend himself to the Corinthians. The Lord has commended Paul already to the service of the church, including the fellowship at Corinth. Rather, the apostle is trying merely to state the facts to the Corinthian church. Thus, they will be forewarned and forearmed with the necessary spiritual ammunition to speak on this apostle's behalf to those who would oppose him or deny the validity of his apostleship. Therefore, Paul reminds them of his calling by God to the apostleship and what this apostleship entails. He further reminds them of how he has remained faithful to his calling and has represented Christ and his gospel throughout the area committed to his charge. With these facts in their possession, the church at Corinth would be able to defend Paul's ministry among them and refute the claims of the false apostles or false teachers.

As Paul points out in this verse, these imposters were concerned more about outward appearances and advancement than inward spiritual verities. They were concerned primarily to gain a following for themselves or their party. They were concerned about setting up a formal or external *form* of religion—a 'cult'—rather than a religion of the heart and life. They were not unduly concerned for faithfulness to spiritual truths or for people to be regenerated. Rather they sought to establish a pseudo-religion, a counterfeit faith, where people would be grossly deluded and deceived by the lie of the devil—whose naïve servants these false teachers were. Thus, "*the god of this world*" (Satan) would be able more effectively to blind the minds of unbelievers by presenting them with a false or counterfeit form of faith in Christ.

Hence the reason why Paul was so insistent on maintaining the truth of the gospel; why he was so unwilling to compromise these truths and so ready to warn the church about the dangers posed by false teachers and false teaching, or even by misguided teaching. Thus, it is incumbent upon every true servant of God today to follow Paul's example of faithfulness to God, to his church, and to warn the church against the very real dangers of imposters arising from within the church or infiltrating the church from outside. However, in whichever manner they arise, such individuals are not the servants of Christ or his gospel. Rather, they are the servants of the evil one, and their only desire is to lead people astray and away from the truths of God's inerrant and unchanging Word and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:13

¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

Naturally, because the apostle refused to give way to anyone regarding gospel truth, some people in the Corinthian church considered Paul an extremist, an intolerant bigot, or even unbalanced in his mind. This attitude, however, merely displays how spiritually immature or lacking in knowledge of the truth some of these professing believers were. However, it also shows a spirit of malice among certain people associated with the church at Corinth (although not necessarily as genuine believers).

It is common among fallen and sinful men and women to accuse people of being bigoted or psychologically unstable. This may result from their being at a complete loss to understand the issues involved, as when Paul appeared before Festus (Acts 26:24). Again, it may result from evil and shameless desire to discredit or malign a person because the hearer or reader cannot, or will not, agree to the challenging truths being stated by that person. This rebellious reaction, of course, is just an example of sinful humanity's evil and perverse mind in action, in trying to discredit that which does not appeal to them or of which they have no wish to hear since it convicts them of their sin and condemns their evil and disgraceful deeds uncompromisingly.

Such vile and false innuendo or open accusations are of no concern to Paul. As far as Paul is concerned, even if it were remotely possible that the apostle was beside himself, it would still redound to God's glory. Furthermore, and since Paul is in his right mind, it is for the church's benefit and blessing. That Paul was in his right mind cannot be disputed by any unbiased and rationally minded person. In exasperation, Festus may have declared that the apostle had been driven mad by his great learning (Acts 26:24-25). However, in this case, Paul would have been unsuited to the service of the Lord as an apostle. However, the Lord Jesus appointed Paul personally to this office and equipped him for this task. It was a pre-requisite of this appointment that the Lord's servant had to be of clear and sound mind. Close examinations of Paul's epistles show something of the apostle's nature and character. Again, scrutiny of his letters demonstrates Paul's astuteness of mind, intellectual prowess, and spiritual comprehension and discernment. All of these features and characteristics had been graciously bestowed upon him by the Lord.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:14

¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died;

Paul makes it plain that far from being controlled by selfish and self-seeking motives—as were the false apostles—he and the other genuine apostles of the Lord Jesus were being controlled, or rather constrained, by the love of Christ. Out of Christ's love for Paul and the apostle's love for his Redeemer, Paul found it impossible to do anything other than preach Christ, presenting to the people the whole counsel of God. The apostle could not at any time, or for any reason, modify the gospel or compromise its truths. Since the love of Christ constrained him, that love compelled the apostle to remain ever-faithful to his Lord and Master and his teaching.

In that teaching, we learn that One died on behalf of all. One died as a substitute for all. However, the 'all' for whom the One died are all those who belong to Christ: i.e. all those whom the Father has given him (John 6:37, 44, 65). This includes every individual on earth whom God has predestined from eternity to experience salvation through repentance and faith in his Son.

The elect of God from every age and nation—i.e. all God's chosen people worldwide—died in Christ Jesus. When Christ died on the cross, God reckoned all his people to have died with him regarding the Law's condemnation of their sin. Moreover, just as Christ rose from death, so all his people rose again (spiritually) to new life in him. Through Christ's finished and triumphant work, death and resurrection, all his redeemed people have been set free from the Law of sin and death.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:15

15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

However, since Christ died to redeem and sanctify all his people and was raised again for their justification, then their new life in him must not be like the old sinful life. Their new life should not be lived to please themselves but to please, honour and glorify the one who loved them and gave himself for them. They have been made alive or raised spiritually to a life of righteousness and truth, godliness and honour, involving wholehearted love for God and love, mercy and compassion toward others. Paul recognised this truth in his own life and endeavoured to live to the glory of God and to remain faithful to his Lord and Saviour. Similarly, all God's redeemed people ought to recognise and act upon this truth.

Paul writes in verse 16:

2 CORINTHIANS 5:16

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

At one time, Paul boasted in the “flesh”. He had been intensely proud of his natural but unsanctified intellect, gifts and abilities. He exulted in his standing and achievements as a faithful and fervent Pharisee, zealous for the things of God: albeit with a misplaced zeal.

At that time, Saul of Tarsus held in high esteem those of the Jewish faith, especially those practising Pharisees like himself. Then, Saul was proud of his heritage as a Jew and his descent from and association with the Hebrew people. He considered non-Jews or Gentiles of much lesser significance in the eyes of God and the Jews. After all, had not God specifically chosen and called Abraham, and through him, all God's elect in Israel?

All this changed, however, on Saul's conversion to Christ. Then, the proud Pharisee saw how wrong it was to look at people and judge them according to their race, religion, class, or position in society. At one time—and before he had encountered him personally—Paul had even judged the Lord Jesus in this carnal or worldly manner: thereby coming to a completely mistaken conclusion concerning Christ's person and mission in the world. Now, however, the apostle looks on Christ with a renewed mind and from a spiritual and godly point of view. This, too, is what the Corinthian believers should be doing. Instead of looking at Christ from a worldly point of view, they ought to consider his person and work from a spiritually mature perspective.

Instead of judging people according to their rank, position, abilities or status in society, these Corinthians ought to consider others from a spiritual and godly perspective. Instead of elevating selected people or affording certain individuals positions of responsibility within the church, they ought to consider whether God has called and equipped them for such positions.

If they examined the matter carefully and prayerfully, they would have discovered that God had not called certain of their preferred leaders or speakers to his service. Rather, some church leaders, lacking sufficient spiritual discernment, may have appointed these individuals solely because of their innate gifts, talents or abilities. Some of these appointees were noted orators.²⁸ Some were extremely persuasive in their speech and arguments (rhetoric). They could readily refute their opponents and baffle the unwary or spiritually immature believers. Nevertheless, at

²⁸ ...noted orators: Some of the Lord's true and faithful servants were recognised for their oratory. However, these men depended entirely on the Spirit of God—not themselves—for their enhanced abilities and powers of speech. *Apollos*—a noted orator—was one such servant of the Lord. *Apollos* preached and expounded Christ's Gospel powerfully and faithfully while ministering to the churches.

least some of these same individuals were not true servants of Christ. Rather, they were men of this world; or they were false apostles, presenting a false gospel (so-called), operating under false pretences, and endeavouring to lead the people of God away from sound teaching and the eternal truths of God's Word.

Thus, we ought to judge no one by his personality, abilities or any other attributes alone. For these do not necessarily serve the purposes of God. Rather, we should ensure that we seek the will of the Lord before any person is commended or ordained to God's service: remembering that the church can only commend or ordain a person whom God has already called, appointed to, and equipped for that particular service. In Syria, the church at Antioch commended the apostle Paul to the Lord's service—but only after the Lord Jesus had called, appointed, and equipped Paul specifically for that service.

Concerning these things, the apostle writes in verses 17 and 18:

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Those who are in Christ Jesus are no longer controlled by their worldly or carnal nature—or they should not be. In Christ, they have been created anew. They have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, who now indwells them and proceeds to sanctify them. However, those whom the Holy Spirit has thus created anew cannot live any longer according to the dictates and desires of the old sinful nature or lifestyle. Similarly, they ought no longer to look at people or things from a worldly or earthly perspective. Rather, they should consider everyone and everything from God's perspective.

Furthermore, they should remember that they have been saved from the world and God's wrath against sin and upon the sinner by God's grace alone. Therefore, those who are in Christ Jesus should not sit in judgment on a world of unsaved men and women. God will judge the world, and he will do so in righteousness and justice (Acts 17:30-31). Similarly, God's people should not consider others by their outward appearances—as the Corinthians had been doing regarding their leaders.

Being a new creation should bring an end to all forms of worldly ways, attitudes and inclinations. Granted, this may not happen completely when a person is born again of God's Holy Spirit, but it should happen increasingly during the process of sanctification.

Ultimately, the believer was to acknowledge that—in God's sight—there was only one significant distinction to be made between people: viz., the difference before God between those who were saved by his grace and those who were yet perishing in their sins. No other distinctions mattered in the sight of God, whether of rank, position, social standing, race, colour, creed, sex or anything else. Either a person was a new creation in Christ Jesus, or they were not—and if not, then they were abiding under the wrath and judgment of Almighty God.

Thus, the message of redemption and reconciliation with God must needs be proclaimed among all kinds of people, from the highest to the lowest, regardless of their position, rank, class, colour, nationality or anything else: For unless they be forgiven and reconciled to God, they will perish for all eternity.

Thus, concerning the message of repentance and forgiveness through God's grace resulting in faith in Christ Jesus, Paul writes in verse 18:

2 CORINTHIANS 5:18

18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;

A believer's union with Christ originated from God the Father and was a gift of God's sovereign grace. The new creation or new birth was a gift of God, bestowed by the Holy Spirit in effectual calling and regeneration. Reconciliation of the sinner with God was likewise a gift of God. It was made possible to all of the elect only because of the blood shed on the cross: That is, the sinner can be forgiven and reconciled to God the Father only because God the Son lived a consistently perfect life on the sinner's behalf and because Jesus died on the sinner's behalf, bearing in his sinless Person the wrath and judgment of God against sin and upon the sinner. Furthermore, it is also because the Lord Jesus rose triumphant on the third day. He ascended to his Father's right hand to effect the repentant and forgiven sinner's justification and to intercede in God's presence for all his redeemed people.

This, essentially, is the message of reconciliation as proclaimed or declared in the gospel. This was the ministry to which the Lord Jesus had called Paul and the other apostles. This was the gospel of reconciliation with God which the Lord Jesus had appointed Paul and others to proclaim among the Jews and the Gentiles, without respect of persons or distinction of colour, race, creed or nationality. Outside of Christ Jesus, everyone in the world is abiding under God's righteous wrath and judgment. If men and women were to be saved and reconciled to God, this could occur only through repentance and faith in Christ. Repentance and faith in Christ could be exercised only due to the Holy Spirit's prior work in effectual calling and regeneration.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:19

19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

"For God so loved the world...." (John 3:16)

Because of their union with Adam in his sin, combined with their sinful nature and lifestyle, all unregenerate humanity remains alienated from God. All lie under God's just wrath and curse (John 3:36; Rom. 2:5; Eph. 5:6).

Even the most morally upright person in the world stands alienated from God and under his righteous judgment. Because no matter how moral their character, how bountiful their good works and how decent or beneficial their conduct toward others, all their 'righteous acts' proceed from a heart and life that is at enmity with God because of their inherently sinful nature. Thus, anything proceeding from that corrupted nature; thoughts, attitudes, words or actions—no matter how 'excellent' in themselves—is wholly unacceptable to God. Indeed, to God, every person's 'righteous' deeds are like filthy rags (Isa. 64:6).

Thus, if a sinner ²⁹ is to experience forgiveness and reconciliation with God, it can never be through their own beneficence, acts of 'righteousness', charitable works, or any other good and praiseworthy deeds. Rather, no sinful individual can achieve God's righteous standards revealed in his Law and by which Law they stand condemned. Consequently, that person must rely

²⁹ ...sinner: "^{22b} ...for there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:22b-26 ESV)

wholly on God alone to provide him with the necessary righteousness—purely as a gift of his sovereign and unmerited grace.

This situation of an unforgiven sinner's moral turpitude and spiritual helplessness is where God shows his everlasting love for the world of fallen humanity. "*God so loved... that he gave....*" (John 3:16). He gave all that love could give—his one and only Son. When God sent his Son into the world, he gave of himself for sinful men and women. God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself—and he did this through the vicarious and atoning work of his Son and the preaching of the gospel. In that gospel, God proclaims the forgiveness of sins to all those who have faith in Jesus. Therefore, to everyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, God no longer counts their trespasses against them. For, because of the Lord Jesus' perfect life, death, resurrection and ascension to glory, God the Father justifies (or reckons righteous in his sight) every truly repentant sinner. Christ has borne in himself the entire punishment due to the sinner for all their sins and iniquities. God's own Son has paid the debt owed by sinners to the Father by shedding his own precious blood and sacrificing his own sinless life on the sinner's behalf.

This gospel message is the only message given under heaven among human beings that brings the assurance of forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God. There is absolutely no other way to be saved from sin and its punishment or to be reconciled to God. There is no other form of religion in heaven or on earth that can afford forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. Those who would be saved and reconciled to God must be saved and reconciled through repentance and faith in Christ, as the Holy Spirit enables them, or they cannot be saved at all (Acts 4:12).

This gospel, then, is the message that God has entrusted to the apostles. This gospel is the one and only message of salvation and eternal life. This is the glorious message that Paul and the other apostles had been preaching fearlessly and faithfully to the people—to both Jews and Gentiles, including those in the Corinthian and other local churches. This message declared unequivocally and uncompromisingly the only way for sinners of any nation under heaven to be saved and reconciled to God.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:20

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

An ambassador is an envoy invested with plenipotentiary powers who represents his country in a foreign land. His home country's lawful government authorises their ambassador to speak or make representations on their behalf. However, the ambassador can only declare or speak on those matters which agree with his country's political, economic and social position.

Similarly, Paul and the other apostles are ambassadors of Christ. They were the envoys or 'sent ones' of the Lord Jesus. The Lord invested them with full power and authority to proclaim his gospel and to represent the kingdom of heaven among all nations on earth. They were to pronounce to all nations, on the authority of the Lord Jesus himself—to whom all power in heaven and earth had been committed—that there was one way and one method only of reconciliation with God (Matt. 28:18-20). There was no other name, way or method through which a person could be saved (Acts 4:12).

No person, government or other body of people on earth had been invested with the power or authority to set aside or modify the message of reconciliation proclaimed in the gospel. God is Sovereign over all creation, including all men and women worldwide. This sovereignty over all creation also includes the rulers and governments that he ordains. The message proclaimed by the ambassadors and apostles of the Lord Jesus was inviolate and inviolable. It was the inerrant and unchanging Word of God himself. If any person refused this message of salvation, they were refusing the Word of God and despising the grace of God.

Nevertheless, although the Lord Jesus had commissioned Paul to exercise full apostolic authority concerning the church, he declines from doing so. Paul is content that the Corinthian believers fully comprehend that the word he is bringing to them is the Word of God and that they must receive it as such. Paul, therefore, *appeals* to the believers—rather than *commanding* them to respond or obey. He considers that—although God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30-31)—on this occasion, the Lord is appealing to them through his appointed apostles and ambassadors of the cross.

This appeal for reconciliation with God would be more understandable if the people to whom Paul was writing in this church were *unbelievers*. However, it would appear that the apostle is calling for the reconciliation to God of some disobedient, worldly-minded, or backslidden *believers*.³⁰ Such people, of course, had been reconciled to God initially through repentance and faith in the Son of God. However, for one reason or another, several believers in the Corinthian church had failed to mature spiritually or had sinned against the Lord and were still in a backslidden condition. Therefore, to these people, it would be appropriate for Paul to appeal for reconciliation with God, as God himself called his wayward people back to himself through his apostles and by the teaching of his Word. (Examples of this kind abound in the Old Testament where, frequently, through the prophets, God calls his chosen people Israel back to himself from their sinful and wayward condition.)

It is, of course, possible that the reference in this passage is to unbelievers being reconciled to God through the challenge and appeal of the gospel. As we have noted below, some unregenerate people may have been associating with the Christians in the Corinthian church. Such people may have been in Paul's mind when he wrote these words.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21

21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

For the sake of all his elect people, God made his Son to be the one who bore our sins, albeit while remaining perfectly sinless. Only in this way could the redeemed children of God be justified or caused to appropriate the perfect righteousness that God required, and without which no one could approach God's presence or find acceptance by him.

When it says that God made his Son "*to be sin*", this does not mean that God made his Son a sinner or that he became a sinner when he took our sin upon himself. Never at any time was the holy, sinless Son of God tainted by sin personally. In respect of his Person and character, the Lord Jesus remained wholly uncontaminated by our sin. Nor did he himself ever commit sin. Concerning his perfect human nature assumed at the incarnation, Jesus was tempted in all points just as we are—yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). However, concerning his divine nature, the Lord Jesus *could not sin* and *did not sin*.

The expression "*he made him to be sin...*" refers to the fact that God imputed to his perfect, sinless Son the full legal (forensic) *liability* for our sins. Jesus did not personally incur our sins. He incurred the full judicial penalty due to our sins. Of course, this was not his own sin but the sin of others—all those for whom Jesus was to die vicariously, making atonement for their sins on the cross. Therefore, he who was and is the sinless Son of God remained the sinless Son of God—

³⁰ ...*backslidden believers*: It is possible, of course, that there may indeed have been some unregenerate people in this fellowship who were yet alienated from God and in need of reconciliation. They may have been *professings* 'believers', accepted by others as genuine believers, and yet had never been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Paul's appeal for reconciliation would apply equally to them, that—by God's sovereign grace—they might be brought to genuine repentance and faith as the Holy Spirit enabled them, and thus be reconciled to God.

even while his Father was inflicting upon his beloved Son his searing wrath against *our* sins and punishing his Son for the debt that *we* owed and could not pay.

Similarly, when this verse says, “...so that in him [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God”, this does not mean that God *makes* us perfectly and inherently righteous, just as Christ is. Rather, legal or forensic usage of the term “righteousness” is being employed here. The redeemed child of God becomes the righteousness of God in Christ in the sense that God *reckons*, *imputes* or *counts* the perfect righteousness of his Son *as though* it were the righteousness of the believer. The believer is considered as though he were righteous, or he is reckoned righteous, through his faith in Christ and his acceptance of Christ’s work on his behalf. However, the believer is not somehow *made innately* righteous, any more than an accused person who is pronounced “not guilty” in a court of law is somehow made *innately virtuous* because of the judge’s pronouncement and acquittal.

Acting as Judge, God justifies and acquits the believer or finds him “not guilty”; but, in and of itself, this pronouncement does not somehow change the believing sinner’s character. God credits righteousness to the believer, and, by faith, the believer is justified (sometimes called *imputed* righteousness). However, although, inherently, the believer does not become completely and finally righteous at his regeneration and justification, he is being made progressively righteous during the Holy Spirit’s work in sanctification (sometimes known as *imparted* righteousness). Sanctification by the Spirit acting through the Word of God follows regeneration and justification and continues throughout a believer’s lifetime until his or her glorification. Sanctification is the process that changes the believer’s character and conduct, not justification.

Thus, the believer ought to thank and praise God for this immeasurable gift—that of justification freely bestowed through faith in his Son. The holy, sinless Son of God endured the wrath and curse ³¹ of God for our sin that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. He made peace with God through the blood of his cross that we might be found at peace with God for all the ages of eternity.

³¹ ...*wrath and curse of God*: The wrath of God is his holy indignation and righteous judgment upon sin and against the sinner (or, as here, against the sinner’s perfect Substitute). The curse of God applies both to God’s curse upon the earth (Gen. 3:17), and also to the declaration in his Word, “*Cursed be everyone that hangs on a tree*” (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). The Lord Jesus incurred this curse when—as our sinless Substitute—he was hanged upon a tree (the cross) to make atonement for us and for our offences. (Gordon Lyons)

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 6

PAUL'S SUFFERINGS FOR THE GOSPEL

2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-10

In the previous chapter, the apostle had spoken of the message of reconciliation in more general terms: specifically, as it had related to unregenerate men and women (including the Corinthians) before, and culminating in, their conversion to Christ. Latterly, however, during his discourse, Paul had spoken of backslidden believers (not unbelievers) being reconciled to God. John Calvin excepted, some commentators do not appear to recognise this distinction and therefore give the impression that the apostle is still speaking exclusively of unbelievers being reconciled to God through regeneration, repentance and faith. However, this writer believes that, in part, at least, Paul was addressing individuals *after their conversion to Christ* (members of the Corinthian church). Therefore, the apostle's remarks about reconciliation ought to be considered in that context.

With this in mind, we will consider chapter 6.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:1

¹ Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

Here, it becomes more evident that Paul is addressing his appeal for reconciliation with God to at least two distinct groups within the church:

1. Those who were still without Christ (i.e. unregenerate), or those who had professed faith in Christ outwardly (i.e. not sincerely, from a regenerate heart), and
2. Those who were already in Christ Jesus (i.e. 'saved' or regenerate) but who subsequently had backslidden, sinning against the Lord.

Concerning group 1 above, the message of reconciliation would apply to those within the Corinthian church who, as yet, did not belong to Christ. It would also apply to those who (outwardly) professed faith in Christ but lacked any significant change of heart or nature. In other words, despite their outward profession of faith and superficial appearance of piety, they were still without Christ and yet in their sins. This situation could be true not only of certain ordinary church members but also of certain church leaders.

Concerning group 2 above, the message of reconciliation could apply to those believers in the church who had sinned against the Lord, failing to repent and seek the Lord's forgiveness. Thus, the apostle appeals to these backslidden believers not to receive God's grace in vain: i.e. not to treat it as something of little or no value or no consequence. This rebellious attitude would be to despise the grace of God and show contempt for the Spirit of grace and glory (cf. Heb. 10:26-29).

This level of arrogance, of course, represented a most serious offence against God. It threatened to lead to a person's repudiation of the blood of Christ: i.e. a willful denial of the meritorious power and effectiveness of Jesus' vicarious and atoning sacrifice for sin. Although this could not happen in the case of the elect, it could happen to someone who falsely or insincerely professed faith in Christ but had never been called or regenerated by the Holy Spirit (Heb. 10:29). It is one thing to *taste* the Spirit's work (cf. Heb. 6:4-8), but quite another to *experience* the Spirit's work in effectual calling, regeneration and sanctification.

Nevertheless, Paul appeals lovingly and yet with a sense of great urgency for these wayward saints to renounce their sin, seeking reconciliation with God through repentance and forgiveness. However, as an apostle and ambassador of the Lord Jesus, it lay within Paul's remit and power to instruct the church leaders formally and authoritatively to discipline these offenders—should the offenders fail to exercise self-discipline and confess their sins to God.

Furthermore, the Lord Jesus had empowered the apostle Paul to instruct the local church leadership to expel any professing believer who refused wilfully and repeatedly to repent and renounce their sin. This expulsion involved turning that person over to Satan: i.e. excluding them from the church's fellowship and the means of grace and exposing them to the world at large where Satan held sway (cf. 1 Tim. 1:20). To avoid this, the apostle appeals earnestly and sincerely for these individuals to recognise their spiritual danger, to acknowledge the grace of God toward them, and to seek reconciliation with the Father in heaven.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:2

² For he says,

“In a favourable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Citing Isaiah 49:8, the apostle reminds the church that God bestows his grace and salvation upon people because of his undeserved favour and mercy. In his grace, God called these Corinthian people to himself. In his grace, God heard them when they responded to his call: calling upon the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. Then, God showed them his great salvation. By his Spirit, he helped them acknowledge the Lord Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

However, for some who had not yet committed themselves wholeheartedly to Christ or his teaching, this was still the day of grace, mercy, favour and salvation. If, with all their heart and soul, they responded to the appeal that God was making through the apostle Paul, then they would experience the Lord's mercy. This was still a favourable or propitious time. This was yet a day when salvation, or forgiveness, would be offered to them.

However, no one could presume upon the grace of God. If a person were to refuse repeatedly to respond to God's appeal, whether by the words of the apostle or by the words of the Holy Scriptures, then God would not continue to appeal to them or strive with them. Ultimately, and in line with his holy and righteous character, God would judge his people. He would discipline them as their sinful conduct deserved.

In the case of genuine believers, this disciplinary action was intended to set an example for God's people. Fatherly discipline aimed to purge God's church from defilement and save the offending believer's soul from ultimate loss. Thus, in his First Epistle to this church, Paul speaks of those whom God disciplined: The Lord had disciplined some of his people through illness or other debilitating conditions, and some through the forfeiture of their life on earth (those who had 'died' or 'fallen asleep') (1 Cor. 11:27-32). The latter had not lost their salvation, but they would certainly lose some or much of their reward in heaven.

Those, however, who remained alienated from God because of their sins, and who were without Christ stood in very great danger of eternal perdition. They might have made an outward profession of faith. They might have been meeting regularly with genuine believers at the services of the Corinthian church. They might even have been baptised. Nevertheless, if they had not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and if the Spirit of God was not continually sanctifying them by his indwelling presence, then these people did not belong to Christ. If they remained in this condition, they would die in their sins.

Hence, the urgency with which Paul pens these words. He is appealing earnestly for those who are still without Christ—and also for God’s backsliding people—to be reconciled before God acts decisively in righteous judgment.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:3

³ We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,

Paul takes great pains to ensure that he does not offend anyone unnecessarily nor cause anyone to stumble by his conduct, whether these people be in the church or the world outside. The apostle endures everything for the sake of the church and for the sake of his Lord and Master, whom he loves and serves.

