

George Philip Bible Readings Second Corinthians

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1:1-2

To set the background to this epistle we consider the place, the people and the writer. Corinth was visited by Paul around A.D.50 during his second missionary journey when he spent a considerable time in that significant city (Acts 18: 1-18). It was set on the main trade route from East to West, having two harbours (see map). Its population of half a million was cosmopolitan, and the atmosphere of the city's life was brilliant, prosperous, permissive and rotten, with the Temple of the Goddess of Love sanctioning vice, just as the cult of self-expression in the present century sanctions and seeks to justify self-indulgence and carnal preoccupation. The people by culture, inheritance and circumstances were pagan, and yet from amongst such people, by God's salvation, a church was formed (1 Cor. 6:9-11). In the church there were some Jews (Acts 18:1-2, 7-8) and a few well-to-do people (Rom. 16:23 Romans being written from Corinth) but the majority were Gentiles and poorer. From First Corinthians it is clear there were both spiritual pride and factions in the church (1 Cor. 3:1-4), a preoccupation with spiritual gifts, together with hazy standards of morality and some considerable misunderstanding of doctrine (1Cor. 5:1-6ff; 12:1-3ff; 15:12ff). The writer of the epistle needs no identification but the number of his visits and letters to Corinthians is debated at length. Visits are referred to in Acts 18:1-18; 2 Cor. 2:1 (a painful visit); 2 Cor. 12:14 and 13:1. It is suggested that the painful and fruitless visit happened between the two epistles. Letters are referred to in 1 Cor. 5:9 (not preserved for us) and this would make our First Corinthians actually the second letter. It seems best (in spite of much debate) to regard the epistle we now study as being the third letter written in answer to news received from Corinth through Titus (2 Cor. 2:12; 7:2-8ff).

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1:1-2

It is good to set the context of an epistle like this not least to show the extent of the uncertainties and misunderstandings and changes of plans that were all part of the apostle's life and experience. We are foolish if we think that the great men of Scripture were either super-human or inhuman. They were men of like passions as we are (and we do not mean to slander them) and in Paul's epistles we see the real humanity of this great man together with all the tensions, hurts and emotions of his service. Remember, in all the recrimination stemming from the church at Corinth, Paul was dealing with people who owed their spiritual life and growth in grace to him under God. The church accepted his rebuke of the incident of gross sin within the congregation by which the testimony of the Gospel was being compromised, but they resented the implied rebuke to their own proud spirituality. Now, the obvious way to hit back was to attack the apostle's person and ministry and this explains something of the stern, authoritative opening verse. Paul makes plain that his ministry does not stand or fall by the approval or acceptance of the Corinthians or any other congregation, but by the will of God. It is painful and distressing to have to make such a clear public affirmation but it is necessary, and the fact of calling and ordination is not cancelled or even qualified by a sense of personal unworthiness or by actual failure. (Do not make Paul sinless; there is only one sinless Man). Read Gal. 1: 1-2, 10-24 and then prepare to listen to such a man whose God-honouring ministry carries its own authentication.

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1:1-2

The opening of the letter is somewhat cold and formal and yet Paul does not hesitate to recognise the company of believers in Corinth as a true church in spite of all its faults. The very existence of Christians at all in that decadent city was a miracle of grace and Paul is not slow to call these converted sinners by their true description, "saints". Consider carefully the description of the church and of the individual believers in it in 1 Cor. 1:1-2 and then let your heart thrill to the glory of being a member of the church of Jesus Christ. It is no run-down human organisation. It is holy, universal and apostolic and its destiny is glory (Eph. 3:20-21; 5:23-27). Paul associates Timothy, his young ministerial colleague, with him as if to authenticate the young man's ministry in Corinth even though he had met with no success. Reference to Timothy and Corinth is found in 1 Cor. 4:14-20; 16:10-11; (Paul seems unsure whether Timothy or the letter would arrive first.) If the Corinthians had rejected Timothy's ministry and counsel, perhaps finding opportunity in the young man's diffidence, then Paul makes plain that he is still one of the apostolic company. Paul defends the young man against his detractors and at the same time in personal letters to Timothy (preserved in Scripture) counsels and exhorts the young man

to lay aside his inhibitions and to fulfil his ministry. There is balance in grace just as there is humanity. When Paul links the Corinthians with all the other groups of believers he both demolishes pride and encourages hope. It is certainly a work of the Devil when Christians and congregations become jealous of each other. There are times and phases in God's work, as there are different aspects and expressions of it, but it is all God's doing. He alone gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:5-9) and He alone has the glory. All we can rightly claim are our sins and failures and these God will forgive. Little wonder Paul prays that grace, the favour of God, will be with them, together with its sweet fruit of peace. What richer blessing can any man pray for another?

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1:3-7

There must have been a measure of apprehension among the Corinthians as this letter began to be read in the church because they had accused Paul of fickleness and unfaithfulness because he had not in fact come to them as he had promised. This is dealt with later in the chapter. Here he launches right into the praise of God and in doing so gives the Corinthians the chance to acknowledge privately that they had been wrong, Far from being careless or indifferent about the need to visit them, Paul had been going through deep trials. And he testifies here to the goodness of God in caring for him, and all like him, in such circumstances. He eulogises (the literal Greek word) or speaks well and warmly about God in respect of his recent experiences of difficulty and suffering, which experiences the Corinthians were adducing as evidences of backsliding and unworthiness of apostleship. Paul rejoices in his circumstances and, while not pretending that they were in themselves pleasurable, recognises them as being rich in blessing for himself and others. He refers to his experiences, (described in v.8-9) in all their soreness, as "mercies" bestowed by the Father of all mercies (v.3 RSV) and the God of all manner of comfort. In relation to a corresponding passage, Rom. 5:1-5. one commentator says, "Tribulations are God's gracious gifts to help us on to glory." But Paul is insisting here that the significance of what he has been going through is far richer than merely his own sanctification, or his chastisement as the Corinthians suggested. It was for the blessing of the Corinthian themselves.

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1:3-7

Ten times in these verses we have reference to comfort, in each case translated from the word "paraclete" which signifies as much of encouragement and help as tenderness and compassion. It signifies the Father of tender mercies standing alongside His children with immediate capacity to help and save (cf. John 14:16, 26; 15:26; Ps. 103:13-14; Phil. 4:19). This is something Paul had learned through suffering so that he could minister it to others. In the things he had been going through, which the Corinthians had labelled as "judgments from God", he had known a new sense of the nearness of God, a new sense of power for ministry, and a new sense of "the fellowship of His sufferings" in the on-going work of the Gospel (Phil. 3:10-15). Paul will later expound to the Corinthians how "death works" in Christian experience in the sense that there are many deaths to die, not least to reputation, acceptability and misunderstanding, in order that there might be saving power in a man's ministry (2 Cor. 4:10-12; Col. 1:24-25). These words of Paul are meant to counsel the Corinthian believers not to fall into the all too common trap of interpreting experiences *solely* in terms of ourselves. Granted some, or even many, battles are the result of our own sin, disobedience and foolishness. But, as we walk with God we must learn to see our battles "in Christ", and explained only in terms of His over-ruling providence whereby He furthers His work of grace in us and through us. This is a glorious way to think of life and Paul seeks to draw the Corinthians into fellowship with himself in such an attitude (6-7) and so to go on together.

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1:8-11

Although Paul speaks rightly with the authority of an apostle he does not take the ground of independence, and that is why in v.11 he stresses the importance of their prayers. In this passage of personal biography it is the intensity and devastation of the trouble he met in Asia that is emphasised rather than the exact nature of it. It was indeed a very dark and even prolonged valley he went through. Some suggest that Paul is here referring to some of his experiences of mob violence during his journeys, or to some of his hazardous experiences in travelling, or to some illness during which he really felt his end was come. Others link the costly agony spoken of with Paul's own reference to his "thorn in the flesh" spoken of later in 12:7ff. We cannot be sure of the

circumstances and since Paul himself is not specific it must be best this way, so that we can apply the passage in whatever situation we find ourselves to the fullest possible encouragement of our hearts. We are wrong when we allow ourselves to think that the mighty men of God, because of their spiritual dedication, found life "plain sailing". Paul is speaking of faith born of despair in circumstances that brought him to "death's door". There was nothing he could do but have faith in God, abandoning all self-confidence, and believing that if he was destined for further service then, if necessary, God would raise him from the dead (cf. Heb. 11:17-19). This is faith indeed, and its essence is confidence in God.

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1:8-11

These verses should be compared with Phil. 1:12-14, 19-26 together with 1 Pet. 4:12-14; 5:6-11 to help us to understand and to prepare ourselves for the inevitable spells of travail (in a variety of forms) that come upon those engaged in spiritual service. Besides the explanations of this experience suggested in yesterday's reading, we must allow for the whole thing being possibly a specific assault of Satan bringing to Paul "fightings without and fears within" (2 Cor. 7:5), something that could be likened to the great heaviness and troubling of spirit that came upon our Lord Jesus Christ as He moved forward to His death on the Cross (Matt. 26:36-38ff). Never forget the deep mystery of the baffling cry from the Cross, "Why have you forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46) for it signifies that even in the high moments of spiritual obedience we may not be aware of, or even capable of being aware of, the true spiritual import of what is happening. It tends to be unbelief rather than faith that insists on having everything neat, tidy, tied up and pigeon-holed. Experience is bigger than that, and God even bigger still. Think of the faith born of despair in the story of Job, especially chapter 23. But the attitude of Paul is dynamic. He declares that the God who delivered him once in the past will do so again and again. But this is not "isolated" faith for v.10 runs right on into v.11 without a break, and we are given a glorious instance of the power of intercessory prayer. But in the words, "He will deliver us, as you help us by your prayers then...." we see Paul's masterly way of dealing with spiritually disaffected critics. He enlists their prayer support in the fellowship of service for the Gospel's sake, so that the blessing of God might reach many. One translation of the second part of v.11 is, "That there may be a sea of upturned faces as a widespread thanksgiving goes up to God on our behalf for the gracious act which He has done for us."

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1:12-14

From this point down to 2:11 Paul is defending his integrity as a man and as a minister of the Gospel, against those who were imputing unworthy motives to him. There is a time to turn the other cheek as both Jesus and Paul taught (Matt. 5:39; 1 Cor. 4:10-13) but when Paul saw the church at Corinth, which he had established in the Gospel, being divided, hindered and possibly destroyed by the ill will of disaffected Christians he was not prepared to stand idly by. Like his Master he could speak plainly when the issue demanded it (Matt. 23:1-3, 13-15, 23-24ff.; John 18:19-23). Here Paul protests his sincerity in person and action before both men and God. In his ministry he has not acted, as they slanderously suggested, with fleshly or worldly wisdom as if he was no other than a shrewd businessman governed only by the profit motive and self-advancement. If that had been his aim he would have acted very differently in his missionary journeys and would not have incurred the wrath of the religious and secular establishments. It was the grace of God toward him in wonderful kindness that moved him to sacrificial service. This same sincerity he claims is in his letters and there are no hidden slights and innuendos to be discovered "between the lines". He says that the Corinthians have not fully understood himself or his letters, and that must have been a blow to a people who were proud of their spiritual understanding.

It also charges them with having chosen deliberately to make the most unfavourable assessment of a situation they knew very little about. This is serious and reveals the "sickness" of their spiritual life. But Paul hopes and prays that they will strive to understand so that on the day of judgment they might be proud of their dealings with the man who had brought salvation to their lives, as he would be proud of the fruit of his ministry.

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1:15-22

It is indicative of how seriously Paul viewed the situation between himself and the Corinthians that he deals with it in great thoroughness. It is almost as if he recognises that this wrong spirit on their part is a massive

hindrance to their growth in grace and to the on-going work of the gospel. Although he personally is quite in the clear, he takes time to explain his actions since they had declined to take him on trust. In 1 Cor. 16:5-7 a visit was promised after he had been to Macedonia but here it is made plain that he subsequently decided to visit them both on his way to Macedonia and on his return. This presupposes good relations between Paul and the Corinthians. But the plan was dropped after they had been told about it and they reacted badly. This was all that some of them needed and they picked on the incident, slandered the apostle saying, "He's nothing but a yes and no man; you never know where you are with him; it might be safest not to take too much notice of what he is saying, for after all it doesn't seem to tally with his great spirituality when he is preaching!" Now, the existence of a church in Corinth was a testimony to the authenticity of Paul's ministry, for God does not bestow the unction of His Spirit on hypocrites. God is witness that Paul's ministry had been one of affirmation in respect of Christ, in whom all God's promises find their fulfilment, and any person dealing with that God and His Gospel cannot ever dare to trifle.

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1:15-22

The following comment from the Record of July 1961 is a fair paraphrase of and comment on the words of a man whose testimony was, "This one thing I do" (Phil. 3:12-14).

"Christ is the Yes pronounced on all God's promises showing Him to be altogether faithful, and no man caught up into the service of that God and His Christ can be other than faithful and true. If a man has many dominating interests in life he may well have as many inconsistencies. But when one thing alone compels his loyalty, and the object of his loyalty is Christ, you can depend on him. He will have no dealings with verbal quibbles and theological subtleties and fancies. His word will be the mighty affirmations of the faith, spoken and expounded in language men will understand either unto faith or refusal. In your case or mine there is nothing for man to boast of. It is all of God that we are confirmed and stabilised in our faith (but they were anything but stable). It is God who has given the unction of His Spirit on our preaching (but they who were detractors had none of this living pulse, so obvious in its absence). It is God alone who marks us out as His own, making the fruits of Christ manifest in our daily lives (but theirs was a spirit of harsh criticism with pride in place of love). My attitude in dealing with you is for your good. I have no desire to dominate your faith, but to teach you faith, so that recognising God when He speaks to you, you may stand ever more sure."

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1:23-2:4

In the immediately preceding verses 21-22 Paul seems to be turning the thoughts of the Corinthians to the God who had both confirmed his preaching and their conversion, calling them together to do His will. This is a glorious picture of salvation. We are established or confirmed, commissioned, sealed and guaranteed. We are marked out from the rest of mankind by the God who has set His love on us. His Spirit is in our hearts. In the innermost recesses of our being there is the one who enables, urges on and keeps us right so that we do not need to get lost in confusion. Now, it is in this attitude of rejoicing in God that Paul moves on to say specifically why he had not come to Corinth. He kept clear of them to spare them inevitable rebuke, and of course these believers, already too aware of their own importance and independence, would resent the suggestion that Paul was their spiritual "boss" or "bishop". Had he not declared in v.21-22 our sufficiency in God? Paul adds v.24 to calm them down but then goes on to speak with plainness saying that there is a time to hold back from saying necessary things because people may not be in a frame of mind and spirit to receive them with benefit. At the same time he asserts that his actions have not been easy for the simple reason that the love which binds together preacher and converts is a love that is capable of deep and sore hurt and anguish of heart. Through the whole of this epistle Paul opens his heart to these Christians and in many ways it is sad to see the apostle pleading with his own converts to be trusted. There is something wrong when Christians prefer to put the worst construction on a situation and to make the least complimentary assessment of men tried and proved in God's service.

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2:1-4

Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth (largely his own converts), was a source of great joy *and* great pain. His deep concern here stems from a painful visit he made to them apparently without bringing any

betterment to the situation or any change of heart and attitude on their part. His grief was not simply because they were manifestly rejecting both him and his ministry but because they were failing to grow in grace and consequently were deteriorating in spirit, life and witness. Now love, which is not lacking in Paul's pastoral heart, cannot remain silent or inactive in the face of danger threatening those who are loved. Therefore Paul attempts to bridge the gap of misunderstanding not only by assuring them of his love and his motives but by trying to get them to view their own situation and condition more seriously. Note how in 1:24 Paul has made it clear that he is not suggesting they have abandoned their evangelical faith. But you can hold firmly to a sound doctrinal position and still be spiritually adrift in heart and in practical life. This is what Paul urges on them right through the epistle to its very last chapter (13:1-5, 10-11) and it is the urging of love which hesitates to force a face-to-face confrontation, hoping *and praying* that the situation will be resolved creatively with the least possible hurt. This is why Paul held back from visiting Corinth, as he makes plain in 1 Cor. 4:14-21. He has no desire to "use the rod" and we can learn from his reticence, not least by recognising that there can be a carnal satisfaction in "taking people to task" or "pointing out where they are wrong" or "dealing with them". We need first to be sure of our own rightness and even more sure of the motivating love of Jesus in our hearts. Think of our Lord's words in Matt. 7:1-5.

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2:5-11

This passage in itself is enough to show that Paul is not concerned with personal slights or with personalities but rather with the health of the fellowship and the integrity of the witness of the church in the world. The situation referred to is recorded in 1 Cor. 5:1-8 and Paul's concern is that since the discipline had been exercised and had produced the result of godly sorrow and repentance, the whole matter should now be consigned to the past and forgotten. Not only so, the restored sinner must now be encouraged and helped, not least because he is weak and vulnerable and must be enabled with the fellowship of the saints to stand against all the demoralising assaults of the Devil. But it is not only the offender who needs to be on guard. Those who exercised the discipline may be tempted to spiritual superiority and those who would have taken "the easy line" may be tempted to criticism and complacency. And such are the devices, the well laid stratagems, of the Devil (Eph. 6:11) that the whole church could be ensnared and sidetracked. Satan would settle for the restoration of a backsliding believer if in the process he could set the church members at odds among themselves. There would neither be prayer, preaching nor witness for a long time if he succeeded. Watch and pray that you do not enter into temptation. The flesh is indeed weak (Matt. 26:41). This is why it needs constantly to be brought under the crucifying influence of the Word of God.

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2:5-11

Two things are clear from Paul's words about discipline being exercised within the church. The first is that forgiveness is a reality, glorious in its totality no matter how terrible the sin is, provided there is repentance and confession. If we confess our sins, whether the moment after the act or after strong rebuke and chastisement, there is forgiveness and the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:5 - 2:2). The second thing is that sin must never be regarded lightly. If we say we have no sin, denying our guilt or justifying our wrongdoing and continuing in the way of wrong, then we must be dealt with. Sometimes this must be done severely, in order to awaken repentance by God's grace, so that we might be restored to fellowship with God and His people and so delivered from the snare and bondage of Satan. Sin, be it carnal or cultivated, is not to be trifled with. It is dangerous and destructive and so swiftly progressive that it reaches a chronic and established condition almost before we begin to think seriously about it. We must be on guard and, without spurious interference, we must be our brother's keeper. Paul's words on discipline in 1 Cor. 5 are in line with our Lord's words in Matt. 18:15ff. and the sentence about being delivered to Satan signifies that church discipline and excommunication (being barred from the Lord's Table) is no mere ecclesiastical action. Deep spiritual consequences are involved. But, and this is very important, the objective is restoration (1 Cor. 5:5; Gal. 6:1). This is indeed glorious ministry although it may well be misunderstood and condemned as harsh, authoritarian, and stemming from spiritual pride. It all depends on how seriously we regard sin and its consequences. Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians about restoration "in the day of the Lord", that is when life is over and final judgment has come (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15). Here in 2 Corinthians sore rebuke has melted the heart and

the sinner has turned from his sin and Paul, rejoicing like the father of the prodigal, urges that the man be encouraged in his restoration to fellowship and reinstatement to service. But in Hebrews 6:4-8; 12:15-17, we read of the dark side of the story where persistence in sin confirms that no work of saving grace had been done in the heart.

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2:12-13

At this point Paul begins to deal with his main theme of Christian life and service and the vital link between the two. His concern is to awaken a sense of responsibility for the stewardship and progress of the gospel, something that had been significantly absent from the Corinthian church because of a spirit that mingled criticism, carelessness and over-strictness. These two verses link back to 1:8-10 and on to 7:5 and highlight the "steady, persistent pressure, the sleepless malignity of the evil forces that beset" (Denney) all those engaged in the work of the gospel. Satan was busy trying to drive a permanent wedge between Paul and the Corinthian church and this was no mere personal issue as today's verses make plain. Having set out on his extended journey which would eventually take him to Corinth, Paul came to Troas (Acts 16:8-11) and found a great door of opportunity for preaching the gospel. However, his concern for the Corinthians, stemming from a heart of love, reached such a pitch and pressure in his mind that he could not grasp the opportunity for preaching, great as it was. Perhaps he left the work in the hands of a colleague while he himself went on into Macedonia eager to seek out Titus and get news about Corinth, which news he earnestly hoped would indicate the time was now ripe for a visit to the Corinthian church. Think of the loss to Troas! Think of the hindrance to the work! Think of Paul's burden to confirm the faith of the Corinthians which here took precedence over his desire for the conversion of the people of Troas. "Paul's worry and anxiety about the Corinthians had so disturbed his spirit that he had no heart left to preach the gospel at Troas and enter the open door. This is a terrible thing to happen. We have known men of God whose spirit has been crushed and broken by trouble and dissension among their people, so that they no longer felt able to continue the work to which God had called them. This lays a solemn responsibility on trouble-makers for which they will have to answer." (Rev. J. Philip) Satan's devices are crafty indeed and he strikes at the heart of the work.

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2:14-17

This passage of glorious thanksgiving is sparked off by Paul's recollection of his meeting with Titus (described in Chap. 7:5ff.) which brought him reassuring news of how the major spiritual crisis in Corinth was resolved. He describes the complicated evolution of his human and spiritual pilgrimage of faith and service as being led along in Christ's triumphal procession which moves forward on a broad front throughout the world regardless of battles, disappointments and apparent setbacks. The triumph is Christ's, and Paul could almost be seeing himself as one of a conqueror's string of captives, glad to be there and thrilled to have a place in such a victory. It is in looking back that Paul sees the sure leading and irresistible activity of God. He recognises that the battle is indeed the Lord's (1 Sam. 17:47; 2 Chron. 20:15) and that the issues do indeed belong to Him in all places and at all stages (Ps. 68:20 AV). The AV. Translation of v.14 "Thanks be to God who always causes us to triumph" seems to draw too much attention to Paul when his concern is actually to emphasise what God has done. But we can take the message from it that when we are determined to act in Christ's interest God will see us through. It may not be quite in the way we expect or even pray for, but in the process something very wonderful will be accomplished. God will use us in the baffling soreness of our experience to spread abroad the fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus. This is the thrill of witness. But note carefully in v.15a that our witness to Christ is first of all unto God.

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2:14-17

Think back to the dividing effect of Christ's coming into a situation as announced in the nativity story. He is set for the fall as well as the rising of many (Lk. 2:34) This is an aspect of witness that we seldom reckon on. We know, in theory at least, that all will not be saved but we must recognise that the one proclamation of Christ will have two completely opposite effects. For some, the announcement of Christ will be a token of salvation right from the beginning, and for the others it will be a word and seal of judgment. This is why our witnessing and

our preaching must never be casual or off-hand, but must come from hearts centred on God. At the same time we must pray for the preaching and hearing of the Word that it might go forth unhindered and be heard in faith (2 Thess. 3:1; Eph. 6:19; Isa. 55:11; Heb. 4:2). If this be the nature and issue of witness to Christ in the Gospel then it is absolutely necessary for all who are so engaged to have their hearts centred on God and not man. Since the issues are so great, Paul cries out, "Who is sufficient?" and the answer is that no-one is sufficient in himself (3:5). Therefore since we are concerned with God and with what belongs to God, pleases God and is of infinite value and delight to God, even Christ, then we see to it that we are not triflers with God's word nor pleasers of men. We are not playing a religious game, looking for clever or interesting ways of making the gospel "attractive" and "acceptable" to sinners. We are certainly not out to make personal gain either in cash or in popularity and advancement as some preachers certainly were in Paul's day. God looks on the heart and sifts the motives. We are people commissioned by God, says Paul, and from sincere hearts, as in the presence of God we speak in Christ and for Christ. There is a time to make such vindication of our personal ministry, and Paul does so to the Corinthians without embarrassment.

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3:1-3

Paul says that what a man is in the secret place of his heart and his life before God determines the range and quality of his service in the Gospel. God will not entrust the unction of His Spirit, by whom alone the work is done, to those who are not worthy to be trusted. Now, the fact that Paul was trusted by God is evidenced by the power of God unto salvation in his preaching in Corinth (1 Cor. 2:1-5). There would have been no church in Corinth but for Paul. He is not in any sense claiming personal credit. It was all God's doing yet Paul was the human instrument and this was all the testimonial that was needed for them and others to accept him as a valid minister of the Gospel. Letters of commendation, which were commonly in use in the early church to prevent unauthorised persons interfering in the preaching and administration of the churches (Acts 18:27), were useful safeguards which Paul at times used as he moved into other areas. But letters can be forged (2 Thess. 2:2). What then marks out a man as an authentic minister of the Gospel? It is the existing and abiding fruit of his ministry, The Corinthian believers (who themselves were issuing letters of commendation to others, not always wisely) were the living testimony to Paul's authenticity and yet they were the very people who were rejecting him and his right to minister and to exercise discipline. But it was no longer necessary for Paul to justify his ministry. *They* were the justification and vindication and all people, Christian and otherwise, knew it (2). This is a real challenge to responsible witness. "You are an open letter about Christ which we ourselves have written, not with pen and ink but with the Spirit of the living God. Our message has been engraved, not in stone but in living men and women." (J.B.P.) But what were the lives and attitudes of the Corinthian believers saying to the pagan city about Christ? People read us better than we sometimes think.

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3:4-6

All praise counts for nothing if God's authentication does not seal a person's ministry in living proof by the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit producing converts of Christian character and continuance. On the other hand, as Paul is emphasising to the Corinthians, all criticism and disaffection can be regarded lightly and discounted if the unmistakable unction of God's Spirit authenticates the work. This is Paul's confidence regarding the situation in Corinth. What the critics were denouncing and denigrating was not Paul or his work but the person and work of the Holy Spirit. This is serious and dangerous sin! Paul is not emphasising either his own ability or his success but rather that the whole work was God's doing. In some ways Paul was a spectator, watching with glorious astonishment what God could do through a manifestly weak instrument (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26-2:5; 1 Thess. 2:1-4, 13). There is reference in today's verses to the three persons of the eternal Trinity and to their respective activity in the work of salvation. This is Paul's theme also in Rom. 8:1-11, emphasising the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer to make all God's salvation in Christ personally effective. This is indeed a glorious Gospel of which Paul, by God's grace, has been made a minister (1 Cor. 15:10-11). Paul is no doubt thinking back to his own conversion and commission, cf. Acts 26:16-18, and to the fact that something new had been instituted by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This "new" thing is not a written code of laws and rules to be imposed on people, for that can "kill" and desolate. The gospel concerns "life in the Spirit".

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3:7-11

In these difficult verses remember that Paul is writing to a company of Christians who were not in good spiritual health and who were lapsing into spiritual pride and legalism because they were more taken up with people than with Christ. They may not have abandoned "sound doctrine" but they had no "savour" of Christ. Salt can lose its savour (Matt. 5:13) and salt is most noticeable in its absence. The point Paul seems intent on making comes finally in v.18 where he speaks of a daily renewal and transformation into the likeness of Christ.