Paul must take his stand on the truth of God’s Word. In everything, he must remain faithful to that Word, even although the presentation and challenge of God’s Word may prove offensive to some and a stumbling block to others (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23 w. Gal.5:11b). Yet, in respect of his personal behaviour, the apostle exercises extreme care in dealing with each of the churches committed to his care and in proclaiming the gospel to the world of lost men and women.

False teachers, presenting themselves to the churches as apostles of the Lord Jesus, had brought God’s Word into disrepute by their scandalous lifestyles and their distortions of God’s Word. Paul would have nothing to do with such sham behaviour or underhand tactics. On the contrary, the apostle wanted his personal life to be a living witness to the remarkable change that the Lord Jesus Christ had wrought within his soul since his days as a zealous Pharisee and an ardent persecutor of God’s church (Phil. 3:6). Thus, to illustrate just how much he is prepared to suffer for the sake of the gospel, Paul gives some examples in the verses that follow:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:4-5

⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger;

Unlike the false apostles, Paul is a true servant of God, appointed by the Lord to minister to his church and proclaim the gospel. However, like so many other faithful servants of the Lord Jesus, Paul had been called not only to believe on Christ but also to suffer for his sake (Acts 9:16; Phil 1:29). In Paul’s case, suffering assumed many different forms:

1. He *endured* far above the normal level of human endurance. Despite all his adversities, pain and grief, the apostle persevered for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of Christ to whom he owed so much.
2. He was *afflicted*. He bore much physical pain and mental torment from his oppressors, but he endured it for the sake of Christ.
3. He suffered *hardships*. On many occasions, the apostle suffered privation of sleep, shelter, food and clothing, but he endured as seeing him who is invisible.
4. He suffered *calamities*. He faced disasters, natural and man-made. Yet, God delivered him out of them all, for his hand was upon his servant for good.
5. The apostle suffered *beatings*. (2 Cor. 11:24-25) On several occasions, Paul was beaten unjustly—both by Jews and by Gentiles. Yet, he endured the pain, shame and suffering, knowing that his Saviour and Lord had endured much more on his account.

6. Paul suffered *imprisonment* (cf. Acts 20:23) for the sake of the gospel. He was deprived of his liberty unjustly for proclaiming the truth concerning the Lord Jesus. Nevertheless, the apostle made full use of his loss of freedom by writing several of his epistles from his place of confinement or house arrest.
7. The apostle was caught up in *riots*. As a result of his preaching, local merchants caused an uproar resulting in a riot when they believed that people would stop purchasing their carefully crafted idols and icons because they believed the gospel (Acts 19:23f). Again, because Paul was preaching the gospel, the Jews incited a riot against the apostle and then sought to blame him for the disorder of their own making (Acts 13:50f).
8. In proclaiming the truth, Paul *laboured* tirelessly. Night and day, as opportunity permitted, the apostle remained faithful to his calling. By day, he laboured as a tentmaker. At other times, he laboured in the preaching of the Word. Paul also laboured and risked his life, travelling back and forth on hazardous and potentially dangerous journeys as a servant of the Lord Jesus. In this service, the apostle ministered to those in need, those afflicted, and those who were sick.
9. With all these heavy burdens laid upon his shoulders, together with his intense love and care for the churches, Paul endured many *sleepless nights*. However, God was gracious to his servant and sustained him in his every hour of need.
10. If all this were not enough, the apostle endured *hunger*, partly through not having sufficient time to eat well and partly through the inability to feed himself adequately under particular and sometimes prolonged hardships, such as shipwreck or other physical disasters.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:6

⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love;

Again, in contrast to many of the false teachers and worldly-orientated professors of religion, the apostle Paul and his companions lived a life that brought honour and glory to the name of their Saviour and Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. This godly way of life assumed several different forms:

- *...purity*. In everything he said and did, the apostle Paul maintained the highest standards of integrity. The apostle practised a life of righteousness and godliness, completely free of insincerity, ostentatious pride, uncleanness in any shape or form, or any other kind of moral impurity or impropriety. This pursuit of godly living did not mean that Paul was or claimed to be perfect in all manner of life. Rather, it demonstrated only that the apostle was striving to the utmost to please, honour and glorify the Lord Jesus by his speech and conduct.
- *...patience*. Paul's patience knew no bounds. This characteristic is evident in his letter to the Corinthian believers. Although individuals within this church were worthy of rebuke or censure for their immature or ungodly behaviour, the apostle hesitated to use his apostolic authority to rebuke them. Rather, with great patience, Paul reasoned with them. He repeatedly tried to persuade them to abandon their foolish ways and to accept the truth as it is in Jesus. Only after many such attempts, and with the greatest reluctance, would Paul initiate action against an offender or instruct the church to do so in his name and the name of the Lord Jesus.

- *...kindness.* Together with great patience, Paul showed immense kindness and compassion. The apostle had no desire to cause pain or grief to anyone in the church by disciplining them—even in love. Therefore, he demonstrated intense compassion for everyone who belonged to the church. It grieved him deeply when certain individuals sinned against the Lord or wandered from the truth to follow false teachers and imposters of the faith. However, the apostle had no wish to grieve those who meant so much to him and were like his spiritual children. Thus, Paul demonstrated great kindness toward them. Only when these professing people of God repeatedly refused to respond to Paul's kindness and patience did the apostle begin to warn them of the consequences of ignoring or despising the Word and grace of God.
- *...the Holy Spirit.* By mentioning the Holy Spirit at this point, the apostle reminds the church that his instructions to them and his dealings with them are not of a personal nature but are being sent with the Holy Spirit's authority. The apostle's words, therefore, are inspired by God's Spirit and ought to be considered as the Word of God—not as the words of man (1 Thess. 2:13). Furthermore, by mentioning the Holy Spirit, Paul reminds these believers that they are being sanctified or made holy by the Spirit of God. He is reminding them that they have been sealed and set apart to God by the Spirit of holiness, and—by that same Spirit—they are being kept secure in their faith until the Day of Redemption. Therefore, their conduct should be consistent with a life of holiness and godliness, not with unfaithfulness to God or any form of compromise or worldly behaviour.
- *...genuine love.* Many of those within the church professed love to the Lord Jesus and one another. However, their 'love' was a *shallow* love or—in some cases—a *sham* love. It was superficial or pretended affection, devoid of any real feeling, concern or empathy. Such, of course, is not love at all. It is nothing more than insincerity or hypocrisy. Paul, however, never demonstrated this kind of sham 'love' toward the church. Rather, he expressed genuine, caring love for every one of God's people—and for those who did not know the Lord. His was a deep and committed love, reflecting something of the love of God himself. Moreover, the love of God could never bear the slightest trace of insincerity or hypocrisy—as was demonstrated when he yielded up his own Son for sinners at Calvary's cross. Such, too, was Paul's love for the church—insofar as the love of God flooded his heart and soul, filling the apostle with the deepest compassion for God's redeemed people.

In verse 7, the apostle continues:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:7

⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;

- *...truthful speech.* From beginning to end, Paul declared the truth of the gospel. Unlike the false teachers, Paul held steadfastly to the truth revealed to him by the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle did not compromise this truth in any way but declared to the churches the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Furthermore, in dealing with the faults and failings of individuals within the church, Paul spoke to them truthfully and with genuine loving concern. The apostle's earnest desire was that those who had drifted from the truth should forsake their sin and be reconciled to God.
- *...the power of God.* In dealing with the Corinthian church, the apostle Paul was not expressing his personal opinions or attempting to impose on these

believers his own ideas or ideals. Every word spoken or written by Paul to the churches was the inspired Word of God, for the Holy Spirit was guiding the apostle to declare only the Word and will of God for his people. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit, who inspired the apostle, also empowered him to speak authoritatively and infallibly in the name of the Lord. Thus, being filled, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit when he spoke or wrote to the church, Paul declares that he spoke to them in “*the power of God*”.³²

- ...*with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left*. This entire verse emphasises that the apostle Paul did not speak or write to the churches merely as a man, or as a church leader, or even as an apostle (humanly considered). Rather, Paul spoke and wrote as the servant of God and the bearer of God’s message of righteousness. This message was the Word of the living God. Using the living Word of God, Paul annihilated every argument against the truth and against the existence of God. The Word of God is referred to also as the *Sword of the Spirit* (Eph. 6:17) or the *Sword of the Lord* (Jer. 47:6; cf. Ezek. 21:3-5). Again, God’s Word is referred to as a Shield and Buckler to those who hold fast to its truths (Ps. 91:4). Thus, Paul was using the Word of God like a sword in his right hand to smite the enemy—including everything of an unrighteous nature. Simultaneously, the apostle wielded the Word of God as a shield or buckler in his left hand to defend himself against the onslaught of his enemies and the vile or malicious lies of the devil.

³² *the power of God*: Concerning the apostolic office, the original apostles alone spoke authoritatively and infallibly in (or by) the power of God. Unlike other offices within the church, the original apostles were not given instructions to appoint more apostles to augment or succeed them. The apostolic office was unique. Only those disciples appointed directly by the Lord Jesus (including Paul) were legitimate apostles, in the primary sense of the word. In respect of apostolic duties and responsibilities, these men alone were inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak, teach and write infallibly to the churches. They alone had been commissioned to the apostolic office by the Lord Jesus Christ personally. *Every one of these men had seen the Lord Jesus alive after his resurrection.*

In many translations of the NT, the term “apostle” is used of a few others who were not of the original Twelve plus Paul. These men are probably better termed “messengers” (the Greek word, ἀπόστολος, apostolos, can be translated as ‘apostle’ or ‘messenger’). This avoids confusion with those Apostles who had seen the Lord Jesus in person, and who had been commissioned directly by the Lord Jesus.

Only the original Twelve (including Matthias but excluding Judas Iscariot) plus Paul, who held this apostolic office, possessed a mandate from God to speak authoritatively and infallibly in the name of the Lord (like the genuine Old Testament prophets before them). Their commission was accompanied by the gifts given to them of being able to perform miraculous signs and wonders in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Until the New Testament had been completed and committed to writing, the apostolic office had been required; but when this was done, the apostolic office became redundant. Therefore, when the last of the original apostles died, the apostolic office ceased permanently. Now, the written Word of God (Old and New Testaments) was to be the sole source of supreme authority and infallibility for God’s people. That authority and infallibility rests or resides in the Bible alone—as interpreted and applied by the Holy Spirit. It does not rest in the church; nor is this authority or infallibility shared by the church or by any of its leaders or members (actual or professing).

Nowhere in the Bible is “apostolic succession” mentioned or implied. This is because no church officer today, or since the death of the original apostles, has been, can be, or is inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak authoritatively and infallibly in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Gordon Lyons).

In verse 8, the apostle writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:8

⁸ through honour and dishonour, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;

- *...through honour and dishonour.* Following his conversion on the Damascus road, Paul endeavoured with all his heart to live a life honouring to the Lord and free from accusation of any kind. Many of God's people recognised Paul's utter integrity in all things and commended him as the Lord's true and faithful servant. In these ways, Paul was honoured—although he would have shunned such accolade from men. He desired to please and honour the Lord Jesus, and from him alone would he accept his due reward. However, many individuals within and outside the church resented Paul and did all they could to discredit his name. Outside the church, such enmity arose from people like the guildsmen or artisans whom Paul had offended when his preaching brought people to Christ. As a result of their conversion, these people no longer purchased idols from the local craftsmen, resulting in a loss of trade and profits (Act 19:23-27ff). Within the church, individuals from several distinct sources attempted to discredit Paul's name and message. They accused him of not requiring new believers to be circumcised and to obey the whole Mosaic Law (the Judaizers). Others tried to dishonour and discredit the apostle because he had rebuked them for their impure or immoral lifestyles.
- *...slander and praise.* Closely related to the preceding was the issue of slander and praise. Many people welcomed the apostle and the gospel message with open arms, including many in the Corinthian church. However, certain individuals in this and some other fellowships resented Paul's apostolic authority over them. As we learn from 1 Corinthians, some of these people formed themselves into distinct groups or parties (cliques), claiming to be followers of Peter (Cephas), Apollos, or Christ, rather than submit to Paul's God-given authority over the Gentile churches. To distance themselves from Paul, they invented all kinds of malicious or slanderous accusations against the apostle. However, such evil behaviour was not confined to these groups alone. With differing motives, many other people endeavoured to slander the apostle Paul and to discredit him as a true servant of God. Nevertheless, through it all, Paul endured—by the grace of God. The apostle found much support and encouragement from the many in the churches who prayed for him, supported him by providing hospitality, and upheld him in many other ways. Thus, as these people praised and glorified the Lord Jesus' name because of Paul's message to them and his ministering among them, the apostle was sustained and supported—even amid the most trying and difficult times.
- *...treated as imposters, and yet are true.* Several groups, in particular, cast doubt on Paul's credentials as a genuine apostle of the Lord Jesus. *Firstly*, some said he could not be an apostle since he was not one of the Twelve and had not associated with Jesus during the Lord's earthly ministry. However, the risen and glorified Lord Jesus had appeared to Paul on the Damascus road and had called and commissioned him to his service. Therefore, on this count, his credentials as an apostle were impeccable. *Secondly*, some claimed that Paul could not be a genuine servant of the Lord Jesus because he emphasised the grace of God in the salvation of sinners at the expense of obedience to the Mosaic Law. However, these claims were based on a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of God's Word by the objectors. Paul emphasised the grace of God alone for salvation. However, he pointed out that the Law had served its purpose as a tutor in leading people to Christ alone for salvation—

and that the precepts and principles of the *moral* Law still applied for every-day living (although not for salvation). *Thirdly*, and related to the previous, some claimed that Paul could not be a true apostle since he did not require the circumcision of new believers according to God's law. The Judaizing party within the church raised this objection. However, they based their argument on a faulty understanding of the old and new covenants. Under the old covenant, outward acceptance into the fellowship of God's people was signified by the rite of circumcision. However, under the new covenant, outward acceptance into the fellowship of God's people is signified by baptism. Thus, in none of these matters or any other, did the apostle Paul prove to be an imposter—as were several other leaders (so-called) within the church. Rather, Paul proved utterly faithful to God and the Lord Jesus as his appointed ambassador. The message that Paul presented both by his preaching and by his letters was the true and faithful Word of God and a true and faithful exposition of the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

In verse 9, the apostle declares:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:9

⁹ **as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed;**

- *...as unknown, and yet well known.* Paul and his companions were well known to the church at Corinth and many other local churches. The apostle had visited and written to the Corinthian church on previous occasions, so they could not deny knowing him. However, although they knew Paul, certain individuals within the Corinthian church refused to recognise Paul as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. They refused to acknowledge that this apostle was a genuine servant of God. Therefore, these individuals regarded Paul as 'unknown', refusing to accept his valid accreditation from God. Nevertheless, Paul had been called and commissioned by the Lord Jesus himself. His calling, appointment to the Lord's service and credentials were impeccable in the eyes of the Lord. Although some in Corinth would not recognise Paul as the Lord's servant, the apostle was well known and fully accepted by the vast majority in this church and other churches. Only among the false, heretical, or Judaizing teachers could dissenters be found who refused to accept Paul's apostolic authority.
- *...as dying, and behold, we live.* Paul endured and suffered much for the sake of the gospel. On many occasions, the apostle had been violently abused, threatened and beaten. He had endured shipwreck—almost losing his life in the process. Nevertheless, by his grace and providence, God had delivered the apostle on each of these occasions. The Lord planned that his gospel should be preached to the Gentiles. To this end, God would preserve the apostle's life until the close of his ministry on earth. Thus, although Paul endured frequent and severe hardship and affliction, although he came close to death on many occasions, the apostle's life forever remained in the Lord's hands (Ps. 31:15). Nothing could deprive Paul of his life before the Lord's appointed time or before he had completed the task to which the Lord had called him.
- *...as punished, and yet not killed.* Sometimes, the Lord himself would chasten or discipline the apostle—as he does with all his genuine children. Such punishments were painful to the apostle, but he endured them, knowing that a loving heavenly Father would only impose upon him such discipline as was necessary for his spiritual welfare or restoration. Thus, Paul tells us that a "thorn in the flesh" afflicted him (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Although Paul pleaded with

God, the Lord would not remove this painful ‘thorn’. On the contrary, God used it to discipline the apostle and prevent him from becoming spiritually elated or conceited. Nevertheless, even although such chastening proved painful to the apostle, it served its purpose. It prevented Paul from becoming spiritually proud—a condition which by itself could have led to spiritual death and uselessness in the service of Christ. Therefore, God’s punishments were severe at times, but they preserved the soul from death.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:10

¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

- *...as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.* The apostle might appear sorrowful to others, especially when subjected to abuse or harm, danger and threat to life. Some would consider Paul sorrowful as he grieved at times over the churches or specific individuals; or as he carried upon his shoulders the burden of all the churches in his care. Nevertheless, although these matters did affect Paul deeply, they did not completely overwhelm him. Nor did they cause him to lose heart or become discouraged or grief-stricken because of the situations he encountered in certain places or churches. Contrariwise, even during his greatest trials and affliction, Paul continued to rejoice in the Lord in the face of the fiercest opposition. The Lord Jesus was his strength and his stay. The world may persecute the apostle, abuse and revile him, but it could not rob him of his peace with God or his joy in the Lord. Nor could the abuses taking place in certain churches so discourage the apostle that he ceased to rejoice. He rested confidently in the Lord his God. Paul knew that, in all things, the Lord would resolve every situation to his ultimate glory and for the wellbeing of the church. Therefore, Paul had every cause to rejoice—always, for he knew that the gates of hell could not prevail against the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- *...as poor, yet making men rich.* The materialistic and ungodly world considered people who lacked wealth or substance to be somehow inferior or socially inadequate, if not failures. Some people or groups within the church thought that wealth or prosperity should be enjoyed by every believer and considered the lack of such prosperity a sign of God’s disfavour or disapproval. Of course, God bestows wealth or prosperity on whom he chooses—as he did with Abraham and Sarah, and others. However, the Lord never promises to bestow material wealth and prosperity on every believer without exception. Paul lacked many of life’s comforts, labouring with his own hands as a tentmaker to provide for necessities. Many other true believers find themselves in a similar situation, lacking even the necessities of life—but not because the Lord is in any way displeased with them. On the contrary, many of the poorest and least esteemed saints are among the most precious possessions of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, although the apostle had no material riches, he bestowed upon the church vast spiritual riches in the name of the Lord Jesus. As the apostle preached the gospel and taught new believers in the ways of the Lord, so he was enriching them in a way with which no earthly wealth or riches could compare. Paul was equipping these people with immeasurable riches from heaven. By his teaching, the apostle helped prepare these believers to inherit a place in their Father’s heavenly realms above.
- *...as having nothing, yet possessing everything.* From a worldly perspective, Paul had next to nothing of value to his name. He had no permanent dwelling; nothing of monetary value above the money he earned from his trade and necessary to meet his basic needs such as food and clothes. However, although

the apostle owned nothing of value on this earth, he possessed a priceless inheritance in heaven. This heavenly inheritance was far more certain and enduring than any riches or inheritance on earth—because this inheritance cannot be lost; it cannot diminish in value, and it cannot pass away. It endures forever throughout the eternal ages. Through his preaching and teaching, the apostle was making known to multitudes of people that this inheritance in glory was available to everyone who called upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance and faith, renouncing their sins to follow Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

“DO NOT BE UNEQUALLY YOKED WITH UNBELIEVERS”

2 CORINTHIANS 6:11-18

2 CORINTHIANS 6:11

11 We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.

The apostle sought only the absolute best for the believers at Corinth. He knew—as did the Corinthians—that they needed to resolve certain matters and that they needed to deal firmly but in love with certain individuals within the local church. Paul had addressed these matters and would continue to do so in this letter. However, in everything he had said, he had spoken openly and with freedom of speech. His intention was not to wound to cause unnecessary suffering or offence, but to wound—if necessary—only to heal the offenders.

“...*our heart is wide open.*” That is, large-hearted, generous or warm.

The thought here is of the wide-open heart of love exhibited by Paul and Timothy as contrasted with the narrow or restrained response from some of the Corinthians. Paul’s affection was virtually unlimited, whereas that of these Corinthians was a reserved or partial affection for the apostle and his associates.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:12

12 You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.

In everything, Paul’s heart was overflowing with love for these believers. Although he recognised and addressed areas of concern within the fellowship at Corinth, the apostle’s willingness to serve them in love was unhampered and boundless. However, Paul was not failing to communicate his love and concern to these Corinthians. Rather, they were failing to reciprocate in full measure or to respond to his appeals or persuasion. Some of their numbers were refusing to accept Paul’s advice or instructions. Because of this, Paul would find it necessary to address these recalcitrant individuals specifically in the latter part of this letter.

2 CORINTHIANS 6:13

13 In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

Perplexed by the Corinthians’ reserved attitude toward him, Paul appeals to them as to his spiritual children to open their hearts wide toward him. In the normal course of events, children of loving parents love their parents in return. However, this was not the case here. Paul had loved these believers as his spiritual sons and daughters. Even so, some of them had failed to

reciprocate that affection in Christ. Furthermore, some of the Corinthians had been standing aloof from Paul's affection toward them. Indeed, they had been spurning any attempts by the apostle to communicate his love toward them in Christ Jesus. Therefore, the apostle appeals to them to express something of their love toward him and Timothy, as they ought to have done out of gratitude for Paul's benevolence toward them on many occasions.

Several reasons existed in the Corinthian fellowship for this restraint in showing Christian love and affection to Paul and his associates. One reason was the admonishments Paul felt necessary to address to some of their members and would be doing again later in the letter. These warnings and corrections may have caused a certain amount of resentment among some within the fellowship who objected to Paul's intervention in the affairs of 'their' local church. Exacerbating this situation was the fact that some people within the Corinthian fellowship refused to acknowledge Paul as a genuine apostle of the Lord Jesus. Thus, these individuals refused to accept Paul's apostolic authority over them.

Another reason was that false teachers and their erroneous or pernicious doctrines and practices were exerting an adverse influence on some members of the Corinthian church. These false teachers were attempting to persuade these members of the Corinthian church to disassociate themselves from Paul and the gospel as it was preached by him and by other genuine servants of God. To a greater or lesser extent, the false teachers had succeeded in poisoning the minds of those who were listening to their erroneous doctrine, thereby causing them to distance themselves from Paul and Timothy. This issue arose because the gospel preached by Paul and other genuine messengers of the Lord (the true gospel) differed in some significant respects from the (false) gospel preached by the false teachers. These heretics had arisen from within the local fellowship or infiltrated the church at Corinth from elsewhere.

With matters of this kind in mind, the apostle continues in verse 14 by declaring:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14

14 Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

Light and darkness cannot co-exist. The two are contradictory or mutually exclusive. In the same way, it is impossible for those who preach the true gospel and those who preach a false gospel to co-exist. The two messages (true and false gospels) are mutually exclusive.

In like manner, those who believe firmly in the true gospel as preached by the Lord Jesus and his apostles cannot co-exist with those who wilfully modify, distort or repudiate that gospel. They must separate from one another. To remain together would mean that believers were yoking or linking themselves together (or fellowshiping with) unbelievers and heretics. No one can repudiate Christ's gospel, or the Word of God more generally, and have any legitimate claim to association or fellowship with Christ. Such a person is an unbeliever—even although he or she may be within the church and may profess (falsely) to have accepted the claims of Christ. The fact that their beliefs and practices do not correspond with the gospel shows that they have no part or lot in the kingdom of God or his Son. *"For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness?"* (v.14b)

The preceding remarks do not suggest that Christians who hold alternative views on matters of indifference are not genuine believers. All who hold uncompromisingly to the true gospel, recognising it as part of God's infallible and eternal Word, are genuine believers in Christ Jesus. Those whom Paul is warning against are those who have significantly distorted or repudiated the true gospel. Such people have embraced false teaching (e.g., forms of Judaism with its emphasis on law and works or philosophical or mystical interpretations added to the true gospel). One cannot repudiate the gospel of God's grace or the message of salvation through faith in Christ alone and still have any connection with genuine believers in Christ Jesus. Similarly, Paul is warning those genuine believers who are being influenced by the false teachers—but who

have not as yet yielded to them or followed them—to separate themselves from these pernicious teachers before they find themselves ensnared by their distorted and ungodly doctrine and practices.

This principle of separation applies to other kinds of association with ungodly or irreligious beliefs or practices. For example, Paul would be warning the Corinthians not to associate with any form of idolatry, whether in the offering of sacrifices to these idols (or demons) or idolatry in the form of materialism. Separation from the beliefs and practices of false religions was essential. There could be no communion here for those who believed in Christ and who belonged to Christ. Similarly, separation from worldliness or the worship of wealth or material goods was also essential. Nothing in a Christian's life must become more important to them than the Lord their God and Jesus Christ his Son.

In verse 15, Paul continues with this theme:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:15

15 What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?

“Belial” equates with that which is worthless or wicked and is related to one of the names given to Satan, “the evil one” or “the wicked one”.

Just as it would be utterly incongruous for Christ to be associated with evil or the evil one in any shape or form, so it should likewise be incongruous for his people to become associated with evil or wicked beliefs, practices, or company. Thus, in the second part of the verse, the apostle asks rhetorically what part or portion a believer can share with an unbeliever.

There can be no meaningful spiritual fellowship between those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and those who deny Christ, either by their words or by their lives. The two are utterly opposed. It is one thing for a believer to bear witness to an unbeliever of Christ's saving power, but it is a totally different matter to share close fellowship or company with that unbeliever when he indulges in his evil practices or when he invites the believer to approve of or participate with him in that which God's Word forbids or condemns.

Similarly, a child of God must not allow himself to be drawn into wicked or worldly company when he knows that, by so doing, he will compromise his testimony for Christ and will be corrupted by the evil influences around him. Granted, God sends his people to preach Christ to the most corrupt or perverse individuals, people or nations. However, when the Lord calls and appoints his servants to preach or witness in his name, he grants them the necessary gifts and abilities to serve Christ without compromising his Word or the standard of their lives, and he empowers them by his Holy Spirit to overcome the forces of evil. Without the Lord's calling and protection, however, a believer may place himself at great risk spiritually if he associates with the unbelieving world in a manner that is likely to harm his spiritual life or his testimony for the Lord Jesus.

In terms of close spiritual fellowship, believers and unbelievers share nothing in common. Thus, in verse 16, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:16

¹⁶ What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,

“I will make my dwelling among them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.

The most powerful argument against close fellowship or company with unbelievers lies in the very fact that the Lord God Almighty indwells his temple—and that temple is rendered sacred or hallowed by his majestic and glorious presence. However, God no longer dwells in a temple built with human hands but in the temples of the living God, viz, the believer’s body. Our redeemed bodies are now the temples of God. God indwells each one of his children by the Holy Spirit, who both sanctifies the believer and seals him or her unto God (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Thus, since our bodies are the temples of the Most High God, what association can they have with idols? —with non-gods or with those who do not believe in God or who deny the existence of God. There can be no association of light with darkness, of righteousness with wickedness, or purity with impurity. Moreover, God has purified his people so that he may call them his children and so that he may commune with them and they with him. However, communion with the most holy God, in the temple of our bodies, precludes communion or fellowship with that which is ungodly, unrighteous or impure.

Of course, these remarks do not imply isolation from the world—as Paul makes clear elsewhere:

1 Corinthians 5:9-11 ESV

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter ³³ not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

God has redeemed his people to serve him in the world by bearing witness to his justice and righteousness and his love, mercy and grace to the world of lost men and women. Furthermore, the Lord expects his redeemed people to serve him in the vocation or occupation to which he has called them or caused them to be. Unless their occupation is wholly inconsistent with the teaching of God’s Word, they must remain there—at least until the Lord directs otherwise.

³³ *my letter*: A letter sent by Paul to the Corinthian church on a previous occasion and distinct from the letter known as *1 Corinthians*. This earlier letter is no longer extant.

Nevertheless, regarding unnecessary, compromising, or sinful associations with unbelievers or with worldly companionships, the apostle declares:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:17

17 Therefore go out from their midst,
 and be separate from them, says the Lord,
 and touch no unclean thing;
 then I will welcome you,

Here, Paul alludes directly to the words of the LORD [YHWH]. The Lord God commanded his people to depart from the midst of an ungodly people and to totally separate themselves from any kind of fellowship or association with that wicked people. The people of God were being contaminated by these wicked people's evil influences and practices and were being tempted to indulge in some of these practices themselves, even though God had expressly forbidden this. Therefore, the Lord commands a total and final separation of his people from these wicked people's unclean and immoral words and practices. Only by thus separating themselves would the LORD God welcome his people into close communion or fellowship with himself. However, while their hearts or minds remained tainted or contaminated by their close association with their sinful neighbours, God could not and would not receive his people into close communion with himself.

In this verse, we notice that God tells his people that they must take the initiative. He commands them to separate themselves. However, to receive his blessing of close fellowship, his people must obey his command and make a complete break from everyone and everything that would hinder their communion with God. Nevertheless, for everyone who obeyed his command wholeheartedly, the Lord says in verse 18:

2 CORINTHIANS 6:18

18 and I will be a father to you,
 and you shall be sons and daughters to me,
 says the Lord Almighty."

This verse is an expression of the most tender love and compassion. Although he is the LORD God Almighty, God assures his obedient people that he will love them unconditionally and treat them as his sons and daughters. Implied in this promise are all the rights and privileges of sonship or heirship, now made effective for all of God's redeemed people in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus, Paul is saying that just as the LORD God required his ancient people to separate themselves from a wicked people and their evil practices and to commit themselves wholeheartedly to serving the LORD and him alone, so also now the Lord requires his redeemed people to separate themselves from ungodly, worldly, or evil associations or companionships, and to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to God and his Son, their Lord and Saviour.

The redeemed children of God are *in* the world, but they are not *of* the world. They are to shine as lights in the darkness of an evil generation, but they are never to participate in the deeds of darkness.

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 7

GRIEVED UNTO REPENTANCE

RESPONSE TO PAUL'S LETTER

2 CORINTHIANS 7:1-16

2 CORINTHIANS 7:1

¹ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

Since God has made such great and precious promises to his people, it is their duty and responsibility to obey him and separate themselves from all forms of idolatry or evil practices to honour and serve the Lord. To begin with, this means cleansing ourselves (body and soul) from anything that pollutes or contaminates us. Bearing in mind that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, we must ensure that this temple is kept pure from all forms of defilement. Thus, the body or any of its parts must not be abused or misused for any dishonourable or impure purposes or practices.

In sexual matters, we must honour the Lord in the manner described in his Word: either by enjoying sexual relations within the bond of male-female marriage or exercising total self-control while remaining unmarried. If abstinence from normal marital relations is likely to be prolonged, this latter option will require a special gift from God. No one ought to refrain from marriage, which God has instituted, or remain single without possessing this gift. Cohabitation or living together as partners while unmarried is an abuse of the body and the soul and is prohibited in God's Word. Similarly, same-sex unions are an abuse of the body and the soul and are likewise expressly forbidden in God's Word ³⁴ (Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9; Eph. 5:5; Heb. 13:4. See also Lev. 18:22).

Ultimately, our aim should be to live our lives in the 'fear of God': i.e., to reverence God and respect his awesome and most holy nature by reserving ourselves—in body and soul—for his presence alone.

³⁴ For those professing to belong to Christ, cohabitation between males and females *outside of marriage* involves the desecration or defilement of God's holy temple (our bodies), and is thus proscribed by God. Within marriage, sexual intimacy between a husband and his wife (biological male and biological female unions only) is commanded, commended and blessed by God (Gen. 1:26-28). Same-sex unions, 'mixed gender' unions and any other forms of unnatural sexual unions are expressly forbidden by the teaching and principles of God's Word, the Bible (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

2 CORINTHIANS 7:2

² Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one.

Following his digression at chapter 6 verse 13, Paul returns now to his earlier theme. He appeals once more to the Corinthian believers to receive him warmly and unreservedly, and, of course, this means accepting his advice and instructions to them as the apostle to the Gentile churches.

In his several letters, Paul had found it necessary to admonish certain members of this church: on one occasion for incest, and on other occasions, for various forms of idolatry such as greed, covetousness, lust, and other forms of sexual immorality.

When he says that he has wronged no one, Paul may be referring to those who accused him falsely of overstepping his authority in correcting or admonishing them. These people resented being under Paul's apostolic authority—although this authority had been bestowed upon him by the Lord Jesus. Therefore, they sought to besmirch Paul or to discredit his name or authority among the other members of the Corinthian fellowship.

On the other hand, the apostle may be alluding to the gift that the church was preparing for the impoverished saints at Jerusalem. Some people within the church questioned Paul's integrity in conducting these gifts to Jerusalem. However, the apostle clarifies that he has never done anything of a questionable nature concerning such gifts. Indeed, when taken to the Jerusalem church, the collection would not be conveyed there by Paul alone but by Paul and other men whom the church had approved for this purpose.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:3

³ I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together.

Paul is making clear to the Corinthians that it is not his intention to criticise or condemn them for failing to respond to his warmth toward them. Undoubtedly, these believers should have received the apostle as a brother beloved in the Lord. However, Paul understands that a small number of individuals within the fellowship were having an adverse influence on the main body of the church. As a result, the church's attitude toward Paul and his companions has been uncharacteristically cool.

Nevertheless, the apostle does not desire to condemn his fellow believers. Rather, he assures them that they are always in his heart: they are always on his mind and are constantly remembered in his prayers. So intense is Paul's love for the Corinthian believers that he is willing even to die with them or to live in fellowship with them.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:4

4 I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.

Alluding to the admonishments and corrections that he had provided already, the apostle concedes that he had spoken to the Corinthians boldly or frankly. Nevertheless, it was not Paul's desire to wound the members of this church unnecessarily. Rather, it was to show them their faults to bring about repentance and restoration of full fellowship with God. In all his frank or plain speaking, however, the apostle's heart was filled with tender love and compassion toward those who had sinned and toward the church as a whole.

Thus, Paul assures the Corinthians that—despite these issues—he has great pride in them both as a church and in the individual members of that local fellowship. He is ready to boast about them or glory in them, for he is confident that—respecting the majority—they are genuinely the children of God. He is also confident that they will resolve those issues that still caused them to be lukewarm in their affection for Paul and renew their love to Christ and the Father in heaven by dealing with offenders in the church and seeking the Lord's mercy on the church as a whole.

To this end, Paul assures them that he is filled with comfort—even as he writes boldly to them. He assures the Corinthians that he is overflowing with joy on their account—even although on other accounts, the apostle is enduring much by way of affliction, distress and danger for the sake of the gospel.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:5

5 For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within.

Paul alludes to some of these afflictions here. When he had come across the Aegean Sea from Troas to Macedonia, the apostle's anxieties and trials showed no signs of abating. In addition to his normal burdens for the care of the churches, the apostle was having to contend with more false teachers opposing the true gospel. Paul also had to contend with the many physical and psychological hazards he encountered as he made his way through the provinces. Furthermore, the apostle would be concerned about the Corinthian's reaction to his earlier letters and whether they had responded to his advice and instructions.

Nevertheless, for all the external and internal afflictions, fears, and inner conflicts that burdened the apostle's soul, his love and concern for the Corinthian fellowship did not diminish in the least. If anything, these trials and concerns increased the apostle's determination to continue caring for this church and ministering to its needs for as long as this proved necessary.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:6-7

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 with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

Yet, even amid his anxieties, the apostle received great consolation by the arrival of his co-worker, Titus. This servant of the Lord provided Paul with a first-hand account of the situation at Corinth, which Titus had just left a short time before.

The news from Titus was most encouraging. Far from disregarding or rejecting the instructions in Paul's earlier letter(s), the Corinthians had responded willingly to the apostle's injunctions—except, perhaps, for a recalcitrant few. Indeed, Titus was able to report to Paul how deeply the Corinthian's felt about the situation involving the apostle and how they longed to see him while

mourning over their sins and errors. Again, when Paul learned of this church's enthusiasm for him, the apostle's mind must have been set at rest. Until now, Paul had been deeply concerned about the response he might experience from the Corinthian believers following his earlier letter to them. Now, however, Titus has assured him that he will find that response most favourable. This encouraging news enables the apostle to rejoice even more in his beloved spiritual children.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:8

⁸ For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while.

Paul realises that his earlier letter to the Corinthian church must have caused a certain measure of grief to that fellowship. Nevertheless, under the circumstances, the apostle could not have moderated the tone of his epistle. Certain matters needed to be dealt with for the good of the church, and they could be dealt with effectively only by highlighting the nature of the problems and the action necessary to resolve those problems. Probably, Paul would have called for some measure of corrective or punitive discipline against a few individuals within the church, and perhaps even for the expulsion of one or two members—especially if these individuals had been involved in false teaching or had refused to repent of known and shameful sin in their lives.

If left unresolved, such matters threatened to harm the church fellowship and to discredit its testimony to the world. Therefore, Paul needed to address these matters frankly in his letter, instructing the Corinthian leadership to rectify the situation without further delay. However, the direct and firm tone of Paul's letter gave him some cause for anxiety in case his forthright tone would hurt these believers unduly, thereby antagonising this local fellowship.

To this extent, the apostle had regretted his tone toward them. Yet, on reflection, Paul knew that he could have done nothing else. Had he not straightforwardly addressed these issues, it was unlikely that the Corinthians believers would have dealt with their undoubtedly serious problems promptly and effectively. Indeed, as the later part of this letter will show, Paul still found it necessary to speak in a forthright manner to the few remaining individuals who had made no attempt to resolve matters and who were still causing serious problems within the Corinthian fellowship.

However, although the main body of the fellowship was grieved initially by Paul's letter, the greater part accepted it as a letter sent to them in love, and they responded accordingly. In these believers, their grief was short-lived, having led to repentance and godly sorrow, together with a renewed zeal for the apostle who cared about them enough to discipline them with a firm hand. A few rebellious individuals continued to exhibit a spirit of hostility and bitterness toward Paul. However, these people may not have been genuine believers. Later, in his present letter, Paul will address these obstinate individuals directly.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:9

⁹ As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

This verse confirms what has been said above. Paul rejoiced when he heard the favourable news from Titus. However, he did not rejoice over the grief that he had caused the Corinthians. Rather, the apostle rejoiced over the fact that his letter had brought them to their senses. Paul's earlier letter had caused the Corinthians to repent of their lax or liberal attitude toward false teachers and toward those who were sinning openly and shamefully while professing the name of Christ. It was individuals such as these who had been bringing the Lord's Supper into disrepute and had been placing themselves in grave danger of God's judgment (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-34).

However, for the vast majority of the Corinthian church, Paul's letter had led them to repentance, and this repentance had led in turn to godly grief or a genuine and wholehearted determination to confess their sins to God and to do all in their power to purge the church of anything that dishonoured the Lord's name. Thus, rather than Paul causing them to suffer loss by the tone of his letter, he had caused the Corinthians to experience immense spiritual gain by their repentance toward God and by their willingness to deal with those matters in the church which had dishonoured the Lord.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:10

¹⁰ For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

Developing the above theme of repentance, the apostle shows the distinction between genuine and false sorrow. Genuine repentance leads to "*godly grief*", or a sincere and wholehearted desire to confess all sin to God, to remedy all wrongs wherever possible, and to live after that to the honour and glory of God. Godly grief is the only kind of grief that is associated with the gift of salvation and eternal life, and it is the only kind that results in forgiveness for those believers who, on occasions, have sinned against the Lord since their salvation.

However, another form of grief is "*worldly grief*". This kind of grief does not involve genuine repentance—although it may involve sorrow, self-pity, regret or remorse. However, none of these is acceptable to God in heaven. If a person fails to exhibit true godly grief and repentance, then God will not grant his forgiveness to that person. Indeed, worldly grief (superficial sorrow, regret, or remorse) results in "*death*". In the case of an unbeliever, this means increasing insensitivity to moral and spiritual matters, such as genuine grief and true repentance toward God. Ultimately, such an insensitivity or hardening of the heart (or mind) leads to death—spiritual, physical and eternal death.

The Corinthians, however, had demonstrated genuine godly repentance and grief—as was seen in their response to Paul's letter and their subsequent remedying of the situation in their fellowship. Thus, their godly sorrow and repentance led to God's forgiveness and God's blessing upon them for removing from their church that which dishonoured his holy name.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:11

¹¹ For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter.

Paul continues by accepting that the Corinthian believers had exhibited the utmost indignation over the state of affairs in their local church. On realising the true nature of the sin within their fellowship, the Corinthians had been consumed with a godly fear—a fear of the dreadful nature of the sin and its consequences for them if not forsaken. This had been followed immediately by intense longing and zeal to remedy the situation without further delay. Punishment may refer to themselves for being so remiss in not recognising and dealing with this sin much earlier, or it may refer to those who had sinned and whom the church had now disciplined.

Thus, it is clear at every turn that the Corinthian church had now taken all possible steps to rectify the wrongs within their fellowship. Certain of their members had renounced their former sinful practices. Furthermore, the church leadership had disciplined or excluded from fellowship anyone who had refused to repent of their evil ways. By doing these and other related things, this church had demonstrated to Paul that they were completely earnest about resolving moral problems within their fellowship. Their fervent desire was that their church should remain pure and faithful in the sight of God and before men.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:12

¹² So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God.

Referring to his forthright remarks in 1 Corinthians concerning the incestuous person associating with the Corinthian believers, Paul points out that his remarks in that earlier letter were not intended solely or primarily for the offender or his victim. Rather, they were intended principally for the Corinthian church; and, in particular, its leadership.

These leaders must have been aware of the vile sin being committed by one of their members. (1 Cor. 5:1-13) However, they had failed to act. They had declined to intervene or to warn or discipline the offender. Indeed, they had failed to act against this incestuous person until Paul had heard about it from other sources and wrote his letter instructing them to expel this person from their midst.

Their favourable response to Paul's letter indicated that they were indeed willing to obey the apostle's command and remove this evil person from their fellowship. This action demonstrated not so much their obedience to Paul as their obedience to Christ and to God whom Paul represented and in whose name he acted as the apostle to the Gentiles.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:13

¹³ Therefore we are comforted.

And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.

Having heard that the Corinthians had dealt decisively with this matter and had excluded this man from fellowship until he should demonstrate genuine godly repentance for his evil deeds, Paul expresses his complete satisfaction with the Corinthians church's actions. Nevertheless, it must have grieved the apostle deeply that anyone calling himself a 'Christian' could engage in such evil practices leading ultimately to his excommunication from church fellowship.

Nonetheless, Paul has been comforted greatly to learn that the Corinthians had purged the evil from among them and that they had expressed godly sorrow and repentance for not having acted much sooner. Additionally, the apostle had also learned from Titus of the Corinthian church's present condition and attitude toward Paul following his earlier letter to them. Paul had feared that the Corinthians might display some degree of resentment or hostility toward him for speaking to them so frankly about the sin in their midst. However, Titus had set the apostle's mind at rest by assuring him that the Corinthians believers were still well-disposed toward him and anxious to meet him again. Only a small number within the fellowship held some lingering grudges against the apostle. Paul would deal with these obstinate individuals in due course.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:14

¹⁴ For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true.

Previously, the apostle Paul had spoken highly to Titus of the Corinthian church and had led him to believe that this fellowship was making good progress in the things of the Lord. This, however, was before Paul had learned of the problems that had arisen in the church more recently, due to the presence of false teachers and the church's toleration of them. On these grounds, the apostle was beginning to think that he might have been too hasty in praising this church fellowship in such glowing terms.

Nevertheless, Paul's fears in this regard proved unfounded. Although the church at Corinth was not without its problems and difficulties, this had not prevented the main body of the fellowship from progressing in the Christian faith. To this end, the leadership had been trying their utmost to deal with those evils that had beset the church—or, at least, some of its members.

Realising, therefore, that—on balance—the Corinthian church was worthy of Paul's confidence and boasting to Titus concerning them, the apostle exclaims—with some relief—that he was not ashamed (or had no cause to be ashamed or disappointed because he had praised this church highly to Titus).

Thus, Paul can say truthfully to the Corinthian believers that his boasting about them to Titus had been wholly justified and accurate. It reflected the state of the vast majority within the fellowship in that city. Granted, Paul would never have boasted of or approved the actions of the small, vociferous and persuasive minority responsible for introducing false teaching or erroneous doctrine. These activists had endeavoured to draw away some of the Corinthian believers after them; or, at least, persuade them to follow their distorted teaching. Some of the Corinthian believers had indeed succumbed for a while. However, when Paul had shown them the error of their ways, they had repented of their sin and returned to sound teaching—except for a disobedient few with whom Paul would deal later.

Thus, Paul assures the Corinthian church that everything he has said to Titus about them has been true. Overall, the church had been proving faithful to the Lord Jesus and his teaching.

Even now, they were proving themselves faithful. Now, the leadership was dealing firmly with those in their midst who had attempted to contaminate the truth and thus compromise the gospel of God's grace.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:15

15 And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling.

Paul assures the Corinthians that Titus continues to hold them in his affections. He remembers their obedience to the Lord during his visit to them and how they had received him with fear and trembling.

The Corinthians would not have feared Titus as a person. However, they realised that he was visiting them as the official representative of the apostle Paul and the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, they would have been deeply concerned about the nature of the report that Titus would make to Paul. The Corinthians wanted to make the best possible impression on Titus—without in any way influencing his impartially as an observer of their fellowship and one who had been sent to minister to them on Paul's behalf.

2 CORINTHIANS 7:16

16 I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

Paul concludes this chapter by reaffirming his complete confidence in Corinthian fellowship. The apostle knew that the local leadership would continue to do their utmost to preserve this church's doctrinal and moral purity. Paul was firmly persuaded that they would discipline—or expel from the church if necessary—anyone who departed from the true gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. In these cases, corrective discipline was essential because these individuals attempted to entice others away from the sound teaching of God's Word.

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 8

COLLECTION FOR THE SAINTS IN NEED

PAUL'S GUIDANCE TO THE CORINTHIANS

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-24

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1

¹ We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia,³⁵

In First Corinthians, Paul had encouraged the church to prepare a gift to relieve poor believers associated with the church at Jerusalem. At the time, the Corinthians had expressed a willingness to share in this form of giving. However, for some reason, the gift had never materialised. Perhaps the problems in the Corinthian church had resulted in a delay in organising this promised gift. However, the apostle reminds them of their earlier promise to provide for those in other churches lacking daily necessities.

To this end, Paul cites the example of the churches in Macedonia. Although these fellowships included a number of very poor members, yet they had managed to organise gifts to send to those in need elsewhere—and they had done so quickly and willingly. However, not only were the Macedonian churches poor themselves, but they were also enduring much hardship. Even so, these afflictions did not prevent them from giving of their own selves to help the churches in other places.

Thus, in verse 2, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 8:2

² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Although at the time, they were enduring great trials or persecution for their faith, the Macedonian churches determined to provide whatever help they could—even if this meant greater suffering or loss to themselves. Such was their love for Christ and his people in other places that no amount of tribulation could deter them from meeting the needs of brothers and sisters in greater need than themselves.

These churches were marked by their extreme generosity amid their own affliction and poverty and by the fact that they provided joyfully, willingly and abundantly (cf. Mark 12:44). These believers shared abundantly of their very limited resources from the riches they had received in Christ Jesus.

³⁵ I.e., the churches at Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:3

³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord,

Paul would have been more than delighted if the Macedonian churches had contributed according to their abilities—and the apostle testifies to this fact. However, Paul declares that these poor believers had far exceeded his expectations in giving. They had provided much more than could have been expected of them and more than they could afford. Nevertheless, they did this willingly and voluntarily.

Paul had not suggested for one moment that these churches should impoverish themselves in order to meet the needs of others. However, the Macedonian believers could not be dissuaded. They had heard the cry for help; they had seen the need and had poured out what little they had to help meet that need. They counted it an honour to share. They rejoiced greatly insofar as they were able to help others in need and that the name of Christ was being honoured and glorified.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:4-5

⁴ begging us earnestly for the favour of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

Here Paul confirms that the Macedonian churches had not only been willing to contribute generously but that they had pleaded most earnestly with Paul to allow them to do so. Undoubtedly, since Paul was aware of their impoverishment and present trials, he would have tried to persuade them not to contribute more than they could afford or beyond their means.

However, the Macedonian churches would not heed Paul's appeal. They wanted to give to the utmost of their abilities. They knew that they were not giving only to believers in need elsewhere, but they were in effect ministering unto the Lord. Therefore, since the Lord had given his all for them, the churches of Macedonia wanted to give their all to the Lord—and not just the portion or proportion required of them.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:6

⁶ Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace.

Having cited the highly commendable example of the Macedonian churches, Paul returns to the corresponding gift from the Corinthian church. Perhaps as much as a year earlier, they had promised to provide such a gift. However, at the time Paul was writing, they had not completed this task. Possibly, other matters in the church had interrupted their preparation of this gift.

Nevertheless, Paul had given instructions to Titus to ensure that the Corinthians fulfilled their pledge to provide relief to those saints in distress. With the impoverished Macedonian churches setting such an excellent example, it would be a severe embarrassment to the more affluent Corinthian church if the poorer churches surpassed them in giving.

Paul refers to these gifts as an “*act of grace*”. Possibly, he is thinking of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ through which he has made his redeemed people rich. In any event, the apostle realises that anything we possess is entrusted to our stewardship by the Lord. It is not ours by right. It is given to us in the providence of God and by his abundant grace toward us. Therefore, just as we have received liberally from the Lord's bounteous provisions, so we should be willing to giving abundantly as the Lord enables us. Thus, Paul encourages the Corinthians believers to remember the extent of God's grace toward them and to give freely and willingly from the riches that the Lord has bestowed upon them.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:7

⁷ But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

The apostle confirms and continues this line of thought in this verse. He reminds them of the gifts of grace that the Lord has bestowed upon them. God has granted these various gifts for the good of the church and the glory of his name. He reminds them of the excellencies of character that they have experienced through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Furthermore, Paul commends them for the depth of their love toward the Lord and toward the saints.

Therefore, as the Corinthians excelled in these matters, so the apostle encourages them to strive most diligently to excel in the matter of giving to the saints in need or distress.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:8

⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.

As an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul could have used his authority to command this church to prepare and send this gift. However, Paul had no desire to exercise his apostolic authority over the church. He much preferred to leave matters in the hands of the local church leaders, believing that they were quite capable of organising their affairs in financial matters.

Thus, Paul reminds the Corinthians that his purpose in mentioning these things is not by way of command, but rather that they may prove to others that their professed love of the saints is genuine: and if genuine, it must show itself by practical concern and care for the welfare of others. Thus, Paul exhorts (rather than commands) the Corinthians believers to demonstrate the reality of their love in practical terms by sending their gift as promised.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

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 by his poverty might become rich.

Here is the example exceeding all others. It was commendable enough for the Macedonian churches to show such generosity when they provided freely, willingly and beyond their means to relieve poor saints elsewhere. Nevertheless, in this verse, we see a demonstration of giving beyond comparison, for it concerns the incomparable riches of the Lord Jesus Christ and his exalted position in glory.

Although immeasurably rich and sharing the glories of heaven with his Father, the Lord Jesus did not hesitate to lay aside his glory, humble himself, and take upon himself the form of a man—yet without sin (Phil. 2:5-8; Heb. 4:15). From the riches of glory, the Son of God came down to a place of poverty on earth and associated with a corrupt and fallen society. And why? So that, by his poverty, they might become rich. So that, by his grace, multitudes of sinful men and women might be called into the kingdom of God and receive the promise of eternal life, being raised from spiritual death to spiritual life—the newness of life in Christ Jesus. So that these redeemed, sanctified and ultimately glorified sinners might share as joint-heirs with the Son in his Father's house above.

Since the Lord Jesus showed such love, mercy and grace toward sinful mankind, what should not those whom he has called and redeemed do for him? If they have received the riches of his love, mercy and grace—without cost to themselves—should they not be willing to share something of *their* love, mercy, and grace without expecting anything in return?

Thus, with this magnificent verse, Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to remember the supreme example of the Lord Jesus Christ and act accordingly.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:10

¹⁰ And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it.

Although not willing to command them authoritatively, Paul expresses his judgment or opinion of the matter. A year earlier, and with great eagerness, the Corinthians had begun to make their collection. To date, however, they had not completed the collection. Thus, the apostle makes it plain that it is in their interests to follow through with their pledge, especially since they initially expressed such eagerness to help. However, unless they matched this eagerness with positive and speedy action, their promises to those in need would appear hollow. Indeed, the speedy and generous action of other churches, such as those of Macedonia, would put the Corinthian church to shame.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:11

¹¹ So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have.