This is witness! Read this passage (7-18) in the N.E.B. translation and then read Exodus 34:29-35, which story Paul uses to demonstrate both the reality and yet the passing nature of the glory of that mighty occasion of the giving of the Law. Two things run through today's verses. The first is the idea of the need for communion, open fellowship with God, as being the basis of all Christian life and service (which theme is taken up in chap. 4). The second emphasis is the contrast between the old covenant which ministered death and the new which brings life (cf. Rom. 7:7-11 and 8:2-4). The Law demanded perfect obedience and to sinners incapable of such obedience it became a word of desolation and condemnation. But we must never despise the old covenant, as some do, making the whole Old Testament virtually irrelevant and portraying it as almost a contradiction of what they call "New Testament Christianity". The Law reflected and expressed the character of God and therefore had a true glory. But it was a prophetic glory, pointing forward to a greater glory yet to come in the gospel. When the "sun of righteousness" (Mal. 4:2) rose, the brightness of that glory eclipsed all lesser lights but did not devalue them. Many a brilliant professor can look back with gratitude to the integrity and competence of an unknown village schoolmaster. The Law was our schoolmaster or custodian, to keep us on the right road and direction till Christ came (Gal. 3:24). Now, Christ is all.

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3:12-18

"Paul is living under the new covenant. He has experienced its glory and he reflects it in his ministry; but great as that glory is, it has not yet been fully displayed. It remains a *hope*, but the hope is so well founded that there is nothing hesitant about Paul's preaching. On the contrary, he uses *great plainness* of speech." (Tasker) This, of course, is what the Corinthians objected to, accusing the man of being "authoritarian" when in fact he was speaking with the authority of God. Referring again to Moses, Paul reminds the people that on the one hand the Israelites could not look on the brightness of the glory of Moses' face as it reflected the glory of God, while at the same time Moses hid his face, to conceal from them that the glory was fading, not permanent. But the glory of the old dispensation was not going to "fade into the light of common day" but to merge into the brilliance of high noon. The whole religious system of the Old Testament pointed to its fulfilment in Christ, and the tragedy of religion is that it so often becomes an end in itself, rejecting Christ. Far too much religious talk today concerns the "church" (as a system of religion) and the church "having a presence" in society, while the doctrines of grace in the gospel are simply forgotten. This seems very much like "preaching another gospel." (Gal. 1:6ff). When the Scriptures are read many of those who have been longest in church do not hear because they do not want to hear. They would rather do as they have always done. They would rather live by the dim candlelight of dull, formal, "trying to be good" religion than open their minds, hearts and wills to the glorious changing and transforming grace of Christ Himself living in their hearts by His Holy Spirit. The fact of the indwelling Spirit, life-giving and enabling, is the glory of the gospel which we all too easily forget. We can lapse back into a dreadful bondage of struggle. That is not God's desire. Commands to holiness crush; exhortations to holiness can bring emotional desolation; but to be told that the power and life of the risen Christ have been given to you and are there for you to use is gospel news and tells of glorious freedom and hope.

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3:18

Why had Paul to go into all the difficult (to us) argument, of this chapter? Was it suggested he was being less than open, veiling and hiding things which the Corinthians were entitled to know and have? If so, he is pointing out that Moses did the very same thing for good reasons which were part of the divine plan which incorporated judgment as well as salvation. There is a blindness upon people's minds which stems not from intellectual difficulty but from moral and spiritual refusal to yield to Christ, which refusal in unbelief has deep elements of

the Satanic in it, as we shall see in the next chapter. Unbelief is evil; it is not weakness (Heb. 3:12; Rom. 14:23). This is why we must see to it that we are "open-faced" with God, out in the open, walking in the light with nothing to hide, so that like Moses we might deal with God face to face as people deal with their true friends (Ex. 33:11). Of course we do not yet see God face to face and yet we do see "that manifestation of His glory which is made in His word and by His Spirit, whose office it is to glorify Christ by revealing Him to us," (Hodge) cf. John 14:25; 16:12-14. We do not look directly on the glory of the Lord but with qualified or limited vision, none the less real, as in a mirror whose surface is not fully polished (1 Cor. 13:12). Although some translations refer to reflecting the glory of God (and this calls for polished lives on our part) the main thrust of Paul's words certainly deals with the transformation that is wrought in our personalities and lives as we maintain "open-faced" fellowship with God, with no lowering of the eyes and no feeble excuses. Lift up your eyes and seek His face, not in an attempt to generate feelings of dedication but with a resolve to obey Him in down-to-earth goodness, and it will not be long before friends will see the change. We ourselves will know the difference. It is called fellowship with God (1 John 1:3-7).

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4:1

Paul here proceeds with his main theme that the life of a Christian and his service as a witness cannot be separated because the first conditions the second. He is thrilled to his depths with the glory of the message and ministry committed to him and to his stewardship. He has spoken of how basic and eternal are its issues (2:15-16) and he is soon to refer to how powerfully the agencies of evil resist the message. Such thoughts both challenge and encourage him. Since he himself has received mercy from God and has further received the privilege of being a custodian of God's message of mercy to others, he is determined not to lose heart nor to show any weakness in his ministry. Think of Paul's developing assessment and awareness of his own essential worthlessness (1 Cor. 15:9; Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:15) and you begin to see the comprehensiveness of his call to consecration in Romans 12:1-2. It is the same here. As a sinner mightily forgiven and consequently mastered by Jesus Christ his one thought is to serve Him acceptably. All service begins with sound and competent doctrine and we must know where we stand (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:1-2). True service also requires competent expression for there must be nothing unworthy used as a vehicle for communicating the glorious gospel of the blessed God (1 Tim. 1:11). It calls for the exercise of our highest capacities and a rigorous slaying of all carnal cleverness (1 Cor. 1:17). But if there is no accompanying competence of life on the part of the preacher and the church then, instead of being channels of God's gracious gospel, our lives become resistances which rob the message of its power. This is indeed responsibility.

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4:1-6

Here is the challenge of service. "Perish policy and cunning, perish all that fears the light," because if we do not have that attitude we will play false with God and with people. The "snares" Paul refers to here are all inward, having to do with thought, attitude and motive. These can all be in a person's heart so well camouflaged that no one suspects, except God who looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). If these hidden things of wrong are allowed in the lives of those called to steward the gospel then their lives and activities will function like the drawing of a curtain on a stage, preventing rather than assisting the clear manifestation of the truth. We will function like a smoke-screen and what should stand forth with crystal clarity will be indeterminate, lacking in definition and in appeal. If we adulterate God's word, holding back its solemn and severe precepts in the interest of popularity, or if we dress up the gospel in philosophical speculation in the interest of acceptability, we may appeal to people's feelings or intellect but the truth will not be commended to the consciences of the hearers to bring them into the presence of God. We may give them the impression they are dealing with God but the effect will be rather like that of inoculation, a little dose given to instil immunity to the real thing. People may well be impressed with *us* and even be drawn to *us* but what is the use of that? Because self has motivated us, we have preached self, not Christ and that is exactly the charge Paul is denying. He was prepared to be nothing so that Christ might be everything (Phil 3:1-21; 1 Cor. 9:19-23). We must learn to be like Jesus who came to minister, to give up His life, and not to be ministered to. It is costly. It is Christianity.

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4:1-6

We have to express the truth so that it stands clear in its own right, integrity and power. The Word of God is not empty, it works (1 Thess. 2:13; Isa. 55:6-11). We are to let our light *so* shine that people will see God and listen to Him. We have no commission to preach ourselves, not least because we are no use to anyone. Self must go. Christ must be all and always increasing (John 3:30). But even authentic, God-glorifying preaching of the gospel is not always believed and accepted. This is a fact of experience testified to in Scripture, and if we do not grasp this fact of "failure" in the business of being Christ's witnesses we shall often find ourselves desolate and depressed. All will not believe; but the fault is not in the gospel nor necessarily in the preacher. Those who remain indifferent and insensitive in the face of the preaching of the gospel bear testimony to their *own* condition. They are perishing. They are not yet finally lost, and this gives urgency but not strained panic to the business of evangelism. We have already emphasised (3:18) that unbelief is something for which people are held culpable. It is a refusing of what God has made plain, as is evident from Rom. 1:18-22ff. But along with moral responsibility there is the active agency of Satan in the business of unbelief for he has blinded the minds of those who do not believe. Just where the human responsibility and the activity of Satan come together and which comes first we cannot say. But this much is clear: those who dabble with unbelief are involved with something far more powerfully evil than they are aware of. It is in this context that we see the glory of the gospel and the Spirit's work in our salvation. This is how we explain our conversion. God shone the light of His glorious grace into our hearts and showed us Jesus and our need of Him, and in so doing enabled us to come to Him in repentance and faith.

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4:1-6

We must consider v.4 very deeply, for no one will make sense of Christian life or service who does not face up to the fact of the personality of evil and his organised kingdom operating with well laid stratagems against God and all His purposes. James Denney in his commentary speaks of how we must reckon on "the omnipresence, the steady persistent pressure, the sleepless malignity, of the evil forces which beset man's life." The world we live in and the human nature we live with are not in any sense neutral. "Satan and his satellites are by no means yet overcome, though their death-knell was sounded by Christ's victory on the Cross." (Tasker) We must learn to reckon on a world order of evil (1 John 2:15-17; 5:19; Gal. 1:4; 4:3; Col. 2:8), a spirit of disobedience which signifies that human nature is not neutral (Eph. 2:1-3; Jer. 17:9; Gen. 6:5), an organised kingdom of evil which is clear in its objective and specific in its operations (Eph. 6:10ff); and an angry Devil whose time is limited, as are his operations, but whose fury knows no bounds in respect of those who align themselves with Christ (Rev. 12:10-17). Only a glorious gospel can meet a situation like this and prove to be the power of God unto salvation. To Paul the glory of the gospel is likened to the sovereign word and work of God in the story of creation, when God spoke and the darkness and chaos were dispelled and light and order were instituted. This is indeed a word of hope to all. Jesus Christ is the light of the world, shining in the darkness and He is able to save to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25 AV).

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4:7-12

It is not accidental that God has chosen those whom the world regards as weak and insignificant to do His glorious work in stewarding and proclaiming the treasure of the gospel, so that there might be brought to all the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ. It guarantees that when marvellous results accrue, the glory all goes to God alone, to whom it belongs. It also safeguards God's servants from pride because the awareness of being simply an earthen vessel presses in upon them. It is a good exercise to go through Paul's epistles in order to trace his immense humanity with all its susceptibility to pain. He was indeed a triumphant Christian and a mighty theologian, but in terms of personality he was regarded as a nonentity and no doubt was told so (2 Cor. 10:10). He was, like our Lord and the great prophets, a man of like passions as we are (Heb. 2:14, 18; 4:15; Jas. 5:16-18). Being aware of bodily weakness, of the limitation of the mind (we know only in part 1 Cor. 13:12) and aware of the turbulence of the moral struggle as he speaks of it in Romans 7, Paul had no hesitation in describing his experience as "bearing about in the body the dying (not the death) of the

Lord Jesus always being delivered up to death so that as death worked in him, life worked in those to whom he preached." This is the principle of fruitful service. There is a death to die, in some form, if there is to be life.

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4:7-12

God chose the weak things of the world (1 Cor. 1:27) to be the earthen vessels for carrying into the world His mighty gospel of light and power. These vessels have to be broken open to release the savour of Christ, and Paul may be thinking of the woman with the box of ointment (John 12:1-8), or the story of Gideon's men whose pitchers were smashed to reveal the light and to win God's battle (Judges 7). These verses should be a mighty comfort and encouragement to all who are finding it a costly business to go on in faithful service. You may not see the connection between your sore trials and the furtherance of the gospel but it is there. And furthermore Paul's testimony makes it very obvious that life was not all plain sailing and clear victory for the great servants of God in the past. Look at Paul's experiences. He was afflicted, pressed in and hemmed in until he felt capitulation was only a matter of time, yet he was not straitened or crushed. He was perplexed, always at a loss, living by the moment and yet always finding a solution. He was persecuted in the sense of being hunted down ruthlessly by men and devils, yet not left in the enemy's hand. He was knocked down but not kept down, and this was not an isolated "bad patch" for he was always carrying in his daily experience these things that were knocking the life out of him. We say we cannot "see" the follow-through from this kind of dying to life in others. We don't need to! No-one saw the resurrection but it happened.

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4:7-12

It is so important to understand our experiences in the light of God's working in and through us, and so vital to grasp the essential principle of Christian service that we stay with this passage. We all tend to be over-conditioned by the idea of "success", whatever we mean by the word, and we try to manipulate life to prove to ourselves and to others that we are in fact spiritual Christians. A missionary returning to the field asked her home congregation to pray, "that I will be as broken bread and poured out wine to my people." Another saint of God said, "All corn must go through the mill before it can become the bread of life to others." The grinding stones of the mill can be many and varied. Our Lord stated the principle, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone. But....." (John 12:24). His enemies mocked Him on the Cross and enunciated the same principle without knowing it, when they said, "He saved others, Himself He cannot save." Paul spoke to the Colossian church a mysterious word about completing Christ's sufferings. He was interpreting his experiences, not casting doubts on the full atonement of the Cross (Col. 1:24). God may move in a mysterious way His wonders to perform but His ways are sure. He is not disturbed or deterred by the slights and rejection of "clever" people. Human cleverness has never been important in the work of God's kingdom and never will be (1 Cor. 1:18-31). God does His work through instruments who are willing to be nothing and to recognise that from beginning to end the glory is God's and God's alone.