In this verse, the apostle confirms the thought expressed above. He exhorts the Corinthians to finish what they had begun but to do so without further delay. Only in this way would their initial eagerness or willingness to help be demonstrated to others. Paul, however, does not suggest that they should send more than they are able to provide. (The Macedonian churches did this of their own volition, and by begging Paul to allow them to exceed that which was expected of them.) Paul did not require the Corinthians to follow the Macedonian churches' example (although they could have done so had they wished). Rather Paul expects the church at Corinth to contribute according to their means (*"out of what you have"*) and not necessarily beyond their means.

The apostle confirms this thought in verse 12:

2 CORINTHIANS 8:12

¹² For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.

What counts is not the amount of the gift but the willingness to provide it cheerfully and without reserve. Those who are genuinely willing to help needy believers elsewhere will look upon them as their brothers and sisters in the Lord—members of their own spiritual family. Out of love for their own family, they will give unreservedly and as much as they can afford. However, although some members of the Corinthian church were relatively wealthy and materially well off, others among them did not possess much by way of material wealth or possessions. Therefore, Paul exhorts them to give as they were able (little or much) but to do so willingly.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:13-14

¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness

¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness.

Paul was not suggesting that the Corinthians should overreach themselves by contributing such a substantial sum that they felt that other churches were being relieved somewhat of the full

contribution due from them. Rather, Paul seeks to establish equity in giving. Each local church should contribute as much as it was able; and, since some churches were wealthier than others, then the wealthy churches would be expected to contribute out of their abundance. The Corinthian church fell into the category of a more wealthy church (although there were several exceptions among its number). Thus, Paul expected the Corinthians to contribute according to their abundance. This expectation was only fair, as poorer churches could not be required to provide the larger sums that—for the most part—the Corinthian believers could afford more easily.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:15

15 As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

Paul is alluding to Exodus 16:18, where the passage speaks of the people of Israel gathering the manna each morning in the desert. Some of the people gathered more than they were likely to need. Others, however, gathered less than what they would need for the day. Perhaps through age, infirmity, or for some other reason, these other people were less able to gather the full amount required for each day. Nevertheless, by the providence of God, their lack would be made good, and their needs met in full. Those who had gathered more than they required were to give of their surplus to those who had been unable to gather their full quota. Hence, the LORD ensured that his provisions for the people of Israel were distributed equitably and that no one suffered hardship or acute shortage of necessities.

Applying this principle to the contribution for the saints in need, Paul is saying that God had blessed churches like that at Corinth with an abundance of riches, wealth or material resources. These resources represented much more than they were likely to need for themselves. However, since the Lord had provided this abundance, the Lord expected them to share their abundance with others who lacked at least some of life’s necessities. Thereby, they would be helping to distribute the Lord’s provisions fairly among the saints.

The Corinthian church had begun this task the previous year, but Paul is now exhorting them to complete what they had begun so that their gift might be ready to send to those in poverty or distress. This poverty or distress might not have been of their own making. Rather, some of these impoverished believers in Judea may have endured the plundering of their homes and the raiding of their goods for the sake of the gospel.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:16

16 But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you.

Paul had sent Titus as his special messenger to the church at Corinth to ensure that the collection would be ready for transfer to the needy saints at Jerusalem. The apostle commends Titus warmly, for this faithful servant of God shared a common interest with Paul in the welfare of these churches, and in particular for the church at Corinth. This church was in Titus’ heart, and it was one over which he must have prayed regularly and earnestly—just as Paul did himself.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:17

17 For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord.

His actions demonstrate Titus’ concern for the church at Corinth. Titus knew of Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians and the apostle’s desire to have them complete and send the gift they had promised. However, without being asked by Paul, Titus had expressed a wish to visit this church and to encourage them to complete the work they had begun. Thus, Paul can say to the Corinthians that Titus was going to them voluntarily. Although he was Paul’s messenger and would be going

with formal authority from Paul, Titus was not going at Paul's command alone but because he wanted genuinely to see these believers and share fellowship with them.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:18

18 With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel.

Titus, however, would not be travelling to Corinth alone. Since he would be bringing back the collection from the Corinthian church, it would be prudent for another believer to accompany Titus. Paul does not tell us this other believer's name. However, it must have been someone well known and highly esteemed among the churches. Whoever he was, his gift of preaching the gospel with great power and clarity distinguished him. He must have been an outstanding preacher, making him well known among the churches. Apollos, a faithful servant of God, was recognised among the churches as being an outstanding preacher. He was also well-known to the Corinthian church. However, Paul does not specifically name Apollos as the person to accompany Titus, and there may have been other well-known and excellent preachers of whom we are not aware.

Of course, Titus was completely trustworthy and could have brought the collection back by himself. Nevertheless, to avoid any suggestions of impropriety from anyone in the Corinthian church or elsewhere, Paul deems it wise to send this other brother along with Titus. This brother would witness the transactions carried out at the Corinthian church, bear testimony to the sum contributed, and accompany Titus on the open highway while he carried this gift from Corinth in Achaia to its destination at Jerusalem in Judea.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:19

19 And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will.

There was, however, another reason why this brother would be accompanying Titus. He had been appointed specifically by the local churches for this very purpose. This appointment confirms that he was well known among the churches, highly esteemed and considered completely trustworthy. Indeed, he had been commissioned by the churches to accompany Paul while the apostle co-ordinated the gifts from the various local churches. Now, Paul was commissioning him to accompany Titus and to collect the gift from the Corinthian church.

Essentially, this work was being undertaken for the Lord's glory and honour—not merely for the sake of individuals in need. The churches were making these collections to alleviate poverty, hardship or suffering among God's people. However, by doing this, they were not ministering to needy believers alone. They were also ministering to the Lord to whom these believers belonged. For those who provide even a cup of cold water to one who belongs to Christ ministers unto Christ himself (Matt. 10:42). Therefore, the Lord's name is glorified when such gifts are made to his distressed people in his name or when the needs of impoverished believers are met for his sake.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:20-21

²⁰ We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, ²¹ for we aim at what is honourable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man.

The course to which Paul is referring is the expedient of sending another brother ³⁶—commissioned by the churches—along with Titus to finalise and collect the gift at Corinth. The presence of two fully accredited individuals would help ensure that no one could make scurrilous or malicious accusations about how this money was being handled or how it was being distributed subsequently.

Once the gift had arrived at its final destination in Jerusalem, Paul—or more likely, the apostles at Jerusalem—would be responsible for its administration and distribution to the various churches in need. However, the apostle Paul desired that every possible step be taken in handling this gift to demonstrate that everything was being done with complete integrity, impartiality and equity. The apostle knew that everything he did would be honourable in the Lord's eyes—and this was what mattered above all else. Nevertheless, Paul also wants to show that everything he does concerning this gift is honourable in the sight of men: that his actions were above reproach or unimpeachable.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:22

²² And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you.

Referring once more to the brother accompanying Titus, Paul adds his personal commendation of this man. He was not a recent or inexperienced believer. Rather, over some time, he had proved himself faithful, sincere and reliable in many matters relating to the church and the family of believers.

Furthermore, this brother had expressed an earnest concern for the church at Corinth. Although the Corinthian believers were not without their faults, and although they had previously exhibited a partisan spirit, yet this brother remained confident in them as a whole. He believed that their differences had been or could be resolved and that any outstanding matters could be set in order when Paul himself visited them. Thus, the brother was keen to go along with Titus to meet and have fellowship with the beloved saints at Corinth.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:23

²³ As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ.

Speaking of Titus, Paul refers to him as his partner and fellow worker. He laboured with Paul in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, which benefitted many of the Lord's people, including the church at Corinth. Titus was one of Paul's faithful co-workers. When Titus visited the local churches, he did so on Paul's behalf and with the delegated authority of the apostle Paul himself.

³⁶ *another brother*: In this passage, Paul mentions only one other brother accompanying Titus. However, this was probably in respect of the Corinthian church alone. When compared with other passages elsewhere, it appears that there may have been several more brothers accompanying Titus, or rendezvousing with him, to convey the churches' gifts to Jerusalem. The presence of these additional commissioned brothers would suggest that the gifts being carried to Jerusalem were not coming solely from the church at Corinth but also from several other churches as well; e.g. the Macedonian churches (cf. Acts 20:4:6; 1 Cor. 16:3-4).

Referring to these brothers (i.e., Titus, together with the unnamed brother commissioned by the churches, and perhaps others not specifically mentioned by Paul), the apostle declares that these men are the messengers (ἀπόστολος, apostolos) of the churches. They were the servants of Christ ('apostles' ³⁷ in the more general sense) who served the churches to the glory of Christ. Such men were considered wholly trustworthy and reliable and were to be received by the churches as though they were receiving the Lord himself.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:24

²⁴ So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.

Having explained the nature of their office and authority to the Corinthian church, Paul now exhorts the believers in this fellowship to receive these men with open arms; to prove their love for other believers (especially toward the saints in need), and to confirm to these men that Paul's boasting about the Corinthian church was not just empty words.

So long as the leadership at Corinth had completed the task of making ready the gift they had promised before these men arrived to collect it, then Paul's confidence in them would be vindicated. Titus and the other messenger or messengers would find that this church was genuinely concerned for the welfare of other less fortunate believers; and that they were prepared to help meet their needs out of their ample resources.

³⁷ *apostle*: Although the Greek word used here (ἀπόστολος, apostolos) can be translated either as 'apostle' or 'messenger', it should be remembered that Titus and other similar messengers of the churches were not commissioned and appointed directly by the risen Lord Jesus, as were the original twelve Apostles and Paul. Only the Twelve (excepting Judas Iscariot) plus Paul were invested with full apostolic authority over the churches, and only they were able to speak, teach and write infallibly the very words that God's Spirit inspired them to declare to these churches. Titus and the other church-appointed messengers could act as apostolic delegates to the churches and could represent Paul or any of the other original Apostles by relaying authoritatively to the churches the words, teaching or letters from the Twelve Apostles or from Paul. However, these church messengers could not speak or teach infallibly to the churches *of their own accord* since they had not been commissioned directly and explicitly to this task by the risen Lord Jesus himself. Rather, they had been commissioned as trustworthy servants of the Lord only by the local churches whom they served. (Gordon Lyons)

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 9

“WHOEVER SOWS SPARINGLY WILL ALSO REAP SPARINGLY”

PAUL’S EXHORTATION TO CONTRIBUTE GENEROUSLY

2 CORINTHIANS 9:1-15

2 CORINTHIANS 9:1

¹ Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints,

The apostle Paul did not need to remind the believers at Corinth of the ministry for the saints. They were already aware of this ministry and their duty and responsibility to share in this ministry to support other poorer saints. No, the Corinthians knew what they ought to do. However, they had procrastinated in this regard, and this was why Paul wrote to them about these matters.

Nevertheless, the church at Corinth was ready and willing to share in this ministry, as Paul acknowledges in verse 2:

2 CORINTHIANS 9:2

² for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them.

The Corinthians had not been unwilling to give to the saints in need. On the contrary, they had exhibited great zeal initially to make their collection and have it ready for collection. This initial zeal on the Corinthian’s part caused Paul to boast of their readiness and example to others—pointing out that the church in the province of Achaia had been ready since the previous year to send their gift. The glowing commendation of the Corinthian’s zeal by Paul had caused other local churches to follow the Corinthian church’s example and prepare their gifts for the needy saints.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:3

³ But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be.

However, although the Corinthians had started well, they had not yet completed their collection. This delay gave Paul some cause for concern, as he did not wish to come to them only to find that the collection was still not ready. Therefore, to ensure that this did not happen, the apostle was about to send the brothers he had mentioned to help the Corinthians finalise their contribution and ensure that it was ready for collection.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:4

⁴ Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident.

Paul had spoken very highly of the church at Corinth and praised their readiness to contribute toward the needs of the saints. Soon, however, he would be coming to that church, accompanied perhaps by some of the Macedonian brothers.

These brothers were aware of the high esteem in which Paul held the church at Corinth and their willingness to help needy believers. However, the Macedonian churches to which they belonged had already made their generous contribution. Therefore, it would be an embarrassment to Paul if he came with some of these brothers to Corinth, only to find that the Corinthian church was still not ready to hand over their promised gift. This situation would humiliate the apostle in the eyes of his Macedonian brothers. After all, the apostle had boasted highly to the Macedonian church of the Corinthians' long-standing eagerness to help.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:5

⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.

The potential for a delay in completing the collection was why Paul had sent Titus and the other brother ahead. They were to make final arrangements with the church at Corinth to ensure that the promised gift would be ready for collection as soon as Paul and the Macedonian brothers arrived. Then, it would appear as a willing gift and not as a gift made reluctantly and under pressure only because Paul and the Macedonian brothers were by then present. Such a lack of preparation would greatly embarrass Paul and the Corinthians, who had promised so much. Furthermore, the Macedonian brothers would have felt let down by the tardiness of the church at Corinth.

GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6

⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Paul was concerned that the Corinthians' delay in preparing their gift for collection might be because there was some reluctance by some of their members to make a liberal contribution to the needy saints. Therefore, to deal with any such thoughts or attitudes, the apostle uses an analogy from the field of agriculture. On the one hand, a farmer who is meagre in his seed distribution will find that—when he harvests his crop—the crop yield will be according to the proportion he has sown: sparse and wholly inadequate. On the other hand, the farmer who scatters his seed liberally will reap a bountiful harvest.

Paul is making the point that those who give meagrely will receive meagre blessings in return, whereas those who give bountifully will be blessed abundantly—and will be none the poorer for their generosity to others.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Paul does not want to command or direct the Corinthian believers to set aside a specific amount. He would much rather let the leaders of the Corinthian church, in conjunction with the church members, determine how much this should be.

Again, Paul emphasises that the amount each person contributes is of secondary importance. What matters more is that the individual giver contributes their gift in love, from a sincere and considerate heart, not under any external influences. Above all, the apostle does not want believers to contribute reluctantly or under a feeling of obligation or compulsion. This collection was to take the form of a free-will offering, a gift made entirely voluntarily, with each person

determining in his heart how much he was able to donate and how much he ought to set aside as an offering well-pleasing to God.

Thus, the apostle adds, “...for God loves a cheerful giver.” God is pleased with those who give willingly, freely, and according to their means—and above their means, if they feel this is right in the sight of the Lord. Gifts made from a heart of love are truly blessed by the Lord, who will richly reward what is done in his name and for his disadvantaged people.

By implication, this verse teaches us that God is displeased with those who give reluctantly or only because they feel they must make an appearance of generosity to maintain their favourable standing with other believers. However, God sees such hypocrisy for what it is. Those who withhold what they could easily have provided are withholding not only from the Lord’s needy people but also from the Lord himself—in whose eyes these poor believers are treasured.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:8

⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

Perhaps some church members at Corinth felt that by giving generously, they would be leaving themselves short or even without adequate personal resources. They would argue that they could not leave themselves in a position whereby they might become indebted to others or a burden to the church. Furthermore, they would say, leaving ourselves short of personal funds would be a poor testimony to others. It would be contrary to the biblical teaching that a person should work to earn sufficient for his living and that he should not be dependent on anyone for his support.

Such an argument may have some force because it appears to be based on prudence, common sense, and biblical principles or teaching. Nevertheless, while a person ought to be prudent and ought to observe the teachings of God’s Word, this must not be made an excuse for failing to fulfil one’s duty to God and his neighbour. It is essential to meet the needs of one’s own family and other relatives. However, the Lord expects his people to give from their surplus to their neighbour in need.

To this end, the apostle reminds the Corinthians, “...God is able to make all grace abound to you....”

If the Lord’s people are faithful, both regarding their own families and their offerings to the Lord, then God will meet all their needs. His grace is immeasurable, and out of that grace, the Lord will provide. Provided his people do their duty toward those in need—and do so willingly and generously, as they can afford—then the Lord will meet every need of theirs. They may not acquire a surfeit of material goods or wealth, but they will have sufficiency in everything. This sufficiency from the hand of the Lord ought to be their incentive to abound in the Lord’s work, to give freely to the Lord’s service and to contribute generously to those of the Lord’s people in need.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:9

⁹ As it is written,

“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;

his righteousness endures forever.”

(Ps. 112:9 ESV)

Quoting from Psalm 112, the apostle demonstrates how the Lord provides for his people.

“He has distributed freely....” Unlike those who sow sparingly and reap a paltry provision, the Lord distributes his gifts liberally or abundantly so that there is no shortage for those who wait on him.

“...he has given to the poor....” Certainly, the Lord meets the needs of those of his people who lack everyday essentials. They lack no good thing. However, this verse may not apply only to those poor people who lack material necessities such as food or clothing. It may also apply to those who are *“poor in spirit”*—for the humble or poor in spirit is precious in God’s sight. It is certain that these people, too, will be blessed abundantly of the Lord.

This provision of basic needs for his people is one way in which the Lord demonstrates his righteousness. Since that righteousness endures forever, his abundant provisions to the poor must also endure forever, or for as long as this age endures.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:10

¹⁰ **He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.**

It is important to note what this verse is saying. The seed for sowing is made available by the providence of God. Human resources, provisions, or ingenuity alone cannot guarantee a supply of natural seed—without which there can be no crop and no harvest. The sower must depend on the Lord to make the living seed available; for providing fertile soil and favourable weather conditions for growth and harvest.

Paul uses this as an analogy relating to the gifts from the church at Corinth. God provides seed to the sower. God also provides material wealth or resources to the believers at Corinth (and elsewhere). Thus, the Corinthians ought not to think of their wealth or material resources as the result of their labours or enterprises alone—without reference to God. Ultimately, they possess these good things only because of God’s providence, mercy and grace toward them. If it were not for the providence of God, these believers might find themselves unable to labour. They might find themselves lacking good health, strength or soundness of mind to enrich themselves in material ways. Thus, all that they have they owe to God and his providence.

Accepting, then, that they have been enriched by the Lord and not merely by their labours alone, these believers ought to consider their riches or material gains as being entrusted to them by the Lord. Thus, when they have met the needs of their families and their work, they ought to remember that the Lord expects them to help meet the needs of their neighbours who lack some of life’s necessities.

Paul then argues that God will provide for them abundantly, that he will multiply their seed for sowing (or whatever is basic to their particular enterprise or labour), and that he will increase the harvests... Note, however, that Paul does not stop at the expression, will *“increase the harvest...”* Rather, he says, he [God] will *“increase the harvest of your righteousness.”* In other words, the more abundantly his people contribute willingly to the needs of others, the more abundantly able the Lord will make them to make further and perhaps greater contributions. What is true in respect of monetary gifts to the saints in need is true also of other ways which express a believer’s righteous character. However, this kind of righteousness is a fruit of the Spirit and is not inherent in the believer himself.

The apostle confirms this theme in verse 11:

2 CORINTHIANS 9:11

11 You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.

If the believers observe the principles outlined above and acknowledge fully that God's providence enriches them, they will find that the Lord will bless them abundantly. This is not to suggest that the Lord will make them wealthy materially. The Lord may choose to do this with certain of his redeemed people as he did with Abraham and others. However, the point Paul is making is that God will enrich them if they honour him and acknowledge that all good gifts come from the Father above—not that they might be enriched personally but rather that the riches or gain that the Lord bestows upon them might be used for his glory and the benefit of others. Thus, the more abundantly the Lord blesses a person with riches or material goods, the more generous the Lord expects that person to be to those in need; and especially to his own people who lack the basic comforts of life.

Thus, as the churches observe the Corinthian believers following Paul's instructions to honour the Lord in their giving and to acknowledge his hand of providence in their lives, they will be induced to thank God. What applies to the church at Corinth applies equally to the believers in all other local churches. Their riches or possessions are theirs by God's providence. God may remove them at any time. Therefore, they should acknowledge that these are the Lord's gifts and that they are his stewards. Should not a steward prove faithful to his Master?

2 CORINTHIANS 9:12

12 For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.

"...the ministry of this service..." (ESV) means ... *"the administration of this service..."* (KJV). (The word (διακονία, diakonia; *service, ministry* [UBS⁵]) is related to the word used for "deacons"; or those who 'serve tables' in the church.)

Referring here to the collection from the Corinthian and other local churches, Paul points out that the administration of this gift is not only for the relief of poor saints—although this was its aim in human terms. Rather, the ordering and organising of this gift from all the churches resulted in praise, honour and glory to God. This was partly because impoverished believers were obtaining very welcome assistance in their time of need. However, it was due also, and more pertinently, to the fact that all those believers who had contributed to this gift had experienced an enrichment of the soul. Consequently, they would be more inclined to praise God who had permitted them to share in this great work. These believers would also find that the more they shared in similar enterprises in the future, the more they would experience the blessing of God in their souls—provided their gifts were made from a loving, pure, sincere and humble heart; desiring to honour and glorify God, and not from any attempt at pretended generosity.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:13

13 By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others,

Their *"approval of this service"* might be better understood as 'their commendation of this ministry': i.e., their commendation of the gift willingly made and sent from Corinth. Observing the Corinthians' kindness and generosity toward the saints in need, the believers in other churches would have even more cause to glorify God. They had heard of the Corinthian church's promise

to provide for those in need. However, until they had witnessed the fulfilment of this promise, they were not in a position to thank God wholeheartedly for the saints at Corinth. Nevertheless, as soon as the promised gift had been collected and was en route to Jerusalem, these other churches could thank and praise the Lord that Corinth, too, had been ready and willing to support the Lord's poor saints.

The apostle states that their submission flowed from the gospel of Christ. Probably, this is an elipsis for their obedience to the principles of the gospel. The Corinthians had confessed (or professed) faith in Christ, and there is no reason here to doubt the validity of their confession—at least, concerning the majority. As believers, the Corinthians knew that the Lord Jesus and his apostles had taught the need of making provision for the poor. The Corinthians' obedience to this and other related teaching was a demonstration that they were submitting willingly to the gospel of Christ.

Furthermore, the Corinthian believers submitted willingly to the precepts and principles of the gospel, and they were doing so generously. It was their earnest desire to help the saints in need to the utmost of their abilities; and, so far as they were able, to help other needy believers whenever and wherever this was necessary.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:14

¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.

The Corinthian church did not stand alone in this ministry. Many other local churches were making similar contributions for the saints in need. Again, the Corinthian church was being supported or upheld by believers in other churches. These believers had been longing earnestly for and praying for the church at Corinth that they also might share in this contribution for the saints. However, they would be concerned about the material gift and the spiritual blessings that would accrue to the Corinthian church. The other churches desired with all their heart that Corinth should share in these blessings that God would bestow upon his faithful people when they considered and responded to the needs of his materially poorer saints.

The Corinthian church had begun to experience a measure of this abundant grace from God. Paul describes it as "*the surpassing grace of God upon you.*" God's grace is without measure and unlimited. However, although saving grace is bestowed upon every truly redeemed child of God, the Lord has additional stores of grace (or beneficent blessings) for all those who obey his Word and live in the light of that Word. Thus, those who obeyed God's Word to remember the poor—expressed in both old and new covenants—would experience something of God's additional blessings drawn from his infinite resources of grace.

There is, however, one gift of God's grace that far exceeds all others, as Paul now indicates in verse 15:

2 CORINTHIANS 9:15

¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

By the measure of their gift, the Corinthian church might demonstrate their utmost generosity toward the saints in need. By a like measure, all the other local churches involved in this ministry might demonstrate unrivalled generosity to the needy and helpless. However, neither these nor any other human acts of benevolence could begin to compare with the greatest and highest gift of all: that of God's own Son for a lost and perishing world. No gift can compare with the Father's gift of love toward fallen and sinful men and women. Human beings give what they can out of what they can afford. However, in his love for sinners, the Father in heaven gave the very One that was dearest to his heart—his One and Only Son. No value can ever be placed upon

such a gift. It is priceless. Therefore, the apostle Paul can only say—as must we all— “*Thanks be to God for his inexpressible ³⁸ gift!*”

³⁸ *inexpressible [gift]*: The adjective that Paul uses here also translates as “unspeakable” [gift] (ἀνεκδιήγητος, *anekdiegetos*). This word occurs nowhere else in the NT but was later used by Clement of Rome (1 Clement to the Corinthians). Paul may have coined this word to illustrate something of the indescribable or unspeakable nature of God’s gift of his One and Only Son. (See further on *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament, 2 Corinthians*, by Colin G. Kruse, 2020:193)

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 10

PAUL CONTENDS AGAINST FALSE TEACHERS

THOSE ONLY MAY SERVE WHOM CHRIST HAS CALLED

2 CORINTHIANS 10:1-18

2 CORINTHIANS 10:1

¹ I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—

The apostle has spoken of the need for the Corinthian church to fulfil its obligations and make ready their promised gift for collection. Paul now leaves this topic to speak once more of the false prophets or pseudo-apostles. These pretenders had arisen within this church or had come to the fellowship from elsewhere. It is with these individuals in mind that the apostle utters the words of this verse.

The apostle had instructed the Corinthian church leaders to deal with these false teachers and expel them from their midst. However, this injunction had been challenged by some in the Corinthian fellowship. They asserted that Paul had no right to dictate to an 'independent' church, and the local church was under no obligation to follow the apostle's instructions. Indeed, they asserted, Paul is making empty boasts. He appears bold and forceful while he is away from us. However, when he arrives, he will lack the courage to follow through with his instructions or apply discipline.

This argument was being put forward by the false teachers and those who had fallen under their sway. It is unlikely that the majority of the membership at Corinth concurred with it. Nevertheless, the assertiveness of the false teachers was causing some disquiet among the Corinthian church leaders. Paul had instructed the leaders to deal with these men. However, when the church leaders attempted to act against them, these same men contended that the apostle had no power or authority to remove them or instruct others to remove them.

Additionally, Paul appears to be alluding to some remarks that some of these men had made against him. They have cited the apostle's humility when in their presence. They have made the great mistake of confusing meekness with weakness and considered that Paul's humility demonstrated a weakness of character. Therefore, although he spoke boldly when absent from them and wrote weighty letters, this was pure verbal posturing or puffing in the wind.

Such are the ways of men who will not accept God's Word as it stands and who attempt to distort that Word to suit their specific interpretations of that Word. When a faithful servant of God challenges them by bringing the truth of God's Word to bear upon their evil ways, they respond by attempting to discredit God's servant and to bring his name into disrepute. Nevertheless, the Lord will preserve those who remain faithful to him and his Word and who stand against false teaching and misguided or evil practices.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:2

² I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh.

The Lord Jesus had invested Paul with apostolic authority. However, Paul had no desire to bring the full force of that authority to bear on the Corinthian believers if he could avoid it. Therefore, rather than commanding them to obey his instructions—which, effectively, were the instructions or word of the Lord himself, Paul appeals to them to be obedient to Christ. He beseeches them with meekness and humility to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord.

Even now, the apostle begs the Corinthians to follow his directions. Paul has given these instructions to them in love and for the spiritual welfare of that local church. However, the apostle hints that if they are not willing to obey his instructions, then—when he comes—it will be necessary for him to act with power and authority. Then, they would realise that Paul was anything but weak when it came to imposing discipline or when it came to purging the church of false teaching and false teachers.

Some of them had accused the apostle of “*walking according to the flesh*”. In this context, the meaning probably is that they were accusing Paul of trying to exercise powers that did not belong to him and making demands of them from a purely human perspective. This suggestion, of course, was to deny Paul’s divine calling and appointment by the Lord Jesus and to repudiate the apostle’s commission to the Gentiles. Such an attitude amounted to outright rebellion against the Lord Jesus, by whom Paul had been called and commissioned. Furthermore, like the other apostles of the Lord Jesus, Paul had been commissioned to speak and teach infallibly in the name of the Lord Jesus. Those who rejected the apostle’s teaching or instructions were guilty of rejecting the teaching or instructions of the Lord himself—in whose name Paul was speaking.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:3

³ For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

There was one sense in which it might be said that Paul walked according to the flesh: That is, he was an ordinary human being like every other member of the human race. He had a fallen, sinful human nature like every other member of Adam’s race. In Paul’s case, however, his fallen nature had been regenerated, and he had been redeemed by the blood of the Lord Jesus. Yes, essentially, he was human—with faults and failings—and the apostle would never attempt to claim anything else.

Nevertheless, Paul was not waging war against a human, fleshly or earthly enemy. On the contrary, in the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, the apostle was waging war against a spiritual enemy—Satan and his minions. These evil spiritual beings were attempting to destroy God’s church (albeit futilely) by sowing weeds (i.e., false teachers and teaching) within the church.

Nevertheless, how was Paul—and other believers more generally—to contend against the wiles of the devil? How were they to defeat the onslaught of the evil one and preserve the church from his attacks? By the teaching of God’s Word. By the uncompromising teaching of this Truth and this Truth alone. By refusing to compromise or distort the unchanging Word of God or to accommodate its teaching to suit the evil desires of sinful men and women or carnal or worldly Christians.

This action involves spiritual warfare; and, concerning this warfare, the apostle writes in verse 4:

2 CORINTHIANS 10:4

⁴ For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

Any attempt to defeat evil or the evil one by using purely human resources is bound to fail. Human effort is no match for the machinations of Satan. The devil is a fallen *angelic* being—not a fallen *human* being. Therefore, as a former mighty angel cast out of heaven, the devil possesses *supernatural* power. This power is vastly superior to human power, although it bears no comparison with God's *infinite* power. God alone ³⁹ is characterised by unlimited power. God alone is omnipotent.

Therefore, weapons or resources of the flesh (human powers or resources) are wholly inadequate to prevail against the evil one or his servants on earth. Satan's servants on earth include those ministers of Satan who infiltrate the churches, attempting to wreak havoc against the people of God.

Waging war against such greater spiritual powers requires a power superior to that possessed by the devil and his emissaries. Thus, Paul's attacks against evil are not from his innate human strength but from the strength of the Lord Jesus and by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Because Father, Son and Holy Spirit are omnipotent, the devil stands in terror and abject fear of the Godhead. This almighty power of the Godhead is the only power in the universe that Satan is totally unable to overcome. Thus, strengthened by the almighty power of the Lord his God, Paul takes his stand against the enemy of souls.

This reliance on the power of Almighty God remains true whether the enemy is attacking Paul using personal temptations and enticements or whether Paul is attacking the enemy exemplified by the false ministers of Christ found within various local churches. These false ministers appear outwardly as "angels of light" (i.e., as warm-hearted, blameless and upright as the holy angels). Thus, they deceive people into trusting them and accepting their teaching. In reality, however, these deceiving imposters are the "servants of Satan". They turn certain truths concerning God into lies. For example, they repudiate the clear teaching of God's Word, pronouncing that that which God expressly forbids and condemns is to be commended and practised without restraint.

Either way, Paul was warring against the enemy with divine power granted from above and exercised through the apostle by the person and agency of God's Holy Spirit. By this means alone, Paul and his associates can succeed in destroying or laying waste (evil spiritual) strongholds.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:5

⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

Now Paul shows something of the power of the gospel of Christ. Worldly individuals—frequently, men and women of great intellect and learning—attempt to overthrow the gospel message or question or deny God's existence. However, the arguments of these individuals—together with the arguments of the false teachers within the church—are doomed to failure. The wisdom of this world cannot prevail against the wisdom, power and glory of God or his gospel. Similarly,

³⁹ 'God alone': When we say 'God alone' we are speaking of the one and only true and living God or Godhead, comprising God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All the attributes of God the Father are also the attributes of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit—these attributes inhering in all their fulness, without measure or division, in all three Persons of the triune God. (Gordon Lyons)

the high-sounding and persuasive opinions of unspiritual men and women cannot prevail against the truth of God or the knowledge of God.

God has revealed himself to mankind in his Word—the Bible. Those who deny the teachings of this infallible and unchanging Word will be confuted and condemned by that same Word. God brooks no rivals. Those attempting to set themselves up against the Almighty or deny his existence, power and glory reveal something of their complete lack of spiritual understanding or awareness. How can a mere fallen, finite and sinful human being presume to sit in judgment upon the perfect and infinite, almighty, and sovereign God? The thought is ludicrous!

Therefore, when the apostle speaks of destroying arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, he is speaking of doing so through the power of God's Word or the gospel. The Word of God is the "*sword of the Spirit*"—a double-edged sword (Eph. 6:17). The use of this weapon alone can defeat the enemies of the Cross by refuting their unspiritual and ungodly teaching and opinions and by exalting the name of the Lord Jesus. Through preaching this same Word, the Holy Spirit brings sinful and rebellious men and women to repentance and faith in Christ. Thus, Paul speaks of taking every thought captive (through the message of the Cross and conviction by the Holy Spirit) to obey Christ: meaning to submit to Christ as Saviour and Lord.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:6

⁶ being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

Concentrating on those individuals within the Corinthian church who resisted Paul's instructions and persisted in teaching unsound and harmful doctrine, the apostle now issues a stark warning: Contrary to what they had asserted about his character and demeanour, the apostle would not deal with them mildly or in a spirit of weakness. Rather, he would discipline them as their deeds deserved. If necessary, he would exercise his apostolic authority to inflict punishment on the offenders, either by suspending them from fellowship until they repented or expelling them from the church altogether if their teachings or actions revealed them to be false teachers and messengers of Satan.

At the same time, Paul looked to the remainder of the Corinthian fellowship to obey his instructions without further delay. Thus, the apostle would not need to deal with the main body of the church when he arrived to deal with the recalcitrant and wilfully disobedient offenders in their midst.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:7

⁷ Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we.

It was understandable that the believers at Corinth should claim to belong to Christ—for so they did. They had been redeemed by his blood and were now part of his body, the church. They could make this claim with full confidence, for the Word of God (then in the form of apostolic teaching and individual New Testament letters) assured them of their position in Christ.

Even so, some of these believers tended to consider themselves equal to or greater than the apostle Paul—as far as exercising authority over local churches was concerned. Therefore, Paul must correct their misapprehension. Not they, but he is an appointed apostle of the Lord Jesus. He—not they—had been given a commission from the Lord to minister to the Gentiles and the Gentile churches. Therefore, although they had authority in a local sense over the government of their church, this authority was not equal to—and could not usurp or replace—that of the apostle Paul. Therefore, when Paul asks them to remind themselves that he and his co-workers are as much the servants of Christ as anyone in the Corinthian church, he is perhaps understating

his true position. Granted, the apostle was equal with the Corinthians in respect to his faith in Christ. However, in respect of his authority over the churches of Christ, the apostle Paul—like the other Twelve apostles—held a superior office to any local church leaders.

However, not everyone who claimed to belong to Christ was a genuine follower of Christ (Matt. 7:22-23). Several individuals claimed vehemently to belong to Christ when in fact, their real master was the devil (cf. John 8:44). These men and women possessed no part or lot in the kingdom of God or his Christ. Although they were within the church fellowship and perhaps served or ministered in various offices, they did not belong to the church of Christ.

Consequently, on the last day, they will be separated from the genuine flock of God as a shepherd separates his sheep from the goats. The ‘sheep’ will enter the Father’s eternal kingdom in heaven. The ‘goats’, however, will be consigned forever to an eternal hell of separation from God and any hope of mercy (Matt. 25:31-46).

What applied to such men and women in Paul’s day applies equally to such men and women within the church today. Even now—while promoting vile practices and preaching liberty to sin—they are abiding under God’s wrath and judgment. Their end will be as their deeds deserve, and there will be no respite day or night from their torments.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:8

⁸ For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed.

Under the circumstances, Paul needed to assert his apostolic authority, and therefore his right to require churches to follow his instructions. Paul did not issue these commands or instructions of his own accord. Rather, he was repeating the words or teachings of the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, when speaking, writing or teaching in his apostolic capacity, Paul was doing so by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, his words and teaching not only reflected accurately the teaching of the Lord Jesus, but they also were the inspired or divine Word of God, to be accepted as pronounced by the Lord God himself.

Thus, the apostle Paul could hardly be guilty of boasting too much of his authority or the authority of the other Twelve apostles. Matthias ⁴⁰ excepted, the Lord Jesus had specifically chosen, called and appointed these men to his service. They were acting in the name of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, when they required the obedience of the churches to their words of instruction, this obedience was not to them personally but rather to the Lord Jesus in whose name they spoke and acted.

Nevertheless, Paul points out assiduously that the apostolic office was not intended for harming the church or its members in any way. On the contrary, the Lord had commissioned his apostles to build up, guide, and strengthen his church and nourish or feed them on the Word of life. Thus, although Paul can boast confidently and unashamedly of the authority invested in him as an apostle of the Lord Jesus, his only desire is to use that authority for the church’s welfare and God’s glory.

Undoubtedly, the apostle will use his God-given authority against false teachers and anyone else who threatens to harm or disrupt the church. Then, however, his authority is not being used against genuine believers. Rather, the apostle is using it against false professors within the

⁴⁰ *Matthias*: Matthias had been selected by lot and appointed to the apostolic office by the remaining 11 apostles to replace Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:26). Matthias, however, is not recorded as having engaged in any apostolic activities relating to the churches, similar to those of Peter, James, John, or Paul, etc.

church. Where there is no doubt as to the evil teaching or practices of these men, Paul will not hesitate to expel them.

However, where there is a possibility of genuine godly repentance, Paul may require—at most—temporary exclusion from fellowship with a view to subsequent restoration. In less serious cases of doctrinal error, misunderstanding, or misapprehension of the truth, Paul advises the churches not to remove such people from fellowship (in case the church leaders remove a genuine believer unwittingly) but to await the time when the Lord himself will separate the wheat from the chaff.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:9

⁹ I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters.

There were occasions when the apostle wrote in a very forthright manner in some of his epistles. However, as a rule, Paul endeavoured to demonstrate his great love for the churches and wrote to them in a manner consistent with humility, patience, compassion and love. Thus, he says that he did not want his letters to appear frightening or alarming to them.

We must remember that these epistles would be read aloud publicly to each of the churches. Since the hearers could not see the expressions of the ‘original’ (human) author ⁴¹ of the letter or hear his tone of voice, they could not always determine how a particular remark or passage should be understood. Sometimes, a word, phrase, or passage might be considered hard, harsh or unkind due to a misunderstanding on the hearer's part. Thus, Paul did his utmost to write his letters so that apparent harshness or seeming unkindness was reduced to an absolute minimum when read aloud to the churches.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:10

¹⁰ For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.”

As has been said, Paul endeavoured to write his letters in love and compassion. However, on occasions, the apostle needed to express himself more forcefully. Such was the case when Paul commanded the Corinthians to deal firmly with the incestuous man in their fellowship (1 Cor 5:1-13). Such was also the case when the apostle instructed the Corinthian church leaders to deal firmly with the false teachers in their midst. On these occasions, Paul expressed himself with some vigour and with full apostolic authority.

However, this was simply another way the apostle demonstrated his genuine love for this church. He knew the immense harm immoral individuals could cause to the fellowship if others followed their depraved example. He knew, too, the great danger posed to the church by the false teachers as they attempted to lure the believers away from the truth and into false teaching and practices. In these and other situations, Paul determined to protect the church of the Lord Jesus Christ—and to do so out of his great love for them.

Nevertheless, several of these evil men—especially among the false teachers—seized on Paul’s warnings in his letters. In their arrogance, they accused Paul of mouthing loud and empty

⁴¹ *original author*: In regard to the original Hebrew and Greek Scripture texts, the original or primary Author of the Word of God was God himself—not the prophets or apostles. The prophets of the OT and the apostles of the NT were secondary authors or preachers only. Under the direct inspiration of God’s Holy Spirit, these men proclaimed or recorded exactly the words that God spoke, without modification. However, they recorded or wrote down God’s Word in languages appropriate to their intended hearers or readers (Hebrew or Greek). Furthermore, in conveying God’s Word to the people, the OT prophets and NT apostles used their individual speaking or writing styles or forms of expression, without in any way altering the precise meaning of the words that God had spoken. (Gordon Lyons)

words—words that he would never be in a position to express in action. Taking advantage of the apostle's physical weaknesses, they believed that this implied that the apostle would also be weak mentally or psychologically, and therefore unable to act against them when he arrived in Corinth. Therefore, these individuals showed contempt for Paul's instructions—and thus for the instructions of the Lord himself in whose name Paul acted.

The false teachers declared that Paul's speech was of no account—worthless, useless, and fit only to be despised and disregarded. This arrogant attitude shows that these men did not belong to Christ. They were not only despising and rejecting the words of Paul. Much more significantly, they were despising and rejecting the words (or the teaching) of the Lord Jesus. There was but one action Paul could take against such imposters: Judge them in the name of the Lord Jesus and the presence of the church and expel them permanently from the fellowship of God's people.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:11

¹¹ Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present.

This verse confirms what has been said above. Anyone who contended that Paul would not or could not act with authority when he arrived at Corinth was labouring under a very great delusion. Paul now makes it abundantly clear that he means exactly what he says in his letters. This word of warning was no bluff. It was not blustering. Paul had written his letter to the Corinthians by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, whatever he had said in these letters had been said on the authority of the Lord Jesus. Thus, acting in the name of the Lord, he would do whatever was necessary for the good of the church. This remedial action entailed dealing firmly with any recalcitrant church members. It also involved expelling from the church anyone who was harming the fellowship with false teaching, refusing wilfully to repent of their ungodly teaching.

It was indeed possible that the Corinthian church leaders would deal with these matters themselves before Paul arrived. However, if any matter remained outstanding when he came, Paul would not hesitate to act.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:12

¹² Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

Paul realised that a few individuals in the church at Corinth were elevating themselves above their station. Filled with arrogance and sinful pride, these men attempted to outdo one another and place themselves above everyone else in the church. However, they were nothing more than blustering windbags. The Lord had not appointed them to serve his church. Rather, they had appointed themselves to make their opinions known and attempt to force these opinions on the believers at Corinth.

These men were not slow to commend themselves (since they had received no commendation from the Lord). They asserted that they were as good as any other servant of the Lord, if not better than others. However, this was a false claim. No one can be a servant of the Lord or a minister of Christ if the Lord has not called and appointed him to that office, directly (as with the apostle Paul) or through the mediation of the church leadership and the laying on of hands in recognition of God's call.

The apostle Paul did not need to compare himself with such individuals. These were false apostles. Paul was one of the genuine apostles of the Lord Jesus. Like the false prophets of the Old Testament, these men did not speak in the name of the Lord. Paul, however, spoke in the name of the Lord Jesus, and he did so by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Paul speaks of these men as being without understanding. This complete lack of understanding was true from a spiritual point of view. Any person who commends himself is acting contrary to church order and protocol. Again, any spiritually minded person would realise that such an action would be carnal and worldly. Those who seek formal recognition of their calling and commendation by the Lord to his service seek it through the church's appointed officers. These men manifestly failed to do so.⁴²

Only in extremely rare occasions (where the church officers have failed consistently to recognise a person whom the Lord has expressly called and commissioned to his service) is it appropriate to act in accord with the will of God and obedience to the express command of God. This situation, however, did not apply to the leadership at Corinth or to these individuals within the Corinthian fellowship.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:13

13 But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you.

Paul (and his companions who acted as his apostolic delegates) could have asserted his authority over the Gentile churches—including Corinth. He could have magnified his office—which the Lord Jesus himself had given him on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1–9; 22:6–11; 26:9–20) and which would have been reaffirmed when the apostle was caught up into the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2ff). However, the apostle does not desire to boast above measure. His only desire in reminding the Corinthians of his apostolic authority is to ensure that they submit to his instructions and teachings, which, of course, are the teachings of the Lord Jesus. In exercising his authority, the apostle sought only to build up the church in love by providing it with sound teaching, as he has done in all his letters to the churches.

Paul recognised, however, that there were limits to his authority over the churches. The Lord had commissioned Paul to preach to the churches in Gentile areas, just as the Lord had commissioned Peter and other apostles to preach among the Jewish people. Thus, Paul points out to the Corinthians that their church—predominately a Gentile fellowship—falls within his remit and therefore comes under his apostolic authority.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:14

14 For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ.

Paul reminds the believers at Corinth that he was not acting beyond his apostolic authority regarding them. The Lord Jesus had commissioned Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles. Corinth, in Greece, was predominately a Gentile fellowship. Furthermore, it was among the first churches that Paul reached with the gospel and with the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

Thus, in assuming responsibility for the church at Corinth, Paul was acting in accord with the commission given to him by the Lord Jesus himself. This situation did not prevent the Corinthian church from electing its particular internal leadership or governing itself as a local church. However, as with all local fellowships, these early churches were subject to apostolic authority: In this case, to the authority of Paul and his delegates.

⁴² They may have been 'commended' unofficially by a specific party or group but not by the official church leadership. For example, some false teachers claimed to have received letters of commendation from the church in Jerusalem. However, they failed to mention that these letters were from the schismatic Judaizing party and not from Peter, James, John or any of the other apostles at Jerusalem.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:15

15 We do not boast beyond limit in the labours of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged,

Paul has no intention of claiming credit for the work done by others in proclaiming the gospel and building up the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is a co-worker—a co-labourer—with the other apostles and servants of the Lord. He shares with them in the service of the Lord Jesus. If others have benefitted the Corinthian church (e.g., Titus by his ministry there), then Paul would be the first to acknowledge their service for the Lord Jesus. The apostle would not hesitate to grant them the credit to which they were entitled as the ministers of Christ.

Paul is not claiming recognition in respect of the work done by others—as though that work had been his responsibility. Rather, he claims a link to the Corinthian church only insofar as they have benefitted directly from his ministry; either in person or by his letters. Such letters may have been delivered by one or more of Paul’s apostolic delegates, such as Timothy or Titus.

Even so, the apostle hopes that as they grow and mature in their faith and in the teaching that Paul has provided for them, they will reciprocate and afford to the apostle even greater opportunities of serving them and ministering God’s Word to them in the future.

Paul remains fully aware of the harm that false teachers and false doctrines have brought to this church. Thus, his commendations of others who have benefitted the Corinthian church are not directed at false teachers but only at those who were true and faithful servants of the Lord Jesus. Paul had already instructed the Corinthian elders to deal with these false apostles. If any remained when he arrived in person, he would deal with those individuals personally and with the full weight of his apostolic office.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:16

16 so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another’s area of influence.

Paul desired to proclaim the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to others elsewhere. Although authorised to exercise apostolic authority over the Gentile churches, Paul could not personally supervise each one individually. Thus, he instructed these churches to appoint elders and deacons to carry on the work of ministry. Meanwhile, and God willing, the apostle would continue to proclaim Christ in areas that had not yet heard the gospel. This strategy ensured that Paul did not build on a foundation already laid and strengthened by another servant of Christ.

Thus, whether concerning the church at Corinth or any other church, Paul could say that he had not extended his preaching ministry into another man’s sphere of influence. Of course, unless that other man were one of the apostles appointed by the Lord Jesus, he would come under the overall supervision of either Paul regarding Gentile outreaches or of Peter, James and John regarding Jewish outreaches.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:17

17 “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

The verb translated “boast” (*καυχάομαι*, *kauchaomai*) can mean “boast”, “glory”, or “rejoice”—depending on the context. Given the present context, it is probably better to think of the word being used in the sense of magnifying oneself (or one’s office or achievements) or vaunting oneself.

The apostle does not want to create the wrong impression. The boasting of which he is speaking (v.16) is not the vaunting of oneself. Even although related to the preaching of the gospel, this

would have amounted to sinful pride. It would have detracted from the inherent glory of Christ in the gospel and centred it on the man who was making Christ known.

Furthermore, Paul probably has in mind the arrogant boasting of the false teachers disturbing the Corinthian church. These men had no cause for self-praise. They were not true servants of Christ, and the ‘gospel’ they proclaimed was a gross distortion of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus, by way of caution, Paul declares, “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*”

A person may preach the gospel energetically and with great eloquence. However, if the power of the Holy Spirit does not attend his message, it will prove fruitless. For all its enthusiasm and rhetoric, such is not the saving gospel of Christ. A gospel without the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is a non-gospel; it is a man-made message. Nevertheless, this was typical of the message proclaimed by the false apostles at Corinth—and by many false teachers throughout the ages.

(The preceding remarks do not suggest that these false messages were wholly devoid of all truth. To deceive the unwary, a generous sprinkling of truth often accompanied much error or distortion of the truth. For believers young in the faith, this teaching could appear deceptively appealing and credible. At this stage, these young believers—and some older ones—found it difficult to distinguish genuine truth from subtle distortions of the truth.)

Therefore, for the gospel message to be effective to the saving of lost men and women, it had to be attended by the power of the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit—not human oratory—could convict people of sin and judgment, convince them of their need for salvation, and convert them to faith in Christ. The only reason for boasting or glorying is in what—by his grace and by his Spirit—the Lord Jesus is able and willing to achieve in the hearts and lives of sinful men and women.

God alone must receive all the glory for man’s effectual calling, regeneration, repentance, and faith. The preacher is merely God’s instrument to proclaim the Word and to expound the way of salvation. It is the Spirit of God who brings about the desire within sinful men and women to seek the Lord so that he may be found (Isa. 55:6-7). Without this prior work of the Holy Spirit, no sinful human being would desire to seek the Lord, and none would experience God’s salvation in Christ Jesus.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:18

18 For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

With a distinct allusion to the false teachers at Corinth and others like them elsewhere (e.g., Galatia and Colossae), Paul points out that Christ must commend any true servant of Christ—either directly (as was Paul and the other apostles) or through his genuine and godly ministers in the church. Any person whom the Lord Jesus has not commended in one or other of these ways is not a true servant of Christ. Rather, that person is an imposter without any mandate to speak in the name of Christ.

This, however, was precisely what the false teachers were doing. Although they had never been commended by the Lord or by the local church’s leadership, they presumed to speak in Christ’s name. Even worse, they added to the Lord’s teaching or distorted his teaching in such a way as to corrupt its original meaning or intended message completely.

Thus, Paul makes it abundantly plain that a self-appointed man is no servant of Christ and does not meet with Christ’s approval. Rather, those who meet with Christ’s approval and who receive his blessing on their ministry are those whom he has commended personally, i.e., by the calling

and appointing of the Holy Spirit to the Lord's service. These—and these alone—are the true servants of Christ.

Sadly, even today, we see within the church those whom the Lord has never called to his service. They have never received a commendation from the Lord Jesus to minister in his name. Rather, unspiritual and ungodly church leaders have placed them in positions for which they are not suited and not qualified. Alternatively, these imposters have assumed leadership roles by other devious means.

One way or another, these individuals have reached positions of influence within the church, unfortunately, without the church members doing anything proactively to prevent such abuses. Consequently, religious leaders who are devoid of the Spirit of God are now teaching and condoning the grossest errors and the vilest practices: practices that God in his unchanging and inerrant Word utterly condemns.

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 11

FALSE APOSTLES ARE NOT THE LORD'S SERVANTS

PAUL'S APOSTLESHIP IS FROM GOD'S SON

2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-33

In the first part of this chapter, Paul addresses the issue of false teachers within the Corinthian church. The apostle does not specify the nature of the false teaching. However, from his remarks concerning his Jewish pedigree, his emphasis on Hebrew lineage and his descent from Abraham, it would seem that the false teachers may have been from the Judaizing party. Alternatively, the teachings of that party, who were stressing obedience to the Mosaic Law, may have exerted a powerful influence on the false teachers—even if these false teachers were not directly associated with the Judaizing party. Perhaps, as a result, the false teachers taught that believers in Christ should submit to circumcision in keeping with the Mosaic Law. Such teaching, of course, was wholly contrary to the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his apostles. Therefore, Paul refers to such men as 'false apostles' (or 'pseudo-apostles').

Such men could not remain in the church or deceive the believers into following their erroneous doctrines. Therefore, Paul instructs the Corinthian church leaders to deal with this matter. However, in doing so, he begins his remarks to the church in an ironic tone. This tone was because of their willingness to tolerate such false apostles, despite clear teaching received previously from Paul and his associates. Sadly, and under the beguiling spell of the false teachers, some of the Corinthian believers even considered these false 'apostles' to rank equally with the apostle Paul himself. However—unlike these imposters—Paul was a true servant of God whom the Lord Jesus had called and commissioned personally.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:1

¹ I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me!

Paul now returns to his remarks on the false teachers to expand on what he had said already concerning them and to remind the Corinthian church that these men had no legitimate standing in God's eyes.