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4:13-15

Paul here quotes from Psalm 116 which should be read in full. It is in the context of ghastly immediate experience that men of faith like the Psalmist speak their testimony concerning the God whom they trust. Their God is the God of the resurrection and He has no doubt at all about the ultimate harvest. There is no false modesty about Paul. He knows he has been used and is being used by God in bringing many to Christ and yet he says so positively that it is all God's doing and will redound to His glory. Paul knows that one day death will claim him. There will be trials and dangers from which there will be no deliverance. But even then it will be triumph, because he will be "promoted to glory". This is something of the same theme as Paul speaks of in Phil. 1:12-26, where we need to note two things carefully. Paul is always looking to God for the interpretation of immediate experience, so sure is he that God is always around, always active, always positive. Paul is also concerned at all times to incorporate his fellow Christians into what God is doing, reminding them that their prayers are linked positively with the Holy Spirit's activity in the furtherance of the Gospel. Those who preach, those who pray, those who give, those who can be depended on always to be in their place, those who bring

their friends, those who speak to strangers and take them to their homes, as well as those who suffer sore persecutions are all linked together in this vital gospel ministry. Who knows what we owe at given times to the prayers of others? Who knows but that at the times we most felt like giving up, God was doing His mighty work of salvation through us? When we see the finished work we will agree together that the only one who deserves glory is God Himself.

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4:16-18

As he stated in the first verse of the chapter Paul has no intention of losing heart. Why indeed should he? There would be no justification for it. God is no man's debtor. But we need the right perspective and a baptism of realism to face the facts of the present and future. The outward man is wasting away and we grow old in spite of ourselves, and the costly business of sacrificial service hastens the process at times. But the inner man is being renewed. "The decay of the outward man in the godless is a melancholy spectacle, for it is the decay of everything; in the Christian it does not touch the life which is hid with Christ in God, and which is in the soul itself a well of water springing up to life eternal." (Denney) The truth is that we are destined for glory (Rom. 8:28-30) and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:35-39). Every experience works for our good and it does not yet appear what we shall be (1 John 3:1-3). But the end is glory; not glory in the sense of being sprayed with some heavenly aerosol as we cross the threshold of heaven, but glory worked in us in terms of spiritual and moral character as we go on in faithfulness to Christ, through every experience we are brought to in the good providence of the God of our salvation. There is no waste with God. Every day's experiences are loaded with potential glory which, according to Paul, is sufficiently substantial to be spoken of as a "weight" of glory. The present, with all its tribulations, will pass so we must not be obsessed with it. Our eyes must be on the things that are eternal though presently unseen. Think of 1 Cor. 2:9 and Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16, 27. We need the forward look. It is not escapism. It is reality and very practical. It is when we are most heavenly-minded that we are of most use on earth because we have our values, priorities and objectives firmly established.

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5:1-5

The theme of the closing verses of chapter 4 is continued here as Paul faces up with tremendous realism to the fact of "his failing faculties and the increasing awareness that his sufferings will ultimately result in his death." (Tasker) He has already expounded to the Corinthians the glories of the resurrection and the resurrection body (1 Cor. 15:35ff) and now he shows how this applies personally to the practical business of life and service. We must never fail to see how forward looking this man is, not in the negative sense of regarding death as the end of all that is good, but positively in recognising that for the Christian the world to come is the fulfilment and expression of all that we are now doing and being prepared for. Paul's yearning, so tremendously human, is not for escape but for fulfilment, and this yearning increases, rather than decreases as you go on in Christ and with Christ, not least because you are not so easily satisfied as you once were. This passage is very practical because what you value you desire (where your treasure is, there your heart will be). What you desire you live for (where your heart is, your body will follow). What you live for fashions the whole of your life and character (a miser more and more looks a miser). And the life you live and the character you grow to be is yours for eternity. This is Paul's theme as he lives in the light of eternity. His time is running out and his reaction is hope rather than regret. It was this forward-looking attitude that made him such a realistic and practical man in spiritual matters. Read again Phil. 1:19-26.

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5:1-5

In the rigour of Christian service we must never allow preoccupation with the past and present, sad and joyful, to steal from us the conscious awareness that God is always working with us in the interest of the future. Paul is here speaking of a new body fitted for new service, and it is this thought of unlimited and unhindered service and not just personal fulfilment that is the main theme. Read carefully 1 Cor. 15:51-58, then link the thought of the "mortal", the "outer nature" (2 Cor. 4:16) and the "earthly tent" (5:1). The thought is of something having served its temporary purpose now giving way to the permanent situation. The tent is dismantled because the

journey is over and the man is moving into a permanent building which is to last for ever. Living in a tent can be fun, even exciting (for those who like that kind of thing) but as a way of life it is insubstantial, uncomfortable, limited and even dangerous. Keeping the spiritual significance to the fore, is it not true that part of the fun of "camping" is that you can pack up your gear and go "home"? It is an interesting way to think of death: Note how Paul speaks of the life to come in very solid and substantial terms, bodies and buildings, not just immortal "souls" and rather vapoury "spirits". Note also how sure Paul is. We *have* a building from God, cf. John 14:2. In v.4 Paul changes the metaphor from building to garments, and some suggest that he is now thinking of the possibility of not having to undergo the experience of death, being "clothed" with his new body at the coming of the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Some see here the thought of being "clothed upon" with Christ who is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30) as opposed to standing in our own righteousnesses which are as a "polluted garment" (Isa. 64:6). Some others, looking on to v.10 see some reference to Rev. 19:8 and to that heavenly clothing which is related to the righteous deeds of the saints in their life here below. One thing Paul is quite clear about is the reality of heaven.

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5:6-10

Paul is not only sure of heaven, he is sure of his place in it and his participation in its life and service. The Holy Spirit in his heart not only bears witness to the realities of eternity, He prepares the saints for glory and guarantees their safe arrival. This is how Paul looks at painful experience in Rom. 8:18-27 and this is why he says to the Corinthians that he is always of good courage in respect of both present and future. Note how Paul says he is "at home" in both v.6 and v.8. He is neither courting death nor dreading death. This is very healthy for, since he lives by faith and not by sense or sight, he knows he is in Christ and with Christ whatever happens, and therefore he is free in mind and heart to get on with the business of serving Christ. His life is hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:3) and neither life nor death can separate him from God's love (Rom. 8:35ff). The time will come when Paul will be aware that the transition from this world to the next is very near, and his testimony then will be very similar to what it is here cf. 2 Tim. 4:6-8. The phrase "at home" speaks of an absence of strain and a presence of pleasure, love and peace. In this frame of mind Paul's ambition is to live to please his Lord (9). It is the ambition of love not for reputation or reward. The Son of God who loved him and gave Himself for him claims and deserves the utter devotion of his heart and the service of his life. Paul had a one track mind: to please Jesus.

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5:6-10

Paul's anticipation of the glory of the presence of Christ is not without its aspect of sober realism. The life we live here in Christ with all its privileges, provision and possibility will be submitted to the scrutiny of divine judgment. In a real sense (and this is no denial of the glory of God's forgiveness) the things which are seen are not merely temporal. They have their consequences, first in the effect and impact they have on character, what we are becoming and will continue to be in the world to come, and secondly in terms of what we must rightly call our heavenly reward or loss. Consider Matt. 25:14-30; Lk. 12:41-48; and 1 Cor. 3:10-15. At the judgment seat of Christ we must all appear in our true characters to reap the results of the life we have lived in accordance with our actions, good or worthless. What are we doing with the life we have been given? It is not ours to waste, and a day cannot be recalled let alone wilderness years. Even if we say that it is conduct as a whole, that is life disposition and character, rather than specific acts, good or bad, that is being considered, it is still solemn. "In this world we have not seen the last of anything. We shall be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ; all that we have hidden shall be revealed. The things we have done in the body shall come back to us, whether good or bad. Every pious thought and every thought of sin; every secret prayer and every secret curse; every unknown deed of charity and every hidden deed of selfishness; we will see them all again, and though we have not remembered them for years, and perhaps forgotten them altogether, we shall have to acknowledge that they are our own, and take them to ourselves The moral consciousness is not maintained in its vigour and integrity if this doctrine of retribution disappears; and if we are called by a passage like this to encourage ourselves in the Lord, and in the hope which He has revealed, we are warned also that that evil cannot dwell with God, and that He will by no means clear the guilty."(Denney)

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5:11-15

The fear of the Lord and the constraining love of Christ are the dominating notes of this passage. The fear of the Lord in the believer is very different from the terror of the Lord in unbelievers. It is an earnestness which redeems the time, and a sense of responsibility that lives unto the Lord, allowing Him to sift and to purify our motives. Paul is not speaking here of persuading people of the truth of the gospel but rather restating his own integrity of purpose. He does this, not for his own sake but for theirs. He is giving the genuine Corinthians the opportunity to defend him against his detractors. It is the easiest thing in the world to criticise a minister or any other person who has to do his job in the public gaze, and too many are eager to pounce on the slightest adverse fact, failure or innuendo. But those who do this, together with those who fail to defend the motive and character of the messenger of the gospel whose ministry bears fruitful authentication, both lose out spiritually. We must always guard against judging another on the basis of personal dislike, disaffection or prejudice. That is not a rightly constituted court of judgment. It has neither objectivity, evidence nor conscience. There are times when we simply cannot understand people, especially preachers (13) and we tend to think they have gone too far, become too emotional, or even that they show signs of something like insanity. They said that about Jesus (Mk. 3:21). At other times Paul, in his ministry was quiet, composed, orderly and competently systematic, presenting the facts of the gospel with quiet, unassuming diligence. Paul accepts the facts but makes it plain that his life has two aspects, towards God and towards men. There are some aspects of a man's spiritual life that are no business of other people.

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5:11-15

The closing statement of yesterday's note must not be made the basis of an undisciplined individualism in Christian life, for that can be simply a manifestation of "self". This is the very accusation Paul is denying and he declares that the love of Christ controls or constrains him in the sense of not allowing "self" to become the motivating element in Christian life and service. It is Christ's love for Paul and not Paul's for Christ that is the theme here, and it is this mighty dying love that has mastered this man, leading him along in a life of service from which there is no thought of release. This Christ, says Paul, died for us, instead of us, in our place and as our substitute. It was our death that He died. The death that is the penalty of sin was died by Him for us and, as Paul declares elsewhere, we who have believed died with Him. We have been crucified with Christ and raised to newness of life in Him (Rom. 6:11; Gal. 2:20). This is why we can never again live unto ourselves. The death and resurrection of Christ spells the end of all self-centredness and the beginning of Christ-centredness. Read Rom. 6:1-14 and realise how totally the reign of self was shattered once for all in the life of the apostle. This, and nothing less than this, is what he means by being a Christian.

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5:16-21

As far as Paul is concerned a whole new order of thinking as well as experience has come into operation.

Worldly standards, which rely so much on appearances and superficial assessment, no longer count in his estimate of people. Everything now must be considered from the standpoint of faith. It is not the "story" of Jesus of Nazareth the wonderful man, nor even the historical facts of His death and resurrection that are the gospel. It is the fact of the risen and glorious Christ whose work of salvation in respect of sin is complete that people must believe and receive. It is the theology of the Cross and not the story of the Cross that is good news. And the good news is this, that if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, a whole new order of life and experience has begun. All he once was has been done away in the death of Christ and he has been raised from the dead to newness of life in Christ. How much we need to grasp the truth of Rom. 6:1-11, reading it over and over again. The Christian does not struggle to reach victory. He starts from victory in Christ. He is a new creature and must believe it. He must grow up in Christ, developing that new life which is within him by the Holy Spirit. The legacy of "old things" will cling to feelings and memory but this must not be allowed to obscure the fact. If any man is in Christ he is a new creation. Now, "think what Spirit dwells within you" and think what possibilities lie open to you.

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5:16-21

This great transformation, spoken of yesterday, which is a resurrection from the dead and the institution of a new order of existence, is all the work of God through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Only God could do it because it required basically a work of reconciliation that would heal the breach and alienation caused by sin. The problem is two-fold. On man's side the problem is sin and guilt. Man cannot just say he now wishes to be friends with God. Sin is a fact and has to be dealt with, it has to be "expiated", its price has to be paid, and this is what Jesus did in His death. He died, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18; 1 Pet. 2:24). But there is another problem. Sin had created a disposition of wrath on the part of the righteous God and this could not be altered without full and righteous satisfaction, else God's righteousness is undermined and then nothing is safe or sure. This is why the Bible speaks of propitiation, a word that refers to the One sinned against, and we need to be careful with modern translations which generally substitute the word "expiation" for the word "propitiation". God's wrath has been revealed from heaven against sin (Rom. 1:18) and it was God Himself, in His Son Jesus Christ who met that wrath in full satisfaction so making peace and opening the way to reconciliation. It is a sign of how far we have strayed from Biblical thinking that we fail to see the problem of sin from God's side, thinking only of man and his need for forgiveness. The glory of the gospel is that God is proclaiming to men that sin, the great barrier between man and God, has now been dealt with and done away in the death of Christ. Men are called in faith to *receive* the reconciliation. Study carefully Rom. 3:21-26. We must learn to be theologians!

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5:16-21

It is clear from the impassioned appeal in v.20b. that all are not reconciled to God because if appeal means anything at all it means it can be refused. But this does not narrow down the grandeur of Paul's concept of Christ's redeeming work. It is not a universal salvation, in the sense that all will be saved. But it is cosmic in the sense that by the Cross God reconciles all things to Himself and reconstitutes the good and right order of His creation which has been marred and perverted by the intrusion of sin. In Col. 1:19-22 "things" are spoken of before "people". In Rom. 8:18-22 the "sufferings" of Christians are linked in positive cause and effect with the "salvation" of creation. Both Acts 3:21 and Matt. 19:28 speak of a "restoration" or the "new world" and we need to deliver our thinking from the narrow confines of traditional evangelicalism which places so much emphasis on the salvation of the individual believer to the exclusion of the glorious redeeming purpose of God. It is of this message in its fulness that we are ambassadors (20), not incidental workers, for God is making His appeal through us. We do our task with the spirit of the King as well as His authority and we are not too proud to beseech and to appeal. After all, this is the condescension of God's grace to us. On the positive side He reconciled us to Himself and on the negative side He did not put our sins to our account. But this was no casual transaction. God made Christ "sin" for us; not a "sinner", nor just a "sin-offering". Jesus, having no sin, was able to register, to feel and to suffer the curse of sin to an extent we never can because we are "hardened" to it. He was identified with the evil thing "sin", wrapped round with it, and He paid its price. In exchange, we are made free and are given His righteousness. What an exchange. Read Isaiah 53, and worship.