The apostle begins in an ironic tone, expressing incredulity that the Corinthians could have been so naïve as to be deceived by these false teachers. Are *they* right and *he*—Paul—wrong? Is their teaching a true and accurate explanation of God's Word? Has Paul failed to teach the Word of God correctly?

Here, Paul purports to be an unlearned or uneducated person (theologically): i.e., one not fully instructed in the fundamentals of the Scriptures and the gospel truths. In this respect, he may call himself 'foolish' (i.e., uninstructed or uneducated). The implication is that the false apostles are much better instructed than Paul ⁴³—even although he is a genuine apostle who received his instruction from the Lord Jesus himself!

⁴³ If these false teachers had connections with the Judaizing party in Jerusalem, then it is likely that they would have been trained formally in the (Old Testament) Scriptures. Some of their number may have been scribes or rabbis formerly and therefore considered themselves better educated theologically than the apostle Paul. However, prior to his conversion, Paul had been a Pharisee—and a zealous one at that! He had held a high position among the Jewish establishment (consider the official letters issued to him to pursue, persecute and imprison the Christians) (Acts 9:1-2). Furthermore, Paul had received advanced training in the Old Testament Scriptures and had learned extensively about the Law and about Jewish beliefs and

Thus, Paul says, “...*Do bear with me!*” If indeed he is foolish, then he appeals to the Corinthians to bear with him in his foolishness.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:2

² For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

Paul continues in his ironic tone. He is not unconcerned about the spiritual welfare of the Corinthian believers. On the contrary, he expresses righteous and godly jealousy for their welfare. This godly zeal for their spiritual welfare implies that they should be guided and kept in the way of God’s truth and righteousness. This path was the way that Paul had laid down for them already and had re-iterated in his earlier letters.

The apostle likens the Corinthian church to a pure bride. Paul had betrothed and presented this pure virgin ⁴⁴ church to Christ. There could be no question about this church’s initial state. Paul had proved utterly faithful in presenting them with the truth of God’s Word. Any departure from this standard of truth had occurred after Paul’s initial teaching. It had begun with the introduction of false teaching propagated by imposters and charlatans. These same evil men were now attempting to discredit Paul and his teaching and bring the apostle’s name into disrepute.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:3

³ But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Paul realised what had happened to the Corinthian church. However, many of those within this church had not seen what was happening until it was too late. Even then, they had failed to act against the false teachers and had only begun to do so when Paul had sent them explicit instructions to deal with these men.

Thus, Paul fears these imposters would deceive and beguile the Corinthian believers—as was Eve by the serpent—if the leadership did not eradicate the false teachers and teaching from their midst. Failure to act would result in the Corinthians believers being led astray from the truth, and pure devotion to Christ, into the ways of sin, error and unrighteousness. Ultimately, a once-pure church of Christ would become a church corrupted by compromising or legalistic teaching.

practices while sitting at the feet of Gamaliel; who, along with Hillel, was a renowned teacher of the Jewish faith and religion (Acts 22:3).

⁴⁴ *pure virgin*: The church was a “pure virgin” church in the sense that it had not been contaminated or corrupted in any way by false or erroneous teaching, but that—when Paul had presented it to the Lord—it had been sound in doctrine and morals. At this time, the church was not tainted in any way by spiritual adultery (unfaithfulness to God or his Word).

2 CORINTHIANS 11:4

⁴ For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

Now, the apostle begins to protest vigorously about the Corinthian church's behaviour in these matters. Paul shows the paradox between what they should believe and what, in reality, they did believe in three different ways.

When the apostle speaks of someone proclaiming "*another Jesus*", he is not referring to another person of that name but rather to another (false) representation of the true gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is alluding to the fact that the false teachers used many genuine truths from the Lord's teaching but then distorted or misapplied a number of these truths to make it no longer recognisable as the pure gospel taught by the Lord and his apostles.

Furthermore, these pseudo-apostles may well have supplemented the Lord's teaching with their own variations of that teaching or with the teachings of the Mosaic Law. Thus, since, to a greater or lesser extent, their variant teaching contained elements of the truth, several of the more spiritually immature Corinthian believers were deceived into thinking that they were receiving sound doctrine.

It seems that the church at Corinth had overlooked one especially important aspect of the Lord's true teaching: namely, that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth. Although spoken originally to the twelve disciples of the Lord Jesus, the same principle applies to all those who belong to the Lord (John 16:13). However, these Corinthian believers could not have been reading God's Word for themselves ⁴⁵ or submitting to the light shed on that Word by the Spirit of God, or they would have seen their error much sooner than they did.

So bad had matters become that the false teachers had convinced some of them of the reality of another '*spirit*'. This implication could mean the Corinthians accepted that the Holy Spirit worked in ways other than the apostles had taught them or that an entirely different spirit was available to them. So gullible were these people at this stage, and so much under the influence of the very persuasive false apostles, that they believed and readily accepted such preposterous nonsense.

This situation may have been bad enough, but it did not stop there. The Corinthians had heard the true gospel and, by God's grace, they had responded to that message in repentance and faith. The Holy Spirit was the sign and seal that they belonged to Christ. This sealing by the Spirit was true of all those people whom the Holy Spirit had called and regenerated unto eternal life—but it was not true of any others. However, when the false teachers arrived on the scene, they presented to the Corinthian believers a completely different 'gospel'; or a completely different way of looking at the true gospel. Either way, the gospel now being presented to the Corinthian church was not the true gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the Corinthian believers were so deluded and deceived by these false teachers that they accepted this 'other gospel'—even although it was no gospel at all!

Thus, concerning "another Jesus", a "different spirit", and a "different gospel", Paul says to them ironically, "...you put up with it readily enough." You accept mildly and without question that

⁴⁵ *Reading God's Word for themselves*: At the time Paul wrote, the New Testament canon was incomplete. However, these believers had access to the Lord's teaching, to Paul's letters to their church (and to other churches), and to the teaching of Paul's associates or apostolic delegates. Therefore, they possessed all the truth necessary to be fully aware of the Lord's teaching and the apostles' doctrine, and to combat error with that teaching. Those who were unable to read for themselves could listen to the Scriptures, including the apostolic letters, as they were read aloud in the churches. (Gordon Lyons)

which notoriously is wrong. You cannot or will not recognise your error, and you cannot or will not take steps to remedy that error.

No wonder Paul was deeply concerned about a church he loved and cared for so much!

In passing, perhaps we should note that Paul encountered a similar situation to this one at Galatia. On that occasion, he wrote to the Galatian church:

Galatians 1:6-7 ESV

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

The apostle's condemnation of these false teachers was uncompromising:

Galatians 1:8-9 ESV

⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

What was true concerning false teachers at Galatia was true also concerning false teachers at Corinth.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:5

⁵ Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles.

Until now, in this chapter, Paul has not expressly named those to whom his remarks referred. Now, by way of contrast, he refers to them as “super-apostles”. Such a grandiose title may imply that these men had been telling the Corinthian church that their office and ministry was superior to that of the apostle Paul—and presumably to other genuine apostles of the Lord Jesus! This brings the rejoinder from the apostle Paul, *“Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles.”*

How could the apostle Paul consider himself inferior to these “super-apostles?”

- Paul had been called and appointed to the apostolic office by the Lord Jesus himself. These other ‘apostles’ had not.
- Paul had received his instructions and teaching by revelation directly from the Lord Jesus. These other ‘apostles’ had not.
- Paul had been commissioned by the Lord Jesus to preach to the Gentiles. These other ‘apostles’ had not.

These facts show that Paul's apostolic office was authentic and that he stood on an equal footing with all other true servants of Christ. Paul's claim to the apostolic office was genuine. That of the false apostles was not. Therefore, they could not possibly look upon themselves as super- or superior apostles or expect others to do so. They had no grounds for such a claim, except in their vaunted imagination.

If anyone held a superior position, it was Paul and the other genuine apostles of the Lord Jesus. They had been genuinely called and commissioned. The others were rank imposters. However,

although the Lord Jesus had called and appointed him personally, Paul would never have abused or misused his divinely granted apostolic authority over the churches.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:6

⁶ Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.

Paul concedes that he may not be a great orator, implying that the so-called super-apostles might have possessed superior public speaking skills. Nevertheless, it is not powerful or eloquent rhetoric that qualifies a person to speak in the name of the Lord Jesus. Rather, it is the power of the Holy Spirit, and to be indwelt, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, a person must belong to Christ.

Furthermore, Christ determines who shall speak in his name and with his authority. The Lord Jesus equips that person with all the skills necessary for the task required of him. The Lord may accomplish this directly with specific and appropriate gifts of the Holy Spirit and indirectly by formal studies or training for the particular form of ministry or service to which the Lord has called that person. Again, that person would be expected to use their natural gifts, talents or abilities for the glory of God.

This, however, does not mean necessarily that this person will then become a great orator. Nevertheless, he will be Christ's servant, faithfully ministering the Word to the Lord's people to the utmost of his abilities. It is not the power of oratory but the power of the Holy Spirit that makes God's Word effective in the hearts and lives of the hearers.

Paul, however, has made his speaking limitations plain to the Corinthians on previous occasions. Indeed, this may be why some of them disregarded him or made light of his instructions to the church. However, they were reckoning without Paul's apostolic authority and his intention to deal firmly with recalcitrant offenders when he next visited the church in person.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:7

⁷ Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge?

Paul, however, rarely exercised his apostolic authority. The apostle would much rather plead with, encourage, persuade or coax the churches to respond to his teaching and the Word of God. In everything he did toward them, it was done in love and with the utmost concern for their spiritual growth and wellbeing. Thus, to uplift and exalt them in the Lord Jesus, the apostle humbled himself. He downplayed the importance and extent of his office (although not the teaching of Christ) so that the Corinthian believers would not feel overawed or intimidated by him as a person.

Unfortunately, however, some of their numbers mistook Paul's gracious humility for weakness and began to take advantage of the apostle in his absence. It may have been they who permitted the false teachers to arise and flourish within the church.

Then, from the corrupt seed that these disputers had sown, this false doctrine had sprung up. Furthermore, since this doctrine conflicted with the teaching of Paul, then they began casting aspersions on the apostle, questioning the validity of his apostolic calling and doctrine.

Another point of contention with some members of the Corinthian church was over the fact that Paul did not receive any material support from this church. Paul had no wish to burden this church; therefore, he accepted the generous support of other churches instead of the church at Corinth. However, some of the Corinthians may have been offended by Paul's selfless action.

Some of them believed that they could provide him with the support to which he was entitled. This reaction may have been because of some sinful pride on the part of some of these believers. They may have been irritated that Paul's needs were being met by other local churches instead of by themselves.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:8

⁸ I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.

Still maintaining a tone of irony, the apostle declares that he “robbed” other churches so that he would not be dependent on support from the Corinthian church and could minister to them free of charge.

The apostle did not rob other churches in a sense commonly understood by this word. Paul is possibly emphasising that these other churches contributed more than what was required of them to support him and enable him to minister to the Corinthian church without charge. Alternatively, the apostle is alluding to the suggestion made by some of the Corinthian church members that he was taking unfair advantage of these other churches rather than accept support from the church at Corinth: That is, they were accusing the apostle of “robbing” (i.e., accepting more than was due from) other churches rather than accept support from them.

Paul, however, must have had a particularly good reason for declining support from the church at Corinth. Possibly, he knew that some or many of their members possessed very limited financial resources. More likely, however, the apostle did not want to give the false teachers within the fellowship the least excuse for levelling any complaints or criticism against him: this time, concerning financial support that the Corinthian church might have provided and to which the apostle was fully entitled. Because of the potential for unjustified criticism from these imposters, the apostle may have decided to waive his right to support.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:9

⁹ And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way.

This occasion was not the first time that the apostle had declined support from the Corinthian church—as they knew only too well. Previously, during a personal visit to that church, Paul had refused to accept any support from the Corinthian fellowship, even although the apostle needed support at that time. However, rather than burden the Corinthian church, Paul had accepted the support of the Macedonian fellowships instead. The brothers who had come from Macedonia met Paul's needs fully by the gifts provided by their fellowships in that region. In this way, Paul avoided burdening the church at Corinth.

As remarked already, the apostle was fully entitled to support from all those churches to which he ministered. This included the church at Corinth. However, Paul must have had good reasons for declining support from the Corinthian church—not once, but on more than one occasion. Possibly, some church members were relatively poor, but this was not true of all of them. Some were relatively wealthy, as was demonstrated by the substantial quantities of food and drink they brought to the love feast, resulting in their over-indulgence. This over-indulgence had caused the apostle to rebuke them sternly for their inconsiderate and unchristian behaviour at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20-34; cf. Jude 1:12).

2 CORINTHIANS 11:10

¹⁰ As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia.

The apostle now resorts to a formal and solemn asseveration to reinforce what he had been saying. Binding himself by the truth of Christ within him, the apostle declares that he will not be silenced throughout all the regions of Achaia. He will continue to assert his right: The apostle would accept the support of particular local churches—to which he was fully entitled as a servant of the Lord Jesus—or he would decline that support if circumstances demanded. Whichever course of action he pursued, the Lord would provide for Paul's needs out of his riches in glory and from those churches that were in a better position to help meet those needs.

Thus, any criticism emanating from Corinth because Paul refused to accept their support would be met with the apostle's claim to liberty in choosing those churches from which he accepted support and from which he did not.

Did this, then, mean that the apostle thought less highly of the believers in those churches where he had declined their material support? Paul answers this in the next verse.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:11

¹¹ And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

Why does Paul refuse to accept their support, and why does he intend to assert his right to choose the churches from which he accepts support? Is it because he does not love or care for the church at Corinth (or any other church that might find itself in a similar position)?

Emphatically not! God himself is Paul's witness to just how much he loves the believers at Corinth. He makes absolutely no distinction between these believers and believers in any other church fellowship. They are the beloved of the Lord. The apostle cares for each one of them as a true shepherd or pastor cares for each one of his flock.

Therefore, Paul's reasons for declining support from them have nothing to do with his feelings toward them as individuals for whom Christ died, but rather because of his deep concern for them as members of Christ's flock. It is because of his genuine and heartfelt love for them that he is acting as he does. Paul was aware of some circumstances affecting the Corinthian church that constrained him not to add to their existing burdens. At this point, we do not know for certain what these circumstances were. However, in declining support from them, we can be certain that the apostle acted out of deep love for the church at Corinth and in their best interests.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:12

¹² And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do.

This verse confirms that Paul's *main* reason for declining support from the Corinthian church was related to false teachers within that fellowship. It was well known that these imposters to the apostolic office claimed the same rights and privileges as the genuine apostles of the Lord Jesus: i.e. Peter, James, John, Paul and the others. Significant in the present context was that these false teachers claimed support from the Corinthian church—on the pretext that they were entitled to the same kind of support as Paul and the others. We know that some believers within the Corinthian fellowship had fallen under the bewitching spell of these imposters (similar to those at Galatia). Thus, it is quite likely that these deceived believers contributed to the upkeep of the false teachers.

The apostle Paul was aware of this situation, and he would want to resolve it in person before accepting support from the Corinthian church. There could be no possibility of him accepting support while these matters remained unresolved. This action would have implied that Paul accepted the false apostles' claims and agreed to share that support between himself and them. Such a situation was intolerable, and Paul would have no part in such an arrangement. Therefore, the apostle asserts that he will continue to follow his current practice of refusing support from the Corinthian church (i.e. until they have formally withdrawn all support from these heretical teachers and removed them from their fellowship).

Some might argue that Paul showed a lack of tolerance and Christian love in refusing to acknowledge these other teachers as genuine teachers of the gospel. Was this charge justified?

The apostle begins to answer this in the next verse:

2 CORINTHIANS 11:13

¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

Paul did not want the Corinthians to be under any illusions concerning these men. He had described them as “*false apostles*”, and so they were. The gospel they preached was not the pure teaching of Christ. Rather, it involved adulteration of and selective additions to that teaching. The doctrine they taught was not the doctrine handed down by the Lord Jesus to his apostles and declared by them to the churches. Rather, it was a perversion of those doctrines that compromised the truth and burdened the church with teachings and practises that did not originate from the Lord Jesus. Judging by some of the libertine practices in the Corinthian church, it is probable that these men were corrupting the gospel of Christ and turning some of the believers away from God’s moral standards to much laxer standards of morality.

However, the apostle is not content to refer to these men as false apostles. Because of the harm they have been causing and the damage they have been doing to the spiritual lives of certain believers, Paul describes these imposters as “*deceitful workmen*”. In the New Testament, the servants of the Lord Jesus are referred to as ‘workmen’, i.e., workers or co-labourers together in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, the false apostles were *deceitful* workmen: i.e., ‘workmen’ or ‘servants’ who did not labour to advance the cause of Christ and his gospel but deceived others into *believing* (mistakenly) that they were advancing Christ’s cause. So deceptive could these men be that they had deluded several church members at Corinth by their persuasive teaching and had enticed these church members to adhere to the teaching and practices of these evil men.

Nor was it a case that these men were merely mistaken in their teaching. Paul takes matters a step further when he says they were “*disguising themselves as apostles of Christ*”. Clearly, the apostle is stating emphatically that these men were not just mistaken in their teaching but rather that they were not genuine servants of the Lord at all. They had merely disguised themselves as such. Although Christ had never called or appointed them to his service, they had claimed apostolic authority and privileges. They were wolves in sheep’s clothing, caring not that—by their teaching—they were dividing and destroying the flock for which Christ died (Matt. 7:15-23).

However, what kind of men would resort to such evil practices within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ? The apostle answers this in the next two verses:

2 CORINTHIANS 11:14-15

¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

When seeking to attack or entice someone, Satan does not assume a guise that marks him out very obviously as someone with evil intent. On the contrary, the devil assumes a very convincing disguise: He appears as “*an angel of light*”. That is, he appears as though he were one of God’s holy angels (“an angel of light”; harmless, guileless and pure in every respect). By such deceptive demeanour, the evil one thus deludes those whom he influences into thinking that what he is suggesting is intrinsically good, advantageous, or approved by God.

Paul argues that—since Satan disguises himself or presents himself to a person’s mind as though he were a holy angel—it is not surprising if his human agents adopt a similar strategy. These human servants of the devil disguise themselves as genuine messengers or servants of God—servants who purport to teach righteousness and profess to live godly lives. Nevertheless, servants of God they most certainly are not. They are the agents of the evil one himself and are seeking only to fulfil the devil’s purpose—which, ultimately, is to wreak havoc among God’s people by aiming to divide and destroy the church.

Of course, no power in all creation can destroy the church because Christ, the impregnable Rock, is its immovable foundation and chief cornerstone. Nevertheless, Satan’s emissaries—the false teachers—do all in their power to corrupt the church both in its teaching and in its practises. We need only to look at some of the religious leaders in positions of authority today to realise that these men are not the servants of Christ but of Satan. As Paul warns, “...their *end will correspond to their deeds*” (v.15b).

2 CORINTHIANS 11:16

¹⁶ I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little.

Essentially, Paul is warning the Corinthians not to underestimate him. The false teachers had downplayed Paul’s apostolic authority and had attempted to tarnish his credentials. However, these vile aspersions did not alter the fact that Paul had been called and appointed by the Lord Jesus himself to serve in the capacity of a divinely commissioned apostle.

Even so, if any of the Corinthians still considered that Paul was foolish (unlearned or uneducated in comparison with the false teachers),⁴⁶ then the apostle appeals to them to accept him in that capacity. He may have been a “fool” in the eyes of the world and the eyes of unregenerate and ungodly men, such as the false teachers. However, this would not stop him from boasting or rather glorying in his service for the Lord.

Unlike the false apostles, Paul’s commission was genuine. Furthermore, far from acting or speaking foolishly, the apostle acted in line with a godly life and spoke as inspired by the Holy

⁴⁶ In fact, the apostle Paul was a highly educated and intelligent man thoroughly versed in the Scriptures of truth. As “Saul of Tarsus”, he had received his education under Rabbi Gamaliel, the highly esteemed teacher of the Law. Saul of Tarsus had become a zealous Pharisee, well acquainted with the Old Testament scriptures, an able defender of the Jewish faith and a fervent enemy of the Christian faith whose followers he had persecuted with the utmost vigour. This man approved of Stephen’s execution, of whose martyrdom Saul had been a witness (Acts 8:1). However, once converted to Christ and appointed to his service, Saul (or Paul) became a very able expounder and teacher of God’s Word, well qualified by his encounter with the Lord Jesus, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, to assert and defend the truth of the gospel and of the sacred Scriptures more generally (Acts 9:1-19; 1 Cor. 12:1-4; Gal. 1:11-20).

Spirit. However, this only confirms a remark that Paul had made to the Corinthian church on an earlier occasion: *“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”* (1 Cor. 1:18 ESV).

2 CORINTHIANS 11:17

17 What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool.

Paul clarifies that his remarks here are not to be understood as spoken authoritatively by the Lord. Rather, these remarks—pitched in an ironic tone—represent Paul’s response to those in the Corinthian church who despised his authority and rejected his apostleship. Soon, Paul will elaborate on what is involved in being a true apostle of the Lord Jesus. However, the credentials of genuine apostleship are not likely to be found in any of the false professors.

Paul hesitates to state how much it has cost him to serve the Lord faithfully. However, the situation prevailing at Corinth has forced him to do so. Thus, to ensure that the Corinthians do not think he is boasting or glorying in his sufferings for the gospel, Paul emphasises that his boastings are to be understood as personal remarks (or comments)—not remarks that express the Lord’s teaching. *Of course, the apostle is still inspired by the Holy Spirit in everything he says or writes to the churches—including his personal comments.*

2 CORINTHIANS 11:18

18 Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.

Here, Paul is alluding to the false teachers who gloried or boasted in their supposed position as super-apostles (so-called). It was serious enough that these men were causing immense harm to the church with their false doctrine. However, by elevating their self-assumed office above that of the genuine apostles of the Lord Jesus, they gave the impression that their teaching carried greater authority than that of the Lord’s true apostles. Furthermore, they gave the impression that this (false) teaching overruled or superseded any contrary teaching that the Corinthians might hear from Paul or his apostolic delegates. These delegates or co-workers included individuals such as Silvanus (Silas), Timothy, Titus and Apollos.

The false teachers were unspiritual and ungodly men. Their boast was not in the Lord, but in the ‘flesh’: in this instance, ‘flesh’ being taken to mean the power (and folly) of human wisdom and human intellect devoid of the Spirit of God. These men were in spiritual darkness and could hardly be expected to lead the Corinthian believers into spiritual truths. Nevertheless, they beguiled some of the Corinthians into believing that they were genuine shepherds of God’s flock.

Another characteristic mark of these imposters was their emphasis on success in the world and power in and over the church: Not such as derived from God, but such as could be achieved through human ambition, effort and achievement. To them, power and prominence was an indication of success, seemingly irrespective of how it had been achieved. To them, the possession and exhibiting of spiritual gifts and experiences were more important than the teaching of God’s Word and obedience to the truths of the gospel. This attitude was the epitome of self-esteem, worldliness and a perfect example of living according to the ‘flesh’ (human nature or human instincts) instead of the Spirit of holiness and sanctification.

These men boasted in themselves and their gifts, talents and abilities. Paul did not need to resort to such worldly tactics. Unlike the false apostles, Paul had received the Spirit of God and was empowered and inspired by that Spirit. Therefore, Paul’s boasting or glorying would not be in himself or his abilities. Rather, the apostle would boast of his weaknesses, and he would glory in the Lord and in what the Lord had been pleased to do through this fragile earthen vessel.

Nevertheless, Paul finds himself in a position where he must tackle these apostolic imposters head-on. So deluded had some of the Corinthian believers become that straightforward instruction from the apostle was unlikely to have made much impression on their benighted minds. Therefore, Paul prepares to set forth some of the marks of genuine apostleship. However, he will do so as though he were boasting of personal achievements. He is about to relate from a personal perspective his account of his sufferings for the Lord Jesus. By this means, Paul will illustrate the marks of a true apostle—marks which none of the false teachers ever bore. Indeed, the only marks borne by them were the marks of arrogance, conceit and infamy.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:19

¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves!

Before demonstrating the marks of his apostleship, Paul has a few more things to say concerning some deluded believers at Corinth. Here, the apostle upbraids them for their gross naivety and indiscretion. Paul accuses them of bearing with fools (the false teachers) and doing so readily. They had swallowed the heretics' teaching without questioning its authenticity. They had failed to compare this teaching with the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his apostles. Again, in receiving this teaching unquestioningly, they had failed to submit to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Had they done so, it would have been manifestly evident that the teaching they received with open arms was not that of the Lord or his genuine apostles.

These particular Corinthians had disregarded the tests of truth and apostleship and set themselves up as competent individuals to judge spiritual verities (without recourse to Scriptural principles). They would decide who qualified as an apostle and who did not. This attitude and action, of course, amounted to folly of the utmost magnitude. Nevertheless, they considered themselves wise (or prudent and intelligent) enough for such a task—as Paul remarks ironically.

Admittedly, this would not be true of all the Corinthian believers, or perhaps even the majority. Even so, an influential and vociferous minority was acting in this way. This small but strident pressure group was exercising its manipulative power over the majority within the church. Probably, these activists would have been most vocal and influential in their support of the false teachers. We are aware of such cliques within this church from Paul's earlier letter to them. On that occasion, the apostle identified differing factions who claimed allegiance separately to Peter, Paul, Apollos or the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 1:10-17).

2 CORINTHIANS 11:20

²⁰ For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

Paul is utterly amazed at the response of the Corinthian believers toward these bogus teachers. Because they had not implemented Scriptural principles and tested the spirits, they had fallen into the snare of the devil. They had accepted these false teachers as genuine servants of God, and they had submitted to these deluded individuals and their perverse doctrines. Thus, Paul expresses his astonishment that the Corinthian believers could be gullible enough to permit these peddlers to enslave them by their man-made teaching and persuasive words, albeit, proclaimed it seems, with great oratory. Did the Corinthian saints not realise that they should have tested all things to see whether they were from God? (1 Thess. 5:19-22; 1 John 4:1-6)

Some members of the Corinthian fellowship had failed in this regard. They had yielded to spiritual slavery—probably involving submission to legalistic teaching. They had allowed the false teachers to 'devour' them: perhaps, an allusion to the voracious wolves attacking and destroying the flock. Again, they had permitted the pseudo-teachers to take advantage of them. The Corinthian church leaders had failed to ask pertinent questions respecting this teaching or require

these teachers (so-called) to validate this teaching by comparing it with the teaching of the Lord and his apostles.