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6:1-3

Paul has declared that all of salvation is "of God" and at the same time all is "in Christ". He has also stated that it is God who is appealing to the Corinthians through him, and now he describes his ministry of the gospel as a working together with God. This is not pride; it is fact, and Paul is therefore aware of the urgency of the issues confronting the Corinthians. A day of grace, opportunity and decision has come upon them and he warns the church not to "waste" the grace of God. These people who have been taught so much of the gospel need to get right with God, to get right with each other and to get right with Paul, whose person they had devalued and whose ministry they had limited by their attitude of criticism and rejection. In some ways Paul is charging these believers to think of what they are doing in terms of erecting barriers to the advance of the gospel. There were those in Corinth yet to be brought to Christ and the spiritual declension of the Christians together with their preoccupation with their own spiritual "rights" and "standing" was grieving and restricting the Spirit of God. Think of Jesus' words about those who both refuse to respond themselves and also prevent others from doing so

(Matt. 23:13-15). But the heart of the passage seems to be the thought of resisting God's grace and making it a negative thing. We are all too easy-going with regard to spiritual things as if we could "take up the slack" whenever we choose (if we choose). But there is an accepted time for accepting the message and for being accepted. When the day passes it cannot be recalled. The business of the gospel is urgent.

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6:4-10

Paul is well aware of the fact that the easiest way to evade the challenge of God's message preached is to pick holes in the preacher's life (present or past), his methods, his personal idiosyncrasies, and his faults real, imagined and exaggerated. It is part of a preacher's business so to abstain from all appearance of evil (1 Thess. 5:22 AV) that no such opportunity of refusing the gospel will be given to anyone. This Paul claims has been his constant motive and care. In a very detailed way he goes on to speak of the consistency required of all who would serve the gospel (3-10) and then, issuing from that passage, he makes a glorious appeal for consecration (6:14-7:1). In today's verses, introduced by a reference to great and patient endurance, Paul gives a long list of terms (carefully compiled) which reveal something of the complexity, contradiction and cost of the circumstances that come to those who are working in the world as ambassadors for Christ. This is realism, and we must never hide from others or ourselves that it is not an easy business to serve Christ. Jesus Himself told us we would be hated and reviled all along the line (Matt. 10:22) but that those who endured to the end would be saved. Paul speaks here of things he had to endure passively (4-5) about which he could do little. Then he speaks of the active effort of his own life and character. Finally he speaks of the circumstances of his ministry and the varied reactions of people. Some loved, some hated, some flattered, some slighted him. But his life was nevertheless a series of glorious contrasts, sore and empty yet happy and overflowing. This deserves more study.

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6:4-10

Under the general heading of patience, which has to do with continuance as much as with endurance, he refers to three groups of three experiences: general trials, those inflicted by others, and those the result of his own choices. The afflictions are physical, mental and spiritual pressures, whatever their source or explanation. The hardships or necessities refer to circumstances where no change was possible. The calamities or distresses were the frustrations that hemmed him in in a way that left him no room to turn, no room to manoeuvre. The beatings, imprisonments and tumults that men inflicted on this man are well testified to in the Acts of the Apostles and in 2 Cor. 11:22-33. We all have simple, uncomplicated and easy lives compared with this man who spoke of his sufferings as light afflictions (2 Cor. 4:16-18). We do not make light of the painful blows many receive, but we must get them into focus. Finally there was the cost which came by Paul's own ordering of his life, the standards he set for himself, and the eagerness with which he went on after Christ glorying in the privilege of being an ambassador who might well be recalled to the King's presence at any time. His "watchings" were sleepless nights, sometimes with anxiety (2:13; 7:5), sometimes working a night shift to earn his living (2 Thess. 3:8), and sometimes because his body was too sore to lie down (Acts 16:23-25). His hunger was sometimes simply because there was no food and sometimes, though not often, because of fasting (2 Cor. 11:27-28; Acts 13:3). What a man, and what a life!

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6:4-10

Beginning in v.6 Paul enumerates the spiritual graces which God alone had enabled him to manifest in the context of carrying out his ministry. Purity has to do with motives as well as morals and speaks of singleness of purpose. Knowledge is his understanding of God's redeeming love, and all his epistles testify to how thoroughly he had studied and pondered this (Gal. 1:15-2:1). In his dealings with people he showed patience, forbearance, longsuffering, putting up with those who were a continuing vexation to him and to his work (2 Tim. 2:25). "Kindness is goodness in action, a reflection of the kindness of God shown even to the unthankful and the evil (Luke 6:35)." (Tasker) The Holy Spirit and the power of God are as much linked with "the word of truth" (better than truthful speech) as they are with the fruit of the Spirit which is love (1 Cor. 2:1-5; 1 Thess. 1:5; Gal. 5:22). Paul was very much aware that the power of his ministry did not stem from personality, argumentation or

eloquence. It was God's power attending God's Word and causing it to bring forth its appointed fruit (Isa. 55:10-11). In v.7b-10 Paul speaks of the conditions under which his ministry is exercised and of the weapons and methods by which his spiritual warfare is waged. Go right over to Eph. 6:10ff. and consider these verses well before turning to the detail we have here.

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6:4-10

Paul's weapons were not carnal or fleshly (2 Cor. 10:4) and he would not use such weapons because although their immediate impression might be powerful their long term effect is defective because they do not reach the root of the problem, which is sin, self and Satan. The armour of defence is righteousness, whether this refers to being justified by faith or to the inner sense of integrity that accompanies moral rectitude. But this is not merely defensive, for the word "armour" could read "weapons" or "instruments". It has all to do with God's provision for holy warfare (cf. Rom. 13:12; Rom. 6:13). Such armour and preparation is necessary when reputation is slandered and the servant of God is branded as an impostor and fraud (8). Rightness with God (righteousness) is a deep necessity when Paul is being dismissed by many as an unknown irrelevance in respect of God's work. They said he was finished and that his work was dying, but it lived. They said his experiences proved he was being chastised by God, and that there was no other explanation of his many difficulties and troubles. His continuance was a constant miracle to himself and to others. Paul was reckoned to be a "sober-sides" who made no allowances for the cult of pleasure and self-gratification and that would not have made him popular with a certain section of the Christian community which, then as now, considered that the main object of the Gospel was to make people happy whether or not they were holy. But Paul, more than most, called on people to rejoice and be glad in God, to abound in all circumstances, because in Christ we are rich beyond all measure and all possible loss (Phil. 4:4, 11-13, 19; 1 Cor. 3:21-23). What a man, and what a way to live. He is indeed to be envied.'

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6:11-13

"The logic of Paul's testimony had the effect of laying responsibility fairly and squarely on the Corinthians themselves for not receiving more help than they did from the ministry As Moule translates these verses: 'You are not straitened in respect of us; your sense of something lacking, something that withstands your joy and power, has nothing to do with us, as if our commission was uncertain, our devotion to you lukewarm or our message a mistake. You are straitened in respect of your own hearts, which have been distorted, and as it were shrunken, by this miserable false gospel so that you are afraid to take us and our message in.' In other words, it was because they were disaffected that they felt something was lacking in Paul's ministry. It is a common tendency in human nature that when you feel ill-will against someone, you can see nothing good in him at all. And nothing shrinks hearts so much as this kind of disaffection; they become shrivelled and a caricature of themselves. And so Paul appeals to them: 'Open your hearts to me as I have opened mine to you. This is the way to find blessing in my ministry.' This is very searching. If the ministry that helps others is barren to you, this reading explains why." (Rev. J. Philip)

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6:14-18

Paul now gives three clear words of challenge in respect of consecration, making it very plain that the root cause of the Corinthians' spiritual disaffection was simply backsliding. The first word is negative, the second critical or decisive, and the third progressive (14, 17, and 7:1). The whole matter concerns our thinking and attitudes. We think either as Christians or as worldly unbelievers; and there is something far wrong if we think of the "religious" side of our lives spiritually and yet deal with the practical side of life, especially relationships, in the same way as unbelievers. There can be no concord or agreement between opposites and to try to establish such is a dangerous game (1 Cor. 5:9-10; 6:9-11, 15-20; 10:20-23). Paul's words here are command not suggestion and they forbid the forging of permanent associations and relationships between Christian and non-Christian. (This does not mean that temporary "affairs" are permissible.) We normally apply this principle to the marriage relationship, but its application is wider, embracing all unions or commitments in which the distinctive character, principle and expression of the Christian are inhibited, contradicted or concealed. We cannot expect

God to dwell happily in a situation that is a contradiction of His love, grace and purposes. If we are to be God's people and His happy companions then we must go His stated way.

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6:14-18

The second challenge is critical in the sense that it requires thought, moral decision and continuing action. Both the individual believer and the church are here spoken of in terms of being God's dwelling place (1 Cor. 6:15-20; 1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2: 19-22) and not even suspicion of uncleanness must rest on God's dwelling, lest God Himself be slandered (1 Thess. 5:22). This is not just a negative exhortation (Matt. 5:14-16; Phil. 2:14-15), neither must it be made the basis of foolish separatism. It is not contact with sin that defiles but complicity with it, and the distinction must be held firmly. Failure to do so has led to rigid, pharisaical and very selective "rules of holiness" which have led to a sub-human and unattractive form of Christianity. This attitude is as much a stumbling block to the gospel as the indeterminate "believism" which asks only that people subscribe to certain "salvation" truths without any accompanying life. Wrong ideas of separation have also led to a proliferation of breakaway sects and movements, all aiming at "a pure and uncompromised church", failing to see that the inevitable criticism of "compromised brethren" leads to pride which is one of the sins we are called to be separate from. Separation is not the same as contracting out. Jesus was always among sinners yet He was "separate" (Heb. 7:26).

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7:1

The separation unto holiness of life which Paul is urging on the Corinthians (and they lived in a terrible city of sin and sensuality) is something which is progressive. It has to be worked at, for sin, self and Satan have to be overcome in the power of the risen Lord. It is inward and outward conflict, private and public, seen and unseen. It has to do with going on going on with God (Heb. 6:1-3ff), refusing to be squeezed into the world's pattern (Rom. 12:1-2; 6:12-13, 17-22). There is separation and sacrifice, as Jesus made so plain in such passages as Matt. 10: 34-39, but there are promises such as we have studied at the end of the previous chapter, where Paul speaks of the sweet glory of God the Lord feeling totally at home with us His precious children. Of course all this has practical application to evangelism and outreach, as Ezek. 37:26-28 makes plain. It is costly but there are compensations (Mk. 10:29-30). It is realism for it has to do with the will rather than the feelings. One Christian challenged about a wrong relationship said, "I have done nothing about it yet. If I gave him up just now, I would still want him." Of course! There would be no problem otherwise. But we have to perfect holiness in the fear of God, which fear is clean and is the beginning and the main part of wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet.1:13- 2:3).

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7:2-4

Paul takes up again his appeal made in 6:11-13 and at this point there seems to be a change of tone and of emphasis. So far he has been defending his personal character and integrity as a minister of the Gospel, and issuing a challenge to the church in terms of consistency as ambassadors (6:1-10) and of consecration as chosen vessels of the Lord (6:11-7:1. cf. 2 Tim. 2:19-22; 1 John 3:3). In the closing verses of the previous chapter Paul has emphasised the wonder of fellowship with God, and now he goes on to confirm and encourage fellowship with the Corinthians in the interest of the furtherance of the Gospel. Though not to blame for the breach of fellowship, and though he has been wilfully misunderstood, Paul reaches out to them with open statement of his own affection for and acceptance of them. Fellowship is important for the ongoing of the Gospel, for we may not invite sinners to come and share in the disaffection of the saints. Read Paul's words in Eph. 4:1-3, 13-16, 25-5:2. Note Paul's careful method with the Corinthians even though his words are quite spontaneous. Perhaps it is easier to say this kind of thing by letter than by speech. The important thing is that it should actually be said. Paul affirms that he is not concerned to put them in the wrong or to apportion blame. He says that he cares for them, however much they may have misunderstood him. He stands with them and will do so, boasting of them even though he knows their faults. Paul's criticisms are not made a common gossip, which is the best way to demolish a man whether or not he is guilty of the things being gossiped. By now Paul has heard about the

new signs of growth in grace in the Corinthian church and he is overjoyed. A burden has been lifted and his heart is eager to go forward *with* them in the fellowship of service.

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7:5-7

We are seeing here just how human is Paul's spirituality and there are deep lessons to be learned as he refers back to chap. 2:12-14. There had been a time of sore spiritual conflict which had been very costly indeed first in Paul's personal suffering and then in his consciously being distracted from his God-given service in the gospel. Note the sense of strain in these verses, particularly the inward fear which would be far more debilitating than the outward persecutions that beset Paul. He was downcast, dejected and restless, not least because he had no assurance that his converts in Corinth were withstanding the wiles of Satan (1 Cor. 7:5; cf. 2 Cor. 11:12-15). When Paul speaks of the comfort that came to his heart when Titus arrived, he may well have been thinking of Isa. 49:13-16. What was it that finally lifted the cloud and pressure of strain from God's servant? It was the assurance of fellowship; his reunion with Titus, the news of how Titus had been received by the Corinthians and the assurance that the Corinthians, by and large, were of one mind and heart with him in the fellowship of service in the gospel. Remember that Paul had written a painful letter to these Christians (never an easy thing to do) and the deep exercise of his heart concerned their possible reactions. Had they resented and refused the rebuke they might well have gone permanently into a spiritual wilderness. If they received it, there was hope. They did, and Titus told Paul of the earnest desire (longing) for him to come to Corinth; of their mourning with regard to their sinning; of their actual defence of the apostle against his critics and detractors. This is the joy of restored fellowship, and in this joy the work goes forward.

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7:8-11

The tensions of strained fellowship give way to coherence of service but Paul takes time to emphasise that this deepened fellowship had come about only on the basis of realism and repentance. There had been wilful misunderstanding of Paul's words and actions and of course deliberate misrepresentation. This is something to be guarded against because what is said to third, fourth and fifth parties in a time of spiritual estrangement can produce far-reaching complications in the lives of others, who may be left in bitterness of spirit even when the original defaulter is restored. *We are* our brother's keeper and his safety is more important than our satisfaction. This had been an anxious time for Paul because no matter how graciously words of discipline are spoken there is always the possibility that the reaction will be the negative one of resentment and refusal. The Corinthians were sorely hurt by the letter but the personal grievance soon (that is important) gave way to genuine grief and godly repentance. It was not allowed to rankle, for this produces only remorse and this kind of sorrow for sin is not healthy or hopeful. It brings a sense of loss mingled with self-pity, melancholia, bitterness and lassitude.

But repentance, facing up to the facts of the situation as God sees them, and setting the heart to seek God and to return to God, is a life-giving grace. All sin brings a sense of loss and leaves us deflated, but this is not repentance. When we reap the fruit of what we ourselves have sown and decide we do not like it, this is not repentance. When sin has defeated us and our condition is exposed, and we hate being convinced that we are wrong, this is not repentance. When with earnestness of desire we are eager to put things right with God and with others, this *is* repentance.

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7:12-16

Now that fellowship has been restored, the original wrong righted, and the Corinthians having shaken free from their carelessness and bitterness, Paul is anxious to close the whole matter and to get on with the business of serving Christ. In retrospect he sees, and makes them see, that the issue was not just a specific case of wrongdoing. That was the focus of the trouble, which was in fact spiritual pride and complacency. This had led to an attitude of carelessness which in turn had spawned their wrong attitude to Paul and to his ministry. The cloud of doubt, disloyalty and disrespect had been removed and the Corinthians were more aware than ever of their true feelings of love and care for the man who was their spiritual father. Note that at the end of v.12 Paul sets the whole issue in the sight of God. It is not Paul's dignity or vindication that matter, but the spiritual integrity of the Corinthians. Paul is not being hypocritical in speaking now of his boasting about and confidence

in the Corinthians. Even when the crisis had been intense he had boasted to Titus about them (concealing his own misgivings lest he prejudice Titus) and now he is vastly relieved. There is a bigness in Paul which keeps him from condemning others because of one fall, defect or rebellion. If someone is dull, remember their former vitality and loyalty. If they are edgy and uncertain, remember the consistency of their unseen labours. If they are wandering and cold remember the days when their fellowship warmed your heart. Think the best if you want to be a saviour and not a judge. But never confuse grace with weakness. Here in v.15 there is a new and healthy fear of God and fear of trifling with holy things, and a new reality and respect for authority. It came about by a sore process but it opened the way for future service.

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8:1-7

If Christian life is truly spiritual it will be practical in a comprehensive and down-to-earth way specifically concerned with the business of caring and providing for those in need and for maintaining and furthering the work of the Gospel. In dealing with the subject of what Christians should do with their money, their time, talents and opportunities, Paul speaks directly and yet with delicacy, making it quite plain that it is not merely the amount that is given but the element of sacrifice that is vital. Perhaps he was thinking of our Lord's words in Mark 12:41-44, and making plain to the Corinthians, so proud of their spirituality, that they, having a fairly easy and affluent time, were poor in giving and service compared with others who were having a hard time indeed. The truth is that when we are taken up with ourselves, our position, dignity, recognition and service, we are seldom working all that hard for God and for His cause. There is a self-forgetfulness in true service, for after all it is a manifestation of the grace of God (1). But grace does not operate in bursts of emotional enthusiasm. After all, the work of God must go on steadily and not in fits and starts according to how Christians happen to be feeling. There must be realism, system and a sense of duty, responsibility and privilege as we set ourselves to be at God's disposal. Paul has already spoken of this in 1 Cor. 15:58-16:4 as he plans and budgets for the future. Whether he speaks of money, prayer or spiritual warfare, this spiritually minded man is exceedingly practical.

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8:1-7

The liberality of the Macedonian churches (Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea) and the spontaneity of their participation was a well known testimony to the grace of God. They lived under harsh political rule and were never likely to be affluent. They knew persecution as Christians (Acts 16:20; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14) and yet they were outward looking and eager participants in whatever service they could render (Phil. 4:10-20). In v.2 four elements of their situation are specified. They were happy in God and that happiness flowed out generously to others without pressure. Indeed, it was Paul who had to be pressurised (3-4). He had expected some reasonable response but they had dedicated themselves to the Lord and in that dedication had offered themselves to Paul unreservedly for the service of Christ (5). As a result of this glorious openness of self-giving, Paul is encouraged to exhort the Corinthian believers to take their practical share in the missionary endeavour of the Gospel. The Corinthians had manifested many of the gifts of the Spirit but so far generosity had not been evident and any spiritual advance that makes us introspective, preoccupied with ourselves and our own little "vineyard" to the neglect of others, is suspect, or at least defective. The practical gifts must be expressed with the same degree of liberality as the spiritual ones, for they are in fact one.

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8:8-9

Having spoken of the self-giving of the Macedonian churches, Paul now points to the self-giving of our Lord Himself and we need to read Phil. 2:1-8. It is not the lowly circumstances of our Lord's birth in Bethlehem nor His uncomfortable pattern of life (Lk. 9:58), nor even the fact that He died stripped of every personal possession (Matt. 27:28) that is referred to here. It is the fact that He was born at all that evokes Paul's wonder and worship. The Prince of Glory (John 17:5; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3; John 1:1-4, 10-11, 14) temporarily laid aside His glory and became man. He did not lay aside what He was, for He remained ever the eternal Son of the Father, just as He now ever remains true man in glory. But He laid aside willingly the expression and enjoyment of what was His by right, so that through His death and resurrection we might be partakers of the glory He laid aside. This for Paul is the great motivation and inspiration of sacrificial service. He loved me, and gave Himself

for me (Gal. 2:20). "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him." (C.T. Studd) How much we need to think of the goodness of God towards us, His kindness, forbearance, love and the persistence of His grace. Can we who have been such recipients of love deny it to others? Think of the story of the two debtors in Matt. 18:23-35. What is more, if the love of God has in fact been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:5) there must be expression of that love in word and action, in prayer and in selfless service. Love so amazing does indeed demand our soul, our life, our all.

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8:10-15

In his advice Paul gives clear principles of liberality and we must apply them as widely as possible, not confining our thoughts to the matter of money. Read Luke 6:32-38 and Mark 4:20-25. The first principle of Christian service is that it is not good to start something and then fail to see it through (10-11). It is never a good sign when we begin to drag our feet, for we not only demoralise ourselves, we hinder others who are glad to be working for Jesus. It is one thing to suggest certain activities but another to roll up your sleeves and do the donkey-work. The second principle concerns ability (12). But that in itself is not enough. While duty is a glorious concept, not valued enough in Christian circles, service given without a ready and willing mind and heart is not acceptable to God. And all our giving must be unto God. There must be no ostentation or competition (Matt. 6: 1-4) or deceit (Acts 4:32-5:2). The sin of Ananias was not that he gave only part of the money. That was for him to decide. He sinned when he said it was all the money. He was pretending to be "dedicated" to the same extent as others who had given great gifts. Paul has spoken of the Macedonians who had given beyond their true capacity (8:3), but he insists that this must not be made a principle. That would be both legalism and folly. There is a time for extravagance, provided it does not put undue strain on others (as we shall see in the final principle) but without question if there was in Christian work a true application of stewardship according to 1 Cor. 16:1-2 there would be little or no need for "special sacrifice", although opportunity would certainly present itself. The principle of "laying aside" week by week does not mean that each weekly allocation must be spent that week. This is too short term thinking and may lead to unbelieving carelessness rather than the stewardship of faith.

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8:10-15

The third principle enunciated by Paul is that of equality or mutuality in the business of providing for and maintaining the work of God. We are not dealing here with one extravagant act of generosity nor some act of impulsive dedication. For example, giving up one's job to serve Christ may not necessarily be the way of faith and it may lead only to others having to carry a greater (and sometimes unreasonable) burden of financial responsibility. Fellowship is, and must be a two-way traffic and in the practical expression of it there must be recognition of the varying and fluctuating circumstances which are part of normal experience. There are times when we can give very little in any kind of way because we are under pressure and *we* must be supported and if necessary carried by others. At other times we are able and free and then we must be willing to curb our personal enjoyment in order to minister to others. After all it is "family business" in Christ and all the provision we ever have and enjoy is the gift of God as the reference to the story of the manna makes plain (Ex. 16:18). This is what it means to have all things in common (Acts 4:32). With this kind of God-centred, God-serving communism we have no quarrel. It is realistic and does not lend itself to selfishness, laziness, or false spirituality, as 2 Thess. 3:6-13 and Gal. 6:10 make plain.

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8:16-24

On an earlier occasion we made the following comment on the matter of Christian giving: "Much of our religion never gets past the stage of good intentions and pleasant thoughts. Let there be a doing of it according to ability. God is not really interested in amounts; it may be a mite or a million, depending on what you have, what you spend on other things and what you keep hoarded up to leave in your will." It all has to do with attitude and with the extent to which the eternal dimension governs and directs our lives. In this matter of faithful practical service, which is being spoken of out of care for the Corinthians, Paul is supported by Titus who had exercised a good influence on the church. He along with two others, un-named but wonderfully

described (18-19, 22) are messengers (apostles) of the churches, men in whose lives the glory of Christ is reflected. What we have to note above all here is the care and discretion exercised by Paul in this business of dealing with church money. There were those who hinted or even said openly that the apostle was personally benefiting from the church collection, and this is one reason why he himself would never actually handle the money. His conscience was quite clear, but that was not enough, as he makes plain in v.20-21. It is not necessarily a good, let alone a Christian, attitude to say, "I don't care what people think." There is a time to stand our ground and be misunderstood, but at other times we must do everything in our power to prevent any misunderstanding that would cast a slur on the integrity of the Gospel or the reputation of the church. This is what Paul is doing here in one specific, practical area. Consider also 1 Thess. 5:22; 1 Pet. 2:11-12; 4:14-17; Phil. 2:14-15. Of course, some will misunderstand deliberately and continue to do so in spite of denials and evidences. They did so with Jesus and He had no hesitation in naming them as Devil's men.

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9:1-5

It is always dangerous for a church to have a reputation, especially if the members of that church regard this in terms of commendation rather than responsibility. Corinth had a reputation and other places had looked to that church for a lead and inspiration as Paul makes plain in these verses. But expectation had not been realised. They had begun by being spiritual leaders but the impetus was dying out and may well have ceased totally in the case of some or even many. Every spiritual work is in this danger and when the stage is reached that there are too many spiritual passengers (although the work is maintained by a remnant of faithful hard-working souls), the reputation may remain but the viability is gone. It is then that the Lord of the church takes action and speaks very clearly, as Rev. 2:4-5; 3:1-6 makes plain. We need the exhortation of Heb. 10:32-39. In respect of the Corinthians Paul does not detach himself from them. They belong to each other in the Gospel and it could never be otherwise, for they were his own converts and he was their teacher as well as their evangelist. He speaks as he does because he keeps on hoping that the sluggishness and distemper of spirit that had been so manifest might prove to be a temporary thing, a cloud brought over them by the Devil, but now being moved away by the awakening of God's grace and the stirring of fresh love in their hearts.

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9:6-9

Generosity is a profitable grace because in a very real sense giving is sowing and a man reaps what he sows together with the increase of the harvest (Gal. 6:7-9; Prov. 11:24-25). The principle enunciated in v.6 applies to the whole of Christian life and service, not least in the realm of friendship. Give and it will be given to you. There is no compulsion, but neither must our attitude be casual. It is the easiest thing to fritter away possessions, time and capacity all to no purpose. That is why we must plan. But the planning must not be over-calculating nor must we reckon on how little we need to do and give in order to maintain our Christian position and standing. The Lord looks for the cheerful giver. The word used is literally the hilarious giver, the man who throws himself enthusiastically into the Lord's service and gives with hearty willingness whatever is needed, to carry through the work. There is nothing in these two chapters that suggests either excessive giving beyond the bounds of wisdom or undue meanness in the interest of security. After all, says Paul, God is able to provide and He does. There is a miracle of capacity in Christian service which causes us again and again to say that this is the Lord's doing and marvellous is our eyes (Ps. 118:23). There is maintaining grace and there is replenishing grace as our Lord made plain when He spoke of a well of water springing up within us (John 4:14). God is no man's debtor as Jesus promised in Matt. 19:29; Mk. 10:28-30.

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9:10-15

It is in giving ourselves to the Lord for service that we taste and prove the riches of His great goodness and at the same time begin to prove the wonder of authentic Christian fellowship which redounds to the glory of God. Such a chapter as Isaiah 55 is undoubtedly in Paul's mind here and he is thinking of the activity of God working through the various and interdependent channels of human activity. Some are giving, some receiving, some acting as distributors and carriers of others' gifts, and the issue of it all is that the hearts of people are being quickened to praise the God of all goodness. Do not fail to see in the reference to seed not only the colossal

potential of a thirty, sixty or hundredfold increase but also the clear pointer to the future and to the continuance of the work of God. All the different sowings and reapings are progressing towards the harvest. As they do so there is awakened a rejoicing and thanksgiving among the Lord's people, as they behold His faithful goodness, and this in turn leads to a new and fresher giving of obedience. This again increases fellowship which issues in prayer and God is evermore glorified. Little wonder Paul expresses in the last verse thanksgiving to God for the immense privilege of being allowed to be the working servants of the Jesus who gave Himself so freely for us.