The Corinthians bore with it too when these imposters flaunted their supposed elevated position with airs and graces, much like many of the scribes and Pharisees did among the ordinary Jewish people. Of course, many among both groups were hypocrites of the highest order; for, being unregenerate men,⁴⁷ their hearts were not right with God. Paul then speaks of these men as striking the Corinthians in the face. This expression could be understood literally. It would not be beyond the bounds of such arrogant men to express their disapproval against someone who opposed them or their teaching. However, perhaps more likely, the expression should be understood metaphorically. In this case, it would mean that these men were not slow to insult⁴⁸ and denigrate the believers at Corinth if they did not follow their line—and the Corinthians submitted to such slavery!

2 CORINTHIANS 11:21

²¹ To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that.

Paul's remarks here are a direct allusion to the sinful pride exhibited by the false teachers. Far from showing love, mercy, compassion, humility or any other characteristics of the Holy Spirit and a godly life, these men were arrogant boasters of their accomplishments. They thought nothing of taking advantage of the Corinthian church, as could be seen by the amount of damage they had inflicted on this fellowship. However, we must remember that these men were not the servants of God. Rather they were ministers of Satan. Therefore, they would be bent on the destruction of the church—had that been possible.

Their arrogance and boasting knew no bounds. Paul, however, would never resort to such tactics. He would never take advantage of a church he loved, and for whom Christ died. However, some Corinthian fellowship members interpreted Paul's deep concern for the church as a weakness. Some saw it as an unwillingness to lead from the front in opposing these false teachers. This charge, of course, was patently without foundation, as Paul's letters make abundantly clear. It was not weakness that hindered Paul. Rather, it was a genuine concern that *they themselves* put their house in order before it became necessary for him to intervene personally and come to them with the rod of discipline.

Paul was too weak to take advantage of the church (speaking ironically). However, the apostle has now reached the stage where measured action is necessary—in the form of boasting. This boasting will demonstrate his experiences in suffering for his Lord rather than boasting of any self-achievements. The examples that he will list will show what it costs to follow the Lord wholeheartedly. They will demonstrate what kind of afflictions help denote a genuine servant of God.

⁴⁷ *unregenerate men*: The false teachers may have been eminent orators, very intelligent, highly educated, intellectually (but not spiritually) knowledgeable in the Scriptures, and still be unregenerate individuals. Thus, without the power of God's Holy Spirit within them they were totally unqualified to teach, interpret or expound the Word of God. Again, lacking the Spirit of God within them, they could not claim legitimately to be true servants of the Lord.

⁴⁸ *insult*: Being struck in the face, especially with the back of the hand, was a mark of contempt and was considered an insult among Jewish people.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:22

²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.

One of the most significant marks of these false apostles was their insistence on the validity of their Jewish pedigree. In and of itself, this need not have been an issue. However, these men were emphasising their relationship with the Hebrew people for ulterior motives. They disregarded completely the fact that some—if not many of the believers—at Corinth came from Gentile, not Jewish backgrounds.

However, it seems that the false teachers were fully aware of this and were in the process of attempting to Judaize the believers in this fellowship. If this were so, they would emphasise the need for circumcision according to the Mosaic Law and the need to obey the Law of Moses more generally.

Of course, such a proposal would be heresy of the highest order. Christ had fulfilled and abrogated the old covenant of works and established the new covenant—a covenant of grace, not works. Circumcision and the ceremonial rituals of the Mosaic era had no place under the new covenant.

These false teachers realised that the Corinthian church was unlikely to be influenced by their doctrine unless they could demonstrate that their religious pedigree was impeccable. Thus, they placed great emphasis on being Hebrews, being Israelites, and being the offspring of Abraham.

Paul, of course, was well-positioned to counter such claims. Did they claim to be Hebrews? Well, Paul also could claim to be Hebrew—a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Did they claim to belong to the Israelite people? Well, Paul could make the same claim, as his lineage would show. Did they claim to be the offspring of Abraham—through whom the chosen people of God came into existence? Well, Paul also could make this claim, for he too was a true descendant of Abraham.

Furthermore—although not mentioned here—before his conversion, Paul had been one of the most zealous Pharisees of his day. He had associated with the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin had entrusted this passionate Pharisee to carry letters to Damascus calling for the persecution and death of Christians in that area. He had approved of Stephen's death and witnessed this faithful servant's martyrdom with his own eyes. Therefore, if anyone could be considered a fervent servant of the Jewish religion, it had to be Saul of Tarsus (later to become the apostle Paul).

Bearing all this in mind and considering that Paul had been called and appointed by the Lord Jesus while on his way to Damascus, the Corinthian believers should have realised that Paul was a genuine apostle. Paul was a legitimate servant of the Lord while the others were imposters—wolves in sheep's clothing whom the Lord Jesus had never called or appointed to speak, preach or teach in his name.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:23

²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

Yes, these men claimed to be servants of the Lord; but this claim was without foundation. The Lord had not called them to his service. They had assumed the office of 'apostles' by themselves. Therefore, they were imposters; and, even worse, as the apostle Paul had declared earlier in this letter, rather than serving Christ—the Author and Giver of Life—these imposters were the servants of Satan—the prince of darkness.

However, even supposing that their false claims had some merit, their supposed service in the name of Christ could not be compared to that of the apostle Paul. Thus, to emphasise the cost of

true faithfulness and service to Christ, the apostle claims (ironically) that he was a better servant than they. The apostle does not mean that he was a better *person* than they. Rather, he says that his faithfulness to Christ and the gospel was demonstrated in his life in ways that these charlatans had never experienced. Nor would they be willing to experience for the sake of the gospel. Unlike them, Paul laboured night and day in his care of the churches. Unlike them, he endured unjust imprisonments for the sake of the gospel. Unlike them, he endured beatings almost without number because of his faithfulness to Christ and his cause. Unlike them, Paul very nearly died while preaching Christ: by stoning, by attempted assassination, by shipwreck, or by some other means.

Only a person who genuinely believed in Christ and the truth of the gospel would be prepared to suffer so much. Paul's enduring of unspeakable affliction is clear evidence of the validity of his faith and his calling by the Lord Jesus. The fact that these false teachers showed no clear evidence of similar suffering demonstrates that these men had no part or lot in the kingdom of God or his Son, Jesus Christ. For it is granted unto the Lord's true followers not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for his sake (Phil 1:29).

2 CORINTHIANS 11:24

²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.

Citing a single example of suffering for the gospel, Paul mentions the abuses he endured at the hands of the Jewish religious authorities. The Jewish hierarchy was probably enraged that Paul—a former Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin—had forsaken the Jewish faith to preach Christ. Therefore, whenever they found an opportunity to punish the apostle for preaching in the name of the Lord Jesus, they did so with the utmost vehemence.

The thirty-nine lashes were considered the severest form of punishment that the Jewish religious Council could inflict. These thirty-nine strokes with the flail were reckoned to bring the accused to the verge of death. More than this number was considered likely to result in death. Therefore, the Jews did their utmost to remain within the letter of the Roman law, which forbade them from inflicting the death penalty themselves.

However, as the apostle points out, he did not receive this cruel and unjust punishment on one occasion only, but on five occasions at the time of writing this letter. Furthermore, this represented only one type of punishment that he endured for preaching the gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Thus, in verse 25, Paul writes:

2 CORINTHIANS 11:25

²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;

On three occasions, the apostle was beaten with rods. These beatings may not have been at the hands of the Jews, who usually used a flail to inflict punishment. Rather, it may have been at the hands of the Gentile civil authorities who accused Paul of disturbing the peace by his preaching. Alternatively, it may have occurred when he offended the guildsmen or tradesmen by preaching against idols and threatening their livelihood (Acts 19:23ff). Again, on one or more occasions, angry mobs may have attacked Paul with rods or clubs. These wholly unjustified and often violent assaults against him were in addition to the apostle's various punishments by other local governing authorities.

On another occasion, the apostle endured stoning. Either Jews or Gentiles could have inflicted this form of legal punishment or illegal assault. Previously, the Jews had used stoning to inflict the death penalty—although the Roman government had since suspended their right to carry out capital punishment. Capital cases had to be tried by the Roman procurator, although this

may not have prevented an incensed Jewish mob from stoning Paul. However, given what we read in Acts, an outraged Gentile mob may have stoned the apostle. The identity of the assailants is not essential here. Paul is merely mentioning this as one way in which he had endured suffering for sake of the Name and for the gospel.

Paul mentions three occasions on which he experienced a shipwreck. However, we know that the apostle was shipwrecked on more than three occasions since his remarks here could not have included a subsequent shipwreck recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts.

Toward the end of verse 25, Paul mentions that he was cast adrift for 48 hours (a night and a day). This may have been one of the shipwrecks where Paul and others were cast into the sea. They survived only by clinging to floating wreckage. Ultimately, either the tide carried them ashore, or a passing fishing boat crew rescued them.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:26

²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;

These sore afflictions and perilous events did not exhaust the extent of Paul's trials and difficulties. Frequently, his life was put in danger when he travelled over long distances on his missionary journeys and even on shorter journeys. The apostle had made many enemies, including Jews who deeply resented his defection from Judaism to Christ and Christianity. Again, Paul had become a target for the hostility of both Jews and Gentiles because he preached the gospel that exposed their sinful lives and practices in addition to declaring God's way of salvation. Furthermore, the apostle infuriated Gentile merchants: By preaching against idolatry or the worship of false gods, they perceived Paul as effectively condemning their trade and guild and threatening their livelihood. These merchants made their living from making and selling miniature idols or other idolatrous artefacts.

Other dangers also threatened to overwhelm the apostle: raging rivers and floods would pose a real danger on his travels at certain times of the year. Nevertheless, he had to risk his life, on occasions, by crossing these swollen floods. In all probability, this would have been the only way at that time to continue his journey. Although bridges existed in many places, shallow fords (except when a river was in spate) would have been more common on less frequented roads, such as Paul might have occasion to use.

In addition to these dangers, the apostle found himself at risk from highway robbery. These brigands would lie in wait at strategic points along the many arteries leading to and from the empire's towns and cities, waiting to attack unwary travellers. Usually, these robbers would arm themselves with stakes, cudgels or other similar weapons. Thus, it was unwise to travel these roads alone. Paul often travelled with his companions. However, there must have been many occasions when he found it necessary to complete at least part of his journey unaccompanied, and, on these occasions especially, he was at greater risk from robbers.

However, it was not only criminals who proved a threat to the apostle. Some of his own people—the Jews—posed a danger to Paul. They deeply resented Paul—a former zealous Pharisee—now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.

Furthermore, the Jewish religious leaders convinced themselves and others that the apostle was preaching against the Law of Moses. Of course, most Jewish leaders and people refused to believe that Christ had fulfilled that Law and that he was the end of that Law (i.e., of the Law's typical, ritual and ceremonial elements).

Again, the message of the cross deeply offended the Jews (as it also did to unbelieving Gentiles). Similarly, many of the Jews resented the Lord Jesus' claims that he was the Messiah (Gk.,

Χριστός, CHristos, Christ) and the Son of God. All these elements combined made preachers of the gospel enemies of the Jewish religious leaders. Since he was one of the most prominent preachers of the gospel, Paul was a prime target for Jewish antagonism.

However, Paul had more than Jewish hostility with which to contend. Gentiles, too, bitterly opposed his preaching. As mentioned above, this was because the preaching of the gospel proclaimed men and women as sinners abiding under God's wrath and judgment (Rom. 1:18 – 2:16). This exposure to the truth may have brought them under conviction of sin, but it did not necessarily bring them to repentance and faith. However, people—whether Jew or Gentile—hated to have their sin and sinful lifestyle exposed to the truth and condemned by the light of God's Word. Therefore, they turned their resentment against the preacher—in this case, the apostle Paul.

Therefore, summing up, the apostle declares that dangers threatened him in towns or cities, remote areas such as a wilderness or desert, or travelling aboard a ship.

At the very end of his remarks in this verse, Paul adds one more source of hostility and danger: danger from false brothers. This menace, perhaps, posed one of the greatest dangers of all. These men were not only false teachers or false prophets who could be recognised as such by their erroneous teaching or claims or through spiritual discernment exercised by the church leaders. Rather, it is probable that these false brothers displayed little or no apparent signs of their counterfeit nature. Like Judas Iscariot before them, they associated with the Lord and with his people. They fellowshiped with the believers, and they were involved in gospel activities (although not with a sincere heart). Perhaps, too—like Judas—they held positions of trust or responsibility (Judas was treasurer) or service (Judas was sent to preach the gospel). Until the very end, no one except the Lord Jesus knew that Judas Iscariot was not truly a believer (John 6:70-71).

So it would be with the false brothers. Distinct from false teachers—although destined for the same end—these individuals infiltrated the church from outside or arose from within the church, claiming to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and engaging in various forms of church service. However, like Judas, these individuals had never been spiritually regenerated. Although appearing godly to the church leaders and its members, they did not live a life of godliness and holiness outside the church. Thus, they were hypocrites or 'play actors' (the meaning of the word, 'hypocrite'). Not only was their lifestyle outside the church incompatible with godliness and truth, but the influence of their unregenerate lives would—eventually—threaten to contaminate or corrupt genuine believers within the church.

The apostle Paul was very aware of the considerable dangers posed to the church fellowships by these false brothers. Therefore, Paul did everything in his power to warn the churches of their possible presence, expose their hypocrisy, and protect the fellowships from the harm such imposters were sure to cause. Of course, this word of warning would have made Paul an enemy of these unspiritual and ungodly men. Therefore, in retaliation, they attempted to smear Paul's name—as also did the false teachers. They attempted to discredit Paul and his ministry and to cast doubts on whether he was a genuine apostle of the Lord Jesus. Given their ungodly state, some of these men might also have endeavoured to harm Paul physically. However, against all these dangers, the Lord was to preserve his faithful servant.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:27

²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

It would have been difficult enough if the apostle had been exposed to these external troubles and dangers alone. However, this was not the case. Paul had many personal difficulties with which to contend: In preaching the gospel, he frequently endured toil and hardship, which would have resulted in physical and psychological stresses and strains. Many sleepless nights would

have exacerbated the apostle's hardships as he worried about the churches in his care or as he attempted to keep himself half-awake to protect himself against surprise attacks.

Furthermore, Paul endured hunger and thirst on occasion. We do not know precisely when these occasions occurred; but, perhaps it included the time that he spent in the desert, preparing for the Lord's service (Gal. 1:11-20).

On other occasions, too, the apostle found himself without necessary food. Nevertheless, he persevered through these deprivations, knowing that—in due course—the Lord would provide.

Paul could not have undertaken so much travelling in all weather conditions without being exposed to extremes of temperature. Therefore, whether at sea or on land, the apostle endured the freezing conditions that he experienced at times. Although exposed to the worst of the elements, nothing would deter Paul from reaching the lost with the gospel. Nor would he be prevented from ministering to the churches because of inclement or severe weather conditions. By God's grace, the apostle would persevere—despite the undoubted discomfort and hardship that this must have caused him.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:28

28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

We touched briefly on this theme in verse 27 above. The apostle Paul suffered numerous and continuing adversities and privations. However, even these many painful trials paled into insignificance compared to his concern for all the churches in his care. This concern, above all else, provided the apostle with his greatest challenge. This compassionate care for the saints is what solicited his anxiety above all other causes for concern. He loved every one of the Lord's redeemed people. Like a true shepherd or pastor of the flock, the apostle cared for them to the point of laying down his life for their protection—if ever that should prove necessary.

Apart from his love and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ—whose love compelled Paul to preach in Christ's name—Paul's chief concern was for the Lord's people, the churches who gathered in his name. Therefore, he would endure every hardship that came his way, so long as he could continue ministering in love to the churches throughout the province of Asia and beyond.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:29

29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

Paul not only sympathised with his fellow believers, but he also agonised spiritually over their problems and difficulties. When he learned of particular weaknesses (of various kinds) afflicting believers, the apostle entered into their struggles and felt the pain of their vulnerabilities. Paul was not immune to the sufferings and trials of God's people in the churches. The apostle did all in his power to help share their burdens and to encourage them in the faith. He exhorted them to stand steadfastly in the power of the Lord, committing their lives and their problems to God, who guided all events in their lives. Thus, Paul endeavoured to raise the spirits of those who were weak through discouragement, comfort those who were weak through sorrow or loss, and restore to fellowship with the Lord those whose moral or spiritual weakness led them into sin.

When the apostle speaks of those who are "*made to fall*", he speaks of those who have been scandalised, caused to stumble, or offended in some other way. However, such outrages against the Lord's redeemed people caused righteous indignation in the apostle's heart. Paul cannot see believers so offended against without becoming offended himself—against the offenders.

Some believers might stumble or fall into sin or temporarily stray from the Lord due to the false apostles' teaching. In this case, the believers had been drawn away from the truth as it is in

Jesus. They had been deceived into accepting the warped or heretical teaching of these imposters. Therefore, they had fallen from their original profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They had departed from the teaching of the Lord's word and that of his genuine apostles. For this reason, Paul takes issue with these false teachers and instructs the local churches to discipline them or remove them from their fellowships.

Again, when a believer falls into sin or temporarily wanders from the Lord, that person loses his close fellowship with God and his people. This situation, too, causes indignation in the apostle's heart. Why should these straying believers suffer thus? Is it not the leaders' responsibility in the local church fellowships to search for those who wander from the fold and bring them safely home? Thus, Paul would exhort the leaders in every local church to take care of the flock. They were to feed the flock on the Word of God. These leaders were to snatch from the flames those who would wander out of the right way and into the way of spiritual and moral danger or the ways of the ungodly world.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:30

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

Paul loathed doing or saying anything that appeared to elevate him. Although he was an apostle of the Lord Jesus, Paul did not want anyone placing him on a pedestal or raising him to a position to which a servant (bondslave) of the Lord was not entitled.

Since the apostle had no desire for anyone to boast about him, equally, he had no desire to boast about himself or his achievements for the Lord. On the contrary, he desired only to emphasise his weaknesses. He desired to give all glory to God for everything that the Lord had been pleased to accomplish through him. To Paul, he was merely a vessel of the Lord. By calling and commissioning him to his service, the Lord had greatly honoured Paul. However, the apostle desired all honour and glory to redound unto the name of his Saviour and Lord. Therefore, if compelled to boast, Paul would boast about his weaknesses—not his strengths, achievements, or even his apostolic office. His office, abilities and gifts had all come to him from the Lord.

2 CORINTHIANS 11:31

³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.

Here, the apostle refers to God's witness and that of his eternally blessed Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Father and Son knew the truth of Paul's statements. Therefore, Paul can appeal to them as witnesses of everything he is saying about his desire to minimise his own personal achievements and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ's person and work. Christ alone is worthy of all honour, praise and glory.

Paul now cites an example of his straightened circumstances where he required deliverance from his enemies' hands. The apostle had been en route to the Syrian city of Damascus. This journey aimed to arrest Christians in Damascus, bringing them in bonds to the Jewish Council in Jerusalem. However, while on his way, the risen glorified Lord Jesus encountered Saul—as he was then known—on the Damascus road. As a result of this glorious meeting, Saul was converted to faith in Christ.

Subsequently, Saul ('Paul') went into Damascus to proclaim Christ among the people—much to the astonishment of the leading Jews. These Jews recognised Saul and knew that the Jerusalem Council had sent him to arrest the Christians. Nevertheless, Paul continued to preach, confounding the Jews and others opposed to his message. Ultimately, however, the Jews managed to gain the sympathy of the local governor. Thus, in verse 32, we read:

2 CORINTHIANS 11:32

³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me,

Having been persuaded that Paul was a troublemaker, disturbing the peace of Damascus by his preaching, the local governor decided to act. He ordered the immediate securing and guarding of the city gates. He believed this action would trap Paul inside Damascus' city walls until the governor's officers could apprehend and imprison the apostle.

The governor's plans were soon thwarted, as we read in verse 33:

2 CORINTHIANS 11:33

³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

In Acts, Luke tells us that a watch was kept on the city gates day and night to kill Paul (Acts 9:24). However, at night, some of the Lord's followers lowered Paul down the side of the city wall in a basket. Although guards were stationed at the city gates day and night, it did not seem to occur to the authorities that a person might escape from one of the windows built into the city wall.

Therefore, Paul made good his escape from the governor's hands and continued preaching the gospel elsewhere.

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NEXT CHAPTER FOLLOWS

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 12

PAUL ASSERTS HIS DIVINE CALLING

“CAUGHT UP TO THE THIRD HEAVEN”

2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-13

2 CORINTHIANS 12:1

¹ I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

Boasting or glorying in himself could not be further from the apostle’s mind. It was contrary to his renewed nature and against all principles of humility in Christ. However, Paul felt it necessary to defend his divine calling and apostleship against the assertions of those who claimed falsely to be apostles of the Lord Jesus.

Therefore, if Paul is forced to boast (or glory) about anything, it will not be about his personal strengths, educational attainments, qualifications, or anything similar. Rather, if he must boast, he will boast about his weaknesses. He will boast about his sufferings for the sake of the gospel. He will boast about his utter dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, his glorying will magnify the name of the Lord Jesus—not his own name, and certainly not his own achievements. Nevertheless, Paul must assert the genuineness of his divine calling and apostolic authority for the benefit of the believers at Corinth, some of whom had been deceived and enticed into heeding the false teachers.

Besides teaching erroneous doctrine, these false teachers had been challenging Paul’s divine calling and apostolic authority. Furthermore, they challenged the apostle’s right to exercise that authority over the churches—including the church at Corinth.

In verses 2-3, Paul continues:

2 CORINTHIANS 12:2-3

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—

The apostle Paul now adverts to a momentous event that occurred in his life about fourteen years previously. He speaks of himself in the third person (*“I know a man...”*), but this was a standard mode of expression among writers when referring to oneself. In Paul’s case, he would want to downplay his involvement in the experience he is about to relate.

The expression, *“a man in Christ...”* is just another way of affirming his renewed or regenerated identity in Christ (i.e., as a ‘Christian’, as believers were first called at Antioch). Only those who are *“in Christ”* now will be *“with Christ”* later, in his glory.

Paul finds it extremely difficult to describe the nature of the events that unfolded these fourteen years ago. Possibly, this is why he may never have referred to this experience. Again, he would not have wanted to give the impression that he had in some way received an experience that

elevated him above others—including the other apostles. Paul claimed rightly that his apostleship was equal—not superior and not inferior—to that of the other apostles.

Paul describes something of a form of ‘rapture’ (being “caught up” ⁴⁹), although he is at a loss to describe this glorious event accurately. All he knows with certainty is that—either in the body or out of the body—he found himself in the third heaven.⁵⁰

The apostle could not explain how his experience occurred. God alone knew how it was accomplished. However, Paul was resolutely sure of its reality. The immediately following events in Paul’s life attest to the truth of this experience.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:4

⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

During this experience, the apostle Paul found himself in the Lord Jesus Christ's presence in the third heaven. It cannot be argued that no one can enter the almighty, sovereign, and glorious presence of God or his Son and live—as Moses was told. The apostle had encountered the risen, glorified and exalted Lord Jesus once already—on the road to Damascus. In whatever form the Lord Jesus appeared to Paul on that occasion could be repeated on this occasion. Thus, Paul would have been able to hear and understand everything said to him without being overwhelmed or endangered (in respect of his present mortal body) by the excellent and majestic glory of God the Son.

Nevertheless, being in the presence of the Lord and the holy angels of God was an unearthly and overwhelming experience. While there, Paul describes hearing things that cannot be told—unutterable words. This would be because these words would be suited only to those in heaven and totally inappropriate and perhaps incomprehensible to anyone on earth. They were the language or speech of the heaven of heavens: such language as is used by the holy angels when worshipping, adoring and praising God Most High and his Son on the throne of glory.

Furthermore, the words that Paul heard were not to be made known to any person on earth. The unrenewed earth was not a suitable environment for the language of heaven. Nor would this language be suitable or appropriate even for the redeemed children of God—until they had been taken up and glorified in the Lord’s presence in heaven.

⁴⁹ “*caught up*”: Gk., ἀρπάζω, *harpazō*, to snatch away [UBS⁵].

⁵⁰ “*the third heaven*”: The third heaven is the ‘highest heaven’ where the eternal God dwells. It lies beyond or outside the created universe. Since it is the dwelling place of Almighty God throughout the ages of eternity, the ‘third heaven’ cannot be part of the created physical universe. Rather, it must be entirely separate, immaterial, and independent of God’s creation. (Gordon Lyons)

2 CORINTHIANS 12:5

⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—

After these indescribable events, Paul had every reason (humanly speaking) to boast of his experiences. However, he had not mentioned these experiences during the past fourteen years, demonstrating that he had no desire to boast of what had taken place in his life. To him, this was to be a very personal and private matter. Had it not been for Paul's necessity to defend his apostleship and authority over the churches, he would never have needed to relate this experience telling how the Lord had dealt with him. Therefore, if he were to be forced into boasting—like the false apostles—he would not boast of his great strengths and magnificent achievements—of which Paul claimed none. Instead, it would be his significant weaknesses and troubles that afflicted him daily.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:6

⁶ though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.

Paul asserts that it would not be unwise or foolish for him to boast of his experiences because he would be relating truthfully only that which had taken place in his life. However, the apostle has no desire to exult in his experiences but rather keep them private and personal. Thus, by maintaining a low profile regarding these experiences, no one would think more highly of Paul than he ought to do.

Granted, the churches should recognise Paul as an apostle called and appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ to instruct and care for the fellowships of believers. However, no fellowship and no individual believer should set the apostle Paul on a pedestal or consider him more important than he was. Unfortunately, some believers were doing this—not with Paul—but with the false apostles. Thus, they had exalted these pseudo-apostles over Paul—the genuine apostle to the Gentiles.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7

⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Humanly speaking, and because of the surpassing revelations that the apostle had experienced in the third heaven, he could have boasted to the churches of his personal experiences. Elated with pride, he could have claimed superiority over them (rather than equality with them) based on these profound revelations from the Lord himself. He could have gloried in the fact that he had been caught up to the third heaven and witnessed something of what only God's holy angels could witness. However, Paul had no desire to exalt himself in any of these ways. Furthermore, to prevent him from becoming elated or conceited, the Lord had afflicted the apostle with "*a thorn...in the flesh*".

The nature of this thorn is not specified, and it would not serve any useful purpose to speculate. (An ophthalmic condition has often been suggested, related perhaps to the intense light from heaven that had blinded the apostle temporarily on the Damascus road.) Paul refers to it as "*a messenger of Satan*": an affliction intended to harass and humble him, keeping him from becoming proud or conceited on account of the many glorious revelations he had received.

The Greek word here translated "*thorn*" (σκόλοψ, skolops) means essentially 'anything pointed' [Mounce]: For example, a small thorn or barb or a cluster of these, or a larger sharp stake ['*Sudes*', Tertullian]. The word is related to a word meaning 'to impale' and, by association, 'to

crucify'. Thus, in magnitude, this affliction was not merely akin to a small painful thorn but more akin to a large wooden stake—the kind of stake to which malefactors would be secured. Paul, of course, was not being punished *per se*. Rather, this great “thorn” was being used—like a satanic weapon wielded against him—to keep him humble before the Lord and wholly dependent on the overwhelming grace of God for delivering him (v.9).

2 CORINTHIANS 12:8

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

Not unnaturally, perhaps, the apostle beseeched the Lord to remove this troublesome affliction from him. He must have felt it to be a very distressing and distracting burden, and he did not want his service for the Lord impeded by such restrictions. Therefore, on three separate occasions, the apostle pleaded with the Lord to deliver him from this sore affliction.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Paul had pleaded earnestly with the Lord in prayer. He had begged the Lord Jesus to free him of this aggravating affliction. However, as we see, it is not always the Lord’s will to do what we earnestly request. In this case, the Lord would accomplish a far greater good for Paul by not acceding to his plea. For, by allowing the affliction to remain in Paul’s life, the Lord was ensuring that his servant would not become conceited. He would not exult in the many revelations that he had been privileged to receive. Rather, he would remain the humble servant of the Lord, faithful to his cause and anxious only to serve him as best as his present condition permitted.

Nevertheless, the apostle realised that—in his present condition—he could not serve the Lord Jesus unaided. Therefore, the Lord anticipates the apostle’s concern and states to him categorically and most reassuringly: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*”

Paul told the Corinthians that he would boast only in his weaknesses—and this was the reason. The apostle could not have relied on his own strength, but the Lord had assured him that he would meet his every need while serving him: “*My grace is sufficient for you....*” Not less than you need, and not more than you need, but sufficient for your every *need* (not every ‘*want*’ or ‘*desire*’). “*...for my power is made perfect in weakness*”.

The effectual preaching of the gospel cannot be accomplished in or by man’s power but only by the power of God. It is the Spirit of God—not the preaching of man *per se*—that brings men and women to Christ. Thus, despite Paul’s undoubted weaknesses, these were no obstacles to his work in the Lord’s service. That work would prosper, for it would not depend on Paul’s strengths or abilities—or the lack thereof—but on the almighty and sovereign power of God Most High, of his Son Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit of God.

Thus, let us take heart from these words: Whatever our afflictions, disabilities, limitations, or other restrictions, none of these will hinder the Lord from accomplishing his purposes in and for our lives. If he has called and commissioned us to serve him, then he will fulfil his purposes for us through our service—notwithstanding any limitations or infirmities in our lives. Nevertheless, the Lord may grant us “a thorn in the flesh” so that we might seek and proclaim his glory and not our own.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:10

¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Under any other circumstances, Paul might have resented his sufferings. However, the apostle knows that God has called him not only to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ but also to suffer for his sake (Acts 9:16; Phil. 1:29). Therefore, for the sake of his Lord and Master, Paul not only endures suffering but declares that he is content to suffer such afflictions. He is at peace with God and with himself because the Lord has assured him of all-sufficient grace to meet every eventuality and cope with every trial and adversity of life.

Thus, Paul rests content in his weaknesses, knowing that the Lord is his strength and stay. When his opponents—including the false ‘apostles’—insult and abuse him, the apostle remains content, as he abides in the comfort of the Lord. Even when he is insulted by those whom he considered his friends and who had professed to belong to Christ, he endures it, knowing that the Lord knows those who are his (2 Tim. 2:19). Likewise, the apostle endures hardships or the daily struggle against trials and difficulties. Similarly, for the sake of Christ, Paul willingly endures persecution, afflictions, and unjust punishments, knowing that his Lord and Master suffered much more than he.

If these trials were not enough with which to contend, Paul also willingly endures calamities, distressing circumstances, and life-threatening situations for the sake of Christ. In addition to suffering hunger and thirst, there were several occasions when Paul suffered shipwreck, barely escaping with his life. Robbers had ambushed him on the highways and byways. Riotous mobs and the civil or religious authorities had beaten the apostle almost to death. Nevertheless, despite his intense sufferings, Paul has no desire to exalt himself or boast of his endurance. Rather, he desired to glory in his weaknesses and to exalt the name of the Lord Jesus.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:11

¹¹ I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.

Even so, the apostle should never have found himself in this situation. If certain church members at Corinth had acknowledged Paul’s apostolic authority and had submitted to the Lord’s authority over them, Paul would have been spared this hardship. However, certain church members refused to acknowledge Paul’s credentials and to submit to his authority over the local churches—including theirs. Indeed, not only did they reject Paul’s apostleship and divine commission, they exalted and approved men whom the Lord Jesus had not called to serve him in an apostolic capacity. These were the false teachers—or pseudo-apostles—against whom Paul had to contend (cf. 2 Pet. 2:1-10). It was on account of these imposters that the apostle had been forced to adopt his present position.

In truth, Paul ought not only to have been accepted and approved by the entire church at Corinth; they also should have *commended* him. The more so, since Paul was a genuine apostle—one who had seen the Lord Jesus personally. The origin and nature of Paul’s calling and commissioning contrasted markedly with those who claimed to be ‘superior apostles’ (or super-apostles). The false and outlandish claims being made by these imposters implied that they outranked Paul as an apostle.

These troubling individuals were treading unstable ground. If they rejected Paul’s apostolic authority, then it follows that they must also have rejected essential elements of his teaching. However, that teaching—in its entirety—was given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Essentially, it was the infallible Word of God. Therefore, these Corinthians were not only disobeying or

disregarding Paul's teaching but also—and much more importantly—they were disobeying or disregarding God's Word spoken through the apostle (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

2 CORINTHIANS 12:12

¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

How could a church be so gullible and so deceived by men? (cf. Gal. 1:6-10) Paul had demonstrated to them repeatedly the signs of his apostolic office and authority. Yet, some of these Corinthians refused to believe all that Paul had shown to them. They had seen or heard of the signs or miracles performed by the apostle Paul in the name of the Lord Jesus. They had witnessed his power to heal through the Lord's power. They could hardly deny that many people had been converted to Christ through the apostle Paul's ministry—a clear testimony that God was with him. However, despite the overwhelming evidence supporting Paul's apostolic office and authority, some of the Corinthians would not accept him or his God-given authority over the churches.

What can be done with those who repudiate the truth and the messengers of the truth? They are self-condemned. Paul will deal with them as their deeds deserve—notwithstanding their rejection of his authority. Furthermore, the Lord will deal with those who claim to be apostles and are not. If they fail to repent wholeheartedly, they will be removed from the church. Ultimately, they will find that they have been assigned a place among the lost. Even so, such individuals can cause immense damage to the church and its testimony in the world while they remain within its fellowship. Therefore, Paul was concerned that the fellowship leaders should take appropriate action to deal with these false apostles before they could cause even more harm.

So it is today. False 'apostles' and false teachers still exist within the churches. Unless the leadership takes firm measures against them, they will contaminate and corrupt the fellowship of believers with their ungodly ways and their false and vile teachings. To their own destruction, they twist and pervert the imperishable and sacred Word of God (cf. 2 Pet. 3:16; Jude 1:3-4; 12-13; 17-23).

2 CORINTHIANS 12:13

¹³ For in what were you less favoured than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

Paul is at a loss to understand the Corinthian church's attitude toward him. They had benefitted immensely from his ministry among them. Many had experienced salvation through his preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. The church at Corinth had been established and built up by the apostle Paul and his associates. The Corinthian church members had witnessed many signs or miracles at his hand, demonstrating that God was with him.

However, Paul took great pains not to impose himself on these believers or be an unnecessary burden. Therefore, although he was fully entitled to a share of support from this church, the apostle declined to accept such material aid. Was the church now offended because Paul would not accept support from them? Whatever the reason, some of these Corinthian believers preferred to accredit and support the false teachers and accept their distorted teaching.

PAUL'S ENTREATIES AND WARNINGS

2 CORINTHIANS 12:14-21

2 CORINTHIANS 12:14

14 Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.

Paul had visited the church at Corinth previously. Later, the apostle had intended to make another visit but had been prevented on that occasion. However, for the third time, the apostle is ready to make his way to them again.

Paul re-iterates once more that he has no intention of burdening this fellowship. Whatever may be his rightful claims to financial support as an apostle to the Gentiles, he will not lay hold of these claims. Thus, although the false teachers claimed support from the Corinthian church—to which they were not entitled—Paul would claim no such support, even although fully entitled to it.

This considerate action shows something of the apostle's love and concern for the believers at Corinth. He yearned deeply for their spiritual welfare and was much distressed by the willingness of some fellowship members to allow the false teachers to beguile and deceive them. Therefore, far from being a burden to them in any way, Paul intends to do everything in his power to correct these straying believers and bring them back to the truths first imparted to them by him through the gospel. Thus, in a manner analogous to loving parents making future provisions for their children, Paul will endeavour to provide these believers with everything necessary for spiritual growth and godliness. However, he will do so without charge and without accepting material support from this church.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:15

15 I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

Paul reaffirms the extent of his love for these believers, even although some of them have attempted to discredit the apostle and his ministry. Their rebuff to his apostolic commission will not change his love for them or his concern for their spiritual wellbeing. The Lord Jesus had entrusted Paul with the task of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles.

The apostle had been commissioned to establish churches in predominantly Gentile areas and minister to each local fellowship's needs. Therefore, despite their attitude toward him, he will continue to love them, to pray for their repentance and restoration, and to teach them unambiguously what God's Word requires.

Paul realises that some of these Corinthians do not want to know of his love for them. They have chosen to follow the false teachers and to submit to their usurped authority over them. Nevertheless, Paul will not be deterred. He will pursue his goal of attempting to win these straying believers back to the truth. If, in the process, it becomes evident that some among them do not belong to Christ but have made a false profession, they will be called to repentance or removed from the church. Ultimately, however, the Lord will separate the wheat from the chaff.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:16

16 But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit.

Most of the Corinthians conceded that the apostle had not claimed support from them at any time. Nevertheless, a few of their number implied that, although Paul did not claim support directly from them, he did so indirectly. He, personally, did not claim support, but—by guile, stealth and deceit—he engaged others to claim support on his behalf.

This scurrilous accusation, of course, was a wanton and wicked lie. Paul had never resorted to such underhand tactics, either on his own behalf or on behalf of his co-workers. He had never encouraged his co-workers to make claims on his behalf. Thus, in verses 17 and 18, the apostle asks:

2 CORINTHIANS 12:17-18

17 Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? 18 I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

Rather than Paul's co-workers taking advantage of the Corinthians for the apostle's benefit, both Paul and his associates laboured together in unison to benefit the believers at Corinth. The Corinthians had no excuse for disputing this, for they had met Titus and the other brother Paul had sent to them, and they knew full well that these men never took advantage of them in any way. Therefore, it was clear to every honest mind that Paul and his co-workers worked together for the church's good, not its detriment.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:19

19 Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved.

Perhaps, however, some of these Corinthians were adopting a different tack: The reason Paul had sent Titus and the other brother to them was because the apostle was afraid to come in person and face up to their assertions and demands.

How wrong they would have been to have thought along these lines. The apostle most certainly did not fear meeting the recalcitrant few among the Corinthians. Rather, as events would show, he would not only meet them but also would deal firmly and decisively with those who had been causing dissent in the fellowship by their false teaching and claims to apostolic office and authority.

Paul had sent Titus to find out about their present spiritual condition. One of Titus' tasks was to determine whether the majority of the Corinthian church had followed the directions and exhortations Paul had given them in his earlier letter(s).

Neither Paul nor his associates possessed any ulterior motives regarding the Corinthian fellowship. On the contrary, their sole desire was to see the believers built up in their faith, increasing from day to day in their knowledge of Christ and communion with Christ. It was a loving concern for these people that had inspired the apostle to write to them in this manner. Because of his intense love for this fellowship, he expressed himself to them forthrightly yet compassionately in his letter.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:20

²⁰ For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

One of the matters Paul had dealt with previously was the Corinthian's ungodly attitudes and behaviour. He had spoken to them plainly about this earlier, and he expected to see some considerable improvement by the time of his forthcoming visit. However, the apostle fears that he may not find the improvements he was expecting. On the contrary, he fears that there may still be some measure of quarrelling, anger, hostility, gossip and other sins found among some of these Corinthians.

Thus, Paul declares that his next coming may not be in the manner that this fellowship would have wished—nor that the apostle would have wished. Nevertheless, if any church members are still practising these sins, the apostle is fully prepared to deal with those who indulge in them and deal with them firmly.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:21

²¹ I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

However, Paul would take no pleasure whatever in finding such a situation prevailing at Corinth. Indeed, if he came to them and found them still engaged in the same sins as before, he would feel humiliated or humbled before them. After all, in his first letter(s) to them, he had commanded them to repent of their impurity, immorality, and sensuality and forsake these sins altogether. To continue practising such sins was to deny the reality of their conversion to Christ (1 Cor. 5:1-13; cf. 10:1-11).

Even so, Paul suspects that some of the Corinthians were indeed engaging in such sinful behaviour. This evil conduct would affect their own lives and testimony and the lives and testimony of other church members who were not involved in these sins but who tolerated those who practised them. The leadership specifically was duty-bound to apply discipline to those who sinned in this manner.

Thus, fearing the potential spread of these immoral and other evil practices among other church members, the apostle declares that he may have to mourn or grieve for them. They had professed faith in Christ. However, some of them were not living by the sacred duties and responsibilities of that profession. Despite Paul's earlier warnings and entreaties, several of their members had not repented of their sins. Therefore, the apostle knew that they faced the judgment of God if they remained impenitent and disobedient to the truth. However, since he loved this church dearly, the apostle could not help but mourn over those who had rebelled against the truth.

We should remember that the apostle Paul is not alluding only, or even specifically, to that member who had been guilty of sexual perversion (incest) and addressed explicitly in one of Paul's earlier letters (1 Cor. 5:1-5). Serious as it was, this specific sin was only the tip of the iceberg. Other sins had since emerged and had come to the apostle's knowledge. Some of these involved different forms of sexual immorality, but many others were sins of a more general nature. These included, but were not confined to, splits or factions within the church; rebellion against Paul's apostolic commission and authority, including the confrontation with one church member who engaged directly with Paul (or with his appointed delegate) and refused categorically to submit to his authority or instructions.

Additionally, the church had become involved in in-fighting among the various factions, resulting in loss of love, harmony and peace within the fellowship. Others disagreed over the value of spiritual gifts and exalted them above the express teaching of God's Word. Although they may have denied it vehemently, for them, the possession and exercise of spiritual gifts were, in practice, more significant than love for God and love for one another. However, such attitudes and practices resulted in quenching the Spirit of God and the love of God.

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NEXT CHAPTER FOLLOWS

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 13

PAUL'S FINAL WARNINGS AND EXHORTATIONS

2 CORINTHIANS 13:1-14

2 CORINTHIANS 13:1

¹ This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

There seems to be some ambiguity here regarding Paul's "third" visit. His statement may be understood as a third *actual* visit or a third *planned* visit (the second was not accomplished), making only two visits. However, in verse 2 below, Paul speaks of having visited the Corinthians twice previously, making the next visit his third visit.

(Some commentators say that Paul's previous Epistle (1 Corinthians) should be counted as one of his 'visits'. In this way, they limit the apostle's personal visits to two. However, others say that Paul wrote four letters to the Corinthians (only those known today as 1 and 2 Corinthians survive). If, initially, more letters existed, it is conceivable that this involved more visits by Paul to Corinth than is sometimes assumed.)

Paul now alludes to the need for independent witnesses to any offence as prescribed by the Law of Moses. The evidence of a single witness was insufficient to permit a person to be found guilty. Indeed, charges could be sustained, guilt proven, and sentence pronounced upon an individual only on the testimony of two or more competent, honest, and reliable witnesses (Deut 19:15).

Nevertheless, why did the apostle need to make this assertion? Verse 2 tells us:

2 CORINTHIANS 13:2

² I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—

Paul had learned that individual church members at Corinth were continuing to live sinful and immoral lives—despite their profession of faith in Christ. In his first letter to them, he had warned plainly and repeatedly of the consequences of their wilful misdemeanours and its effect on other members of this fellowship. The apostle knew that he would be coming to them to apply discipline. If need be, he would not hesitate to exclude some of these professing believers from the church's fellowship. However, the apostle also knew that—according to the Law of Moses—the allegations made against these offenders had to be supported by two or more independent and reliable witnesses.

Paul, of course, was able to produce these witnesses. Indeed, so blatant was these offenders' sins that their immorality was common knowledge, not only within the church but also to people outside.

Thus, the apostle reiterates his solemn warning. As he had told them before, if they did not repent of their sins and renounce them utterly, he would come to them and would not spare them. To cleanse the church of its impurity and preserve it from further corruption by these individuals, Paul would—if necessary—hand them over to the realm of Satan for punishment in the world.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:3

³ since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.

Some of the Corinthians maliciously challenged Paul's claim to have seen the risen Lord Jesus and did not accept that the Lord had called and appointed him to the apostolic office. One of their reasons for this was not that they disbelieved Paul's calling and apostleship but rather that—*knowing it was true*—they did not want to submit to Paul's authority. They knew that Paul would never tolerate sinful behaviour in their midst.

Paul, however, will have none of it. They had challenged his apostolic authority and had attempted at every turn to discredit him and his apostolic office. Now, the apostle will demonstrate in no uncertain terms that he is the Lord's servant and that the Lord Jesus himself had commissioned him to oversee and discipline the churches. Paul will come to them, and—by dealing with the obstinate offenders in their midst—he will prove to them that he is acting with the power and authority of the Lord Jesus. He will not act in weakness. Rather, when the apostle comes, he will not spare them. If they do not repent, he will take the necessary action to purge the church of its corruption and corrupting influences.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:4

⁴ For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

The Lord Jesus was crucified in weakness, but only because he humbled himself and became obedient unto death—even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:5-8). He submitted voluntarily to the sufferings and death of the cross in order to atone for sin. However, although he was crucified in weakness, he was raised by the power of Almighty God. Furthermore, as the risen, glorified and exalted Lord Jesus, he sits at the Father's right hand with all power and authority in heaven and earth subject to him (Phil. 2:9-11; cf. Heb. 1:3-4; 2:9).

Therefore, when the risen Lord Jesus called and appointed Paul to his service, he invested the apostle with the power and authority that comes directly from the Lord himself. Thus, when acting in his apostolic capacity and when teaching or instructing the churches in his care, Paul speaks and commands with the authority of the Lord Jesus himself. To refuse to hear and heed such teaching or injunctions was to refuse to hear and heed the Word of the living God and his Son (Heb 1:1-2; cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21).

2 CORINTHIANS 13:5

⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

Of course, there could be one obvious reason why these Corinthians were not prepared to listen to Paul or to heed the Word of God: The Holy Spirit had never regenerated them. In this case, they rejected Paul and his teaching because they were unregenerate and still in their sins. Moreover, if still in their sins, Paul's teaching intended to build up and strengthen regenerate believers would be falling on deaf ears: ears that were insensitive to the truth of God's Word because these individuals were spiritually dead.

Granted, this was not true of most professing believers at Corinth, but it could have been true of some. Therefore, the apostle challenges them to examine themselves. Do they possess the Holy Spirit? Are they progressing in sanctification or holiness of life? If not, then it was likely that these individuals were devoid of spiritual life in Christ Jesus; and, therefore, they did not belong

to Christ. However, if they did not belong to Christ, they had no share in Christ or his kingdom. They belonged to the world, and, ultimately, to the world, they would return.

Whatever be the truth of the matter, Paul would not permit rank unbelievers—*who professed to be the children of God*—to remain in the church. He would remove them when he came. If some among them were Christians who had been led astray into sin, he would discipline these believers in love. However, they would not be excluded from the fellowship unless circumstances left the apostle with no other option. Even then, the expulsion of a genuine believer would be temporary.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:6

⁶ I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.

If the same test were to be applied to the apostle Paul and his co-workers, what would the outcome be? Would they pass the test, or would they be found wanting? Even worse, would they be found to be disapproved of God—apostates?

Most certainly not! Paul was a legitimate apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus had called and appointed Paul personally and had sent the apostle to proclaim the gospel and minister in the Saviour's name. The very ministry from which the Corinthians and others had benefited so richly was ample proof that Paul had passed the test: he was a genuine apostle of the Lord Jesus. This clear proof of Paul's apostleship stood in marked contrast to those who claimed to be apostles of the Lord but were not. These were the imposters and reprobates—not Paul and not any of Paul's co-workers.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:7

⁷ But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.

Paul's prayer is that the Corinthian church may not be guilty of wrongdoing; especially, regarding their attitude toward Paul and his co-workers and submitting to false teaching and false teachers. Irrespective of what they might have thought about Paul or his apostolic authority, Paul exhorts them to do the right thing. If they do not, the apostle will deal with those who despise and reject the Word of God when he arrives in person.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:8

⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.

Paul and his co-labourers in Christ are constrained to abide by their commission. The apostle Paul was called and appointed to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ, to preach the gospel among the Gentiles. He was appointed to bear witness to the risen, glorified, and exalted Lord Jesus, who had appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

Since the Lord Jesus himself had called and appointed Paul, there was no way he could or would depart from the true and faithful preaching and teaching of the Lord. To him and his Word, he must remain utterly faithful. He must abide by his Truth—even if some among the Corinthians found that truth or teaching unpalatable or even highly objectionable.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:9

⁹ For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for.

Paul is fully content to endure weaknesses and afflictions for the sake of Christ and the benefit of the churches. The apostle rejoices to think that although he and his co-workers labour in circumstances of great weakness and humility, yet the believers in the churches—in this case, Corinth—consider themselves strong.

These Corinthian believers looked upon themselves as being strong spiritually, needing no one to instruct them in the ways of the Lord or to correct their interpretation of the teaching given them by the false apostles. Indeed, if these believers were now walking in the truth, then Paul gives thanks to God for their restoration because the apostle knew that—previously—these Corinthians had erred and had wandered from the truth.

Nevertheless, the church at Corinth needs to be under no illusion. Although it appeared to them that the apostle Paul was weak—or irresolute—they were very much mistaken. Paul had been allowing them to resolve the grave matters in the church. However, if they had not resolved these matters following the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his genuinely appointed apostles, then—when he came—Paul would most certainly deal with these issues robustly and finally.

Thus, in verse 10, the apostle declares:

2 CORINTHIANS 13:10

¹⁰ For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

Paul had expressed himself very plainly in his First Letter to the Corinthian church, and the present Letter, and probably also in other letters to them that no longer survive. However, some of the Corinthians viewed the apostle's instructions as just mere empty blustering. They thought he would never have the courage to enforce the directives he had given to this church.

In this, however, these Corinthians erred greatly. Paul had not emphasised his apostolic power and authority unduly so as not to coerce those who were causing problems in the church. Rather, he desired to give them time to see the error of their ways and resolve the situation for themselves. Nevertheless, the apostle wanted these Corinthians to realise that he would deal with them decisively when he came if they did not end these internal problems. Then, they would learn that God had granted Paul power and authority for disciplining his church in the name of the Lord Jesus. However, having made this point, the apostle did not want to exercise severe discipline but rather to nourish, sustain, and build up the Lord Jesus Christ's church in a spirit of love, friendship, and harmony.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:11

¹¹ Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

In this verse, the apostle reaffirms his desire for peace and unity within the Corinthian fellowship. He does not want to discipline them when he comes; therefore, he exhorts the believers to rejoice in the Lord and to aim for restoration with one another. At the same time, believers should comfort one another with God's promises regarding them. They should agree with one another as far as this was possible within the teaching of Scripture. However, they could not compromise the truth of God's Word to accommodate false or erroneous teaching.

For the most part, the apostle Paul addressed those who knew and loved the Lord and whose desire was to remain steadfast and faithful to the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his genuine apostles—such as Paul. It was only a vocal and stubborn minority among them who were unwilling to accept Paul's apostolic authority and who were encouraging false teaching in their midst.

To this obstinate minority, primarily, the apostle issues his warnings. It is these, primarily, whom he will discipline on his arrival at Corinth. To all others—including all those who repent of their present disobedience—the apostle assures them that the God of love and peace will be with them and will remain among them.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:12-13

¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints greet you.

The apostle exhorts the believers to demonstrate their love for one another by expressing the customary kiss of greeting. However, Paul is careful to emphasise that this was to be a holy (sanctified) kiss as was befitting the children of God. It was not merely a sign of welcome and friendship (common among eastern people) but an expression of Christian love for one another in Christ Jesus.

Paul then conveys to the Corinthian church the greetings from all those among whom this apostle laboured—his co-workers in the gospel. Paul wanted the Corinthians to be aware that these other churches and co-labourers were supporting them in prayer.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:14

¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Paul closes his Letter with a triune benediction: He prays for the bestowal upon them of the grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship—or binding ties—of the Holy Spirit. Provided they remained loyal and faithful to God and his Word, all the blessings associated with this benediction would be theirs in abundance.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ: Here, we see that it is not only the Father who is associated with the attribute of grace (the God of all grace). The Son also shares in this attribute.

That sovereign grace, which is wholly unmerited and undeserved, the Son bestows upon his elect people. Furthermore, the Lord Jesus continues to bestow grace upon grace on all his redeemed and sanctified ones. Though none of us deserves the least of God's mercies, compassion or kindness, yet—in his grace—he pours out the full measure of his abundant grace, meeting every need of his beloved children. "*As our days, so shall our strength be*" (Deut. 33:25), for—as the Lord declared to the apostle Paul—"My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