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10:1-6

The battle never lets up in Paul's experience, and here he begins to deal with the small, disaffected faction in the church at Corinth who were relentlessly slandering the apostle, his ministry and his motives. This is always Devil's work and is never justified, for it divides the fellowship and, although only a few willing and susceptible souls are taken in, it distracts from service. This kind of situation is sometimes best left alone but at other times it has to be brought right out into the open, shown for what it is and a call for repentance issued. This is what Paul does here, making it plain that he knows (through Titus) exactly what certain men had been saying about him and his ministry, and he shows no embarrassment. They accused him of being a double-dealing hypocrite (1b) and indeed a coward, afraid to say face-to-face what he said in letters. But they misunderstood and underestimated him (2). He was not afraid for his own sake of a confrontation. It was the effect it might have on them that was his concern. *They* were the ones whose spiritual condition was perilous and as a true pastor and teacher he entreated them to consider their attitudes, words and works (1a). It was no part of Paul's design to break them (cf. Isa. 42:3) for that would be contrary to God. But gentleness and timidity must not be mistaken for weakness and fear. During the war we were told that "careless talk costs lives". In the High Priest's house Peter was told that his speech gave him away. It is not accent but content that counts. Consider 1 Cor. 4:9-21; 2 Tim. 2:23-26; and James 3:5ff.

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10:1-6

The second half of this passage (3-6) while still dealing with Paul's refutation of slander against his person and his ministry also states a deep principle of Christian service. A comparison with the A.V. rendering here is useful for the words, "after the flesh", "we walk in the flesh" and "weapons not carnal" are used in place of "worldly" in the R.S.V. His critics had accused Paul of being motivated by the old, carnal, corrupt nature. This is really a denial of his conversion, let alone his spiritual integrity (Rom. 8:5-11). Paul agrees that he is no superman but totally and utterly human, walking in the flesh. Think of 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 4:16; 7:5 to give but a few examples. But he was not ruled by the instincts and inclinations of corrupt human nature. Nor did he rely on mere human resources. This was spiritual warfare which called for spiritual weapons (Eph. 6:10ff). It is not a matter of pitting eloquence against eloquence, argument against argument, passion against carelessness, or conviction against unbelief and indifference, although all these have their place. All we mean by personality and cleverness, especially allied to eloquence, can be a hindrance not a help and can in fact rob the preaching of the Gospel of its power, cf. 1 Cor. 1:17ff; 2:1-5. There is a fire and power that are not of God. The power is the power of God's word when uttered from hearts in which self has been put to death, cf. 1 Thess. 2:1-6, 13. If we present to people anything other than the truth of God in its unadorned fulness they will parry our words and argue us to a standstill. Never enlist the "flesh" in spiritual work. It does nothing but hinder and confuse. Remember 2 Cor. 4:1-7ff.

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10:1-6

In this matter of spiritual warfare and the weapons of our victory, Paul presents clearly the reactions of human nature when the Word of God is announced. People go on guard and erect battlements, strongholds of various kinds to hide behind and escape from what God is saying. They will have complaints, difficulties, theories of interpretation and arguments of science, all of which will be skillfully used to hide the fact that the real issue is not intellectual but moral. They will not yield their wills to God. When Paul speaks of casting down such "strongholds" he is not speaking of the sacrifice of intellect (God's truth is not afraid of honest, thoroughgoing enquiry and Christians should not be unwilling to think through their faith) but of dishonest intellectualism

which comes to the truth of revelation with presuppositions and pre-conditions, refusing to examine facts. Remember that it is not ultimately doctrine that people refuse. Even the devils believe (Jas. 2:19). It is the claims and implications of the truth that people reject. This is the point of Rom. 1:18. The aim of the Gospel is to bring every thought captive to Christ, who is truth, instead of allowing thought to run loose in vague philosophical speculation which has in it the seeds of inescapable degeneration, as Rom. 1:21, 25, 28 make plain. The world by wisdom has never found God (1 Cor. 1:21). What we have to do is to pray the living word, preached and read, into people's consciences and then pray the people into Christ (Heb. 4:12-13). This is evangelism and it is crucifying rather than clever work. Prayer is evangelism shorn of all its carnal attractions.

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10:7-12

In v.6 Paul recognises the main body of the church in Corinth to be now on the mend and he will not act in any way that would hinder this rectifying and restoring process. He has made it plain he will not hesitate to use severity to deal with "perverse resistance to his ministry and deliberate attempts to undo his work..... He has the power of passing sentence on such offenders; and, whether the effects of such sentence will be immediately evident (as in the case of Peter and Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:1-10) or not, it is a sentence of eternal significance." (Tasker) But this stern action will always be a last resort for the passion of his life is to bring people to the obedience of faith. He looks for salvation not judgment. He looks for men and women yielding to Christ and showing evidence of grace in their lives. He tells the Corinthians to look at the effect people have on their spiritual lives: do they have an influence of edifying and stabilising or do they demolish and unsettle? It is one thing to claim to be a spiritual Christian and to express personal conviction about it. But (12) self-commendation without any corroborating evidence is not a very wise or healthy procedure. It is better to let others assess our spiritual worth. It is even better to be so busy building up the body of Christ that we have not too much time to be thinking about who is more spiritual than another (Mk. 9:33-50). These disciples of Jesus were at that time signally lacking in power in their own lives yet their concern was about spiritual place.

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10:13-18

There is great realism in Scripture as the last verse of the chapter makes plain. It is God alone who awards the prizes and His decision is final. Paul recognises that God has given him a work to do and his business is to get on with it. He has no desire to intrude on another man's province and this is wise. We shall all be fully occupied if we are doing what God has set us to do and we shall not have time to intrude into realms that we have no business to be in. There is a basic difference between those who work and those who simply interfere, often in terms of negative criticism (cf. 2 Thess. 3:11; 1 Tim. 5:13). If someone is given a work to do he must do it, resisting and refusing all distractions however plausible (Neh. 6:1-19). There must be no false modesty. The work is great because it is God's and not man's. We must give the highest valuation to the work and at the same time see to it that we never over-value ourselves (Rom. 12:3). But when we get involved in criticism and comparison, our assessments get distorted and we need someone to set things right. Paul here (15) turns the tables on his detractors and shows them to be the limited and limiting ones. When their faith is increased and stabilised he will be able to get on with his work not only in Corinth but in the regions beyond. This is plain speaking, but when Christians become a drag on the advance of the Gospel they need to be told. When the work goes forward and blessing is manifest, then we say, "To God be the glory." (Ps. 118:23) This is the only boasting that is wise (Jer. 9:23-24).

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11:1-6

Because of their persistent criticism Paul has been compelled to defend his person and ministry, but he does not like doing it, not least because it seems that he is praising himself. He asks the Corinthians to bear with him in this "foolishness" because his concern is really for them and not himself. He reveals a true pastor's heart. He has no desire to keep these Christians in "subjection" to himself for his whole concern is that they should grow up into spiritual maturity. But true spiritual independence never makes anyone despise the teacher who first grounded him in Christ. Indeed, spiritual growth and progress lead to a greater and richer fellowship that leads to even fuller let service together in Christ. What was in fact, happening in Corinth was that some (not many as

yet) were being so influenced by other "teachers" that they were being drawn away from Christ. This was something Paul was not prepared to stand and watch without. doing something about it, no matter how much he was misunderstood. After all, he was their father in the faith (1 Cor. 4:14-16; 9:1-2) and "just as a father is not only responsible for having brought his daughter into the world, but also 'gives her away' to her husband, so Paul had espoused the Corinthians to one husband." (Tasker) Paul was not claiming the Corinthians for himself but for Christ and he sees in the influence of these "teachers" in Corinth the work of Satan, appealing to spiritual pride and self-will, and having the effect of taking believers away from simple, wholehearted commitment to Jesus. We need to consider well Jesus' words about false shepherds (John 10:1-6) and Paul's own warning in Acts 20:28-30, cf. Jude 4 and Phil 3:1-2, 17-19.

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11:1-6

Although there is great tenderness in Paul's heart there is no weakness in his words as he deals with this situation in the church which has potential for leading people away from Christ. He recognises the activity of Satan whose set business is to work against the interest of the church. This he does by dissension and distraction. Devil's work is always divisive, setting people at variance one with the other, usually in a way concerned with innuendo rather than specific fact. When this is done unconsciously and unwittingly, people are dupes of the Devil. But when it is done with persistent deliberation, people have yielded themselves to become servants of the Devil. What we are dealing with here is spiritual seduction by means of satanic suggestion which sets suspicion in operation. Once this starts it is difficult to quench or root it out. It can linger for years, poisoning the minds and dulling the spirits of those infected. "The weapon of all false teachers is subtlety; this is why Satan tempted Eve in the form of the most cunning of all God's creatures, the serpent. And the sphere in which this weapon does its deadly work is the human imagination; for once the minds of men are corrupted, their whole personality is rendered impotent to do good. From Eve onwards, the human heart has been prone to be deceived by those who, appearing to have wisdom, insinuate by plausible suggestions and arguments the most destructive of all lies that men and women are not inextricably bound by the limitations of their creaturely estate; that they are not under an imperative duty to recognise and obey their sovereign Creator, but that they have it in their power to break their restrictive fetters, and give free expression to their instincts unbound by any revealed moral law." (Tasker) A desire for spiritual independence is something that needs close scrutiny.

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11:7-12

Paul's detractors were determined to be against him no matter what he did, and the only way to deal with such sick and evil spirits is to tell them the truth to their faces and leave it at that. They spoke contemptuously about his preaching technique and capacity (10:10) and Paul consents that he is not an orator, not a fluent speech-maker (6), but he has already made plain to them that preaching is not a matter of personality or cleverness but of content and power (1 Cor. 1:17; 2: 1-5). The Corinthian critics also slandered Paul in the matter of money. When in Corinth Paul had worked at his trade to maintain himself (and possibly his colleagues) although he had the right to be supported by the church (1 Cor. 9:4-15). It was to preserve his independence and freedom to preach that he did this and his attitude was right because when people are spiritually disaffected money is one of the things they fasten on. The critics accused Paul on occasions of being in the ministry for the profit and the "perks", but at other times they said he was afraid to live by his ministry as the other apostles did, suggesting that no-one would support such a dull and defective minister. When he did live and work free of the support of the Corinthians, they said it was pride. But the pride and failure were theirs. They either did not see his pressing need or they chose to ignore it. But the saints in other places in their love and loyalty provided the necessary financial support so that the Word of God could be preached in Corinth. Note how strong Paul's language is when he says he virtually robbed others who were giving sacrificially (as Paul was) in order that the Corinthians might be blessed. Their "new" teachers did not work on this basis. But Paul insists he will never take payment from the Corinthians in order that his ministry might be free. When people are so spiritual that they are not practical there is an obvious message.

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11:13-15

Paul does not mince his words when speaking of those exercising a malevolent influence on the fellowship at Corinth. He speaks in the same way in Rom. 16:17-20; Gal. 1:8-9 and in other places in his epistles. This was a recurring problem. It is not the gross blasphemers and open deniers of the truth who are the real danger to the church. They declare themselves as being reprobate and none but fools are taken in. Those who *seem* to be spiritual but whose ordination and inspiration is from the Devil are the ones who do the damage, and they do it while acquiring for themselves a spiritual reputation and following. They seem to be fighting for spiritual truth while actually undermining the wellbeing of individual and church alike. This is an alarming thing and has to be exposed, for such persons place themselves in the direct line of God's judgment (Gal. 5:7-10; 1 Pet.1:15-17; 2 Tim, 3:1-9; cf. John 8:44-47). Of course we must be careful in using this kind of language since none of us are immune from the Devil. But at the same time we must see that there is a tolerance that is not of God, it is not Christian, and to allow people to work against Christ's cause without confronting and confounding them is weakness and sin. "Neither the O.T. nor the N.T. has any conception of a religion without this intolerance.... If God has really done something in Christ on which the salvation of the world depends, and if He has made it known, then it is a Christian duty to be intolerant of everything which ignores, denies or explains it away. The man who perverts it is the worst enemy of God and man: and it is not bad temper or narrow-mindedness in St Paul which explains this vehement language. It is the jealousy of God which has kindled in a soul redeemed by the death of Christ a corresponding jealousy for the Saviour." (Denney)

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11:16-21

It goes against the grain for Paul to speak in this way to defend his person and ministry. He does so only in the interest of the weak and uncertain in Corinth who, if the apostle remained silent, might be tempted to believe that there is truth in what the detractors are saying. If some of these waverers had been able to speak to Paul personally the situation could have been resolved more privately, but since that was not possible the apostle speaks publicly, not mincing his words. He contrasts the extrovert, self-assertiveness of the trouble-makers and how they imposed themselves and their will on the church with his own "non-striking" (20) demeanour. None of these new "leaders" they followed would put up with half the indignity Paul suffered and they had made that plain to the Corinthians by their badgering. Now, there is something very practical here. How often and to what extent have we been taken in, browbeaten and distracted from Christ, by the words, actions and attitudes of those who are all too eager to "talk big" but who show remarkably little disposition to work hard and who, on closer examination, are seen to be immature and shallow both humanly and spiritually. Apart from their capacity to talk and personalities that impress to begin with, what are they? Paul has expressed himself without ambiguity.

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11:22-32

Over against the assertiveness of the false apostles Paul places his sufferings, and in contrast to their grasping of position he places his rigorous labours. He suffered for his faith and these experiences (which were not self-inflicted) exhausted him in his service for Christ, while there seems to have been a marked lack of such things in the lives of these upstart teachers. Paul bore in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 6:17) and these are not acquired in a life that spends most of its time in self-indulgent pleasure. What do we do for Christ and for others? Nothing was too hard or too humble for this man, and many Christians would have a far healthier and happier life if they worked harder at everything and had a deeper and sweeter sense of duty and loyalty. Paul's critics boasted of their spiritual pedigree (22), always a dangerous and revealing thing to do, and he counters them as he does in Phil. 3:4-11. To say, "I am a product of" may be more of a slander against that church than a claim to precedence. Paul's critics boasted of their active service of which they were very self-conscious and they are answered in v.25-27. If the experiences described here were to befall some of us we would wonder just why, and many would consider it a sign of God's displeasure and of our spiritual backsliding. No doubt some considered it to be so with Paul but Col. 1:24 is a far more realistic interpretation. His labours were extensive, his sufferings at the hands of religious and political authorities were massive and of maximum measure (Deut. 25:1-3). Jesus spoke about scourging (Matt. 10:17) and Paul's bleeding back in jail at Philippi

testified to the Roman tendency to stretch the law (Acts 16:22ff.). He was stoned, with boulders not pebbles (Acts 14:19), but it never occurred to him to go back from Christ. This is the man the Corinthians had doubts about!

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11:22-33

Paul was not a superman and the repeated dangers of v.26ff. were accompanied by sleepless nights. Travelling was dangerous and "mugging" a real hazard as the story of the good Samaritan tells (Lk. 10:29ff.). Attack from robbers is to be expected, but from your own kindred it is sore and from false brethren it is anguish. In v.27 Paul is not travelling but working in the city and the privations were not voluntary fastings but inescapable need through force of circumstances. Read 2 Tim. 4:9-18 for an understanding of this often lonely man. Note carefully what he says about the care of the churches: "The worry over people, the sharing of their problems as he strives without ceasing to be shepherd, husband, friend and counsellor to all in his care. He has no free life of his own. Long after the queue is gone from outside the vestry door there are still the letters, phone calls, door bells, the hours listening to the tales of tangled lives, seeking solutions, travelling the road of weakness and stumbling with every soul that seeks his help. Sometimes it issues in a life restored and blessed; sometimes after apparent improvement the whole thing crashes down into a worse mess than before. Such was the life of this man of God." (This is the man the Corinthians were having such doubts about and on whose character they were heaping such base criticisms.) "Paul speaks elsewhere of those who are 'without natural affection' and includes this in the terrible catalogue in Romans 1 as one of the evidences of reprobation. How much more then is this true in the spiritual sense, where the bonds that bind believers to those who have brought them to birth and maturity in Christ are even more lasting and more completely of God." (Rev. J. Philip)

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11:22-33

Only a poisoned mind would think that Paul was revealing weakness in this testimony and only a wicked mind would fail to see the immense humanity of this saint and servant of God. There are times when the only refuge and comfort a Christian has is to be able to say that God knows the truth of the matter (31). God does know and He does not hold guiltless those who by action or neglect make it harder for this "suffering servant" to go on in his fruitful labours. Paul is determined to boast only of those things that expose his weakness so that Christ might have all the praise (4:7ff). In the last two verses he refers to an example of unpretentious providence. It was by a simple, undignified escape and not by a mighty miracle that Paul was preserved. No doubt when the story "got round" there were many jokes about "the big man in the clothes basket" (1 Cor. 4:9-13). If he had stayed to fight it out, they would have accused him of bravado and because he escaped they accused him of running away. He just couldn't win! People can be perverse and love to twist everything to a destructive and dishonouring end. Love is so different. It strives to think the best (1 Cor. 13).

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12:1-6

Paul continues to tackle his critics on their own level of boasting about spiritual experiences. He describes himself as "a man in Christ" but speaks in the third person as if to keep attention away from himself. The amazing experience he describes is introduced by 11:30 and climaxed by 12:7. That is, it is set in the context of the battles, struggles and sufferings of a life lived in the service of the gospel. This extraordinary experience was unsought. It was not in any sense self-induced or cultivated. It was sovereign and Paul remains vague as to the details, whether he was translated out of this world in body or whether his soul was temporarily separated from his body. This vision or revelation was quite different from the appearing of the man from Macedonia in Acts 16:9, a real and vital spiritual crisis. It was something he had never spoken about in the fourteen years since it happened. He kept it to himself in a way that he did not keep silent about seeing the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9: 22 and 26). It is suggested that this vision was given by God by way of confirmation and assurance prior to his launching out on the mission to the Gentiles which was a major turning point in the work of the gospel. Whether or not Paul had other similar experiences we cannot tell but it is important to note that he confines his testimony to this one occasion and he speaks of it only under pressure and in relation to the

battles of service. It was the same with the selected three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. Special blessings prepare for special trials.

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12:1-6

Many people feel that "special" experiences are of the essence of Christian life and the temptation is always to feel that such "experiences" necessarily mark a person out as superior. This is not necessarily so. For example, the disciples' experience in the stilling of the storm in Mark 4:35ff. was really a concession to weakness. Their faith would have been stronger had they trusted the Lord through the storm. The story in Luke 16:19-31 emphasises the need to live by the Word of God alone. But Paul was given this experience in the wisdom of God. He was caught up into the presence of the glorified Christ and he emphasises not what he saw but what he heard. Then he insists that what he heard were "inexpressible" words which it is not "permitted" for man to utter. No doubt Paul like Peter and John and indeed James looked back to unique experiences and drew from them great encouragement (2 Pet. 1:16; John 1:14; Jas. 1:17) but they would not thereby claim any superiority for themselves or attribute any inferiority to others who had not had or had not spoken of such experiences. Remember Jesus' words to doubting Thomas in John 20:26-29 and His words to His disciples in Lk. 10:17-20. We must listen to the Lord as He speaks to us and we must trust Him to bring to mind and heart His precious promises and the remembrance of past blessings exactly when we need them. He has promised to provide and we can trust Him to do so. But note Paul's concern that people should not judge him by his hidden experiences but by what is manifest of Christ in his life.

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12:7-10

Paul was so precious to God and so significant in the work of God that God set a guard upon him to preserve his usefulness. That guard was the thorn-in-the-flesh. Paul himself saw the danger of pride arising from what people thought of him (6) and from what he thought of himself (7). Whenever we become self-conscious, over aware of all we are involved in under God, we tend to over-value our significance (Rom. 12:3) and in this way we obtrude upon God's glory and become hindrances rather than helps to the work of the gospel. This means that high moments of spiritual life and service, and especially success, are times of danger that few, if any, are able to cope with apart from some significant help from God. That help for Paul was the thorn in the flesh which he describes as a messenger of Satan to harass and ill-use him. The thing itself was evil and yet God used it for good. Think of the story of Joseph and his comment in Genesis 50:20. We are not dealing here with some besetting sin which troubled Paul, for God is the Saviour who not only forgives sin but breaks the power of cancelled sin. Neither must we think of this thorn in terms of some physical ailment, although many choice saints have to live with sore afflictions which healthy characters often fail to appreciate or sympathise with. This thorn (or even stake) does not *seem* to have been anything outward such as defective eyesight, or inward such as malignancy, fevers or epilepsy. After all, the story of Paul is one of amazing and indeed increasing physical and mental strength and stature. This thorn was for "the flesh".

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12:7-10

Consider the spiritual character of this thorn for the flesh, the old nature which could so easily rear its ugly head and become aggressive and hindering. It was sent by God to guard the apostle from the danger of becoming obsessed by the extent to which he was being used by God. It was God's way of keeping Paul a sharp cutting instrument. We know from our own experience how often we need to be driven to God. Ease, success and praise all tend to be bad for us (Ps. 119:67, 71). Of course lack of rest, constant failure and absence of encouragement can also do satanic work and demolish us. That is why we need to encourage one another (Heb. 12:12-13; 13:1-3). In Paul's case the vision and the voice of paradise seem to have been the encouragement over against the hammering discouragements of experience with their pain and rejection. Paul knew he was a chosen vessel for God and it would have been dishonesty, not humility, to deny it. But there was the thorn: not one sharp conflict but years of pressure, sometimes increasing beyond bearing. God at times would not allow his preaching to progress and allowed his enemies to maltreat him with impunity. At times God allowed great seas of faintheartedness to engulf him with waves of fear and doubt. Think of the floods of evil and blasphemous

thoughts that assailed the mind of Bunyan's Pilgrim. Sometimes God seemed to allow Satan to hinder and blight the work and bring the messenger of the Word into the dust. This was the thorn, God's thorn. His ways are perfect.

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12:7-10

Like his Master in Gethsemane Paul prayed three times and like his Master said, "If this cup pass not from me except I drink it, Thy will be done." God's word to this beleaguered, battling, suffering servant was to the effect that this was the way in which he could be used to the full for the blessing of others and for the glory of God. Paul grasped what we must grasp, assisted by the opening chapters of the Book of Job, that daily experience in the service of Christ cannot be assessed merely on the basis of our own personal, visible service and sanctification. God is at work on a higher dimension and on a vaster scale whereby the kingdom of darkness itself is being assailed and confounded. The personal life and circumstances of Paul and Job alike were the battle ground between God and Satan on which the triumphs and glories of God's grace were to be displayed. This is the theme Paul expounds concerning the church in Eph. 2:7; 3:10. Now, if grace is to be glorified, it must be demonstrated that the "strength" is all of God and it is to this end that God sent the thorn for the flesh to Paul. At the same time God reassured Paul in a way he never forgot saying that His grace was and would always be sufficient. It is not only a privilege to serve, but to suffer (Eph. 3:7-8; Phil 1.29-30). When God said that His strength found opportunity and expression through Paul's weakness the man simply cast himself on God. "O use me, Lord, use even me, just as Thou wilt, and when, and where." (Havergal) If we want God to have full scope to work in and through us then we must consent to His "thorns".

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12:7-10

As a last meditation in these verses (link them with Psalm 73 and Job 23) consider these words from James Denney's commentary regarding the messenger of Satan: "The name is dictated by the inborn, ineradicable shrinking of the soul from pain; that agonising, humiliating, annihilating thing; we feel at the bottom of our hearts, is not, really of God, even when it does His work. In His perfect world pain shall be no more Paul, at first, like all men, found the evil overpowering. The pain, the weakness, the degradation of his malady, were intolerable. He could not understand that only a pressure so pitiless and humbling could preserve him from spiritual pride and a spiritual fall. We are all slow to learn anything like this. We think we can take a warning, that a word will be enough, that at most the memory of a single pang will suffice to keep us safe. But pains remain with us, and the pressure is continuous and unrelieved, because the need of constraint and discipline is ceaseless. The crooked branch will not bend in a new curve if it is only tied to it for half an hour. The sinful bias in our natures - to pride, to sensuality, to falsehood or whatever else - will not be cured by one sharp lesson. The commonest experience in human life is that the man whom sickness and pain have humbled for the moment, the very moment their constraint is lifted, resumes his old habit. He does not think so, but it is really the thorn that has been keeping him right; and when its sharpness is blunted, the edge is taken from his conscience too." If we would be useful, we must yield to the disciplines of the God who is always saying, My grace is sufficient.

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12:11-13

Paul now shakes himself free from this spell of enforced "boasting" in which he has not been happy. He feels he has been brought down to a rather petty level which would not have been necessary if the Corinthians, who knew well his person and his ministry, had defended him as they ought to have done. In this rather vicious situation they had chosen to be neutral and non-committal. Paul agrees that he is in himself nothing (1Cor. 3:6) and yet states he is not in any sense inferior to these "superlative" apostles whom the Corinthians are adulating with little cause. He speaks in v.12 with simple honesty regarding his ministry in Corinth and how it had been, as they knew full well, authenticated by God with the signs of an apostle, not least a work of conversion and the founding of a church (Acts 18:1-17; cf. Acts 14:1-3). There had been *signs*, directing the mind to spiritual truth; *wonders* awakening the emotions to an awareness of God; and *mighty works* testifying that what was being done was not of man but of God. All these amazing things had happened in a situation of conflict and opposition which called forth from Paul a patience and steadfastness which marked him out as God's chosen

man. He had cared for these new believers, sharing their woes, disentangling their problems, discussing with them and encouraging them, laying himself out to be at their disposal. And they had allowed him to do it (although this is not always the case) and they had benefited. In some ways he had been too good to them and had not asked enough of them. For this failure to expect and demand enough from them he asks their forgiveness (13).

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12:14-15

There is no threat or warning in Paul's intimation of a third visit. Rather he is keeping open the channels of communication, insisting that, whatever has passed between them, he is still their father in the faith and will go on caring for them and ministering to them as he has done in the past. He feels it is best that he should remain independent of the Corinthian church in terms of financial support not least to make plain that his primary concern is for their welfare. It may have been that Paul felt that the rectifying of this practical matter of support for the ministry might become a substitute for true repentance and the yielding of their hearts afresh to God. Their spiritual lives had got into a tangle and nothing must be allowed to hinder the restoration. It is quite astonishing how this man who had been so sorely hurt opens his heart without qualification to these Christians he loved so dearly. Like a true father he is prepared to spend and be spent for his children's establishment and well-being, even though they might well misunderstand and resent all he is doing. But do not fail to grasp the challenge of the question in v.15b. Gratitude is a necessary grace which is all too often absent from both natural and spiritual children. The dynamic of gratitude tends also to be absent from *our* attitude in respect of service for Him who spent and was spent for us. The human heart is strange. Is it possible for Christians to be graceless?

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12:16-18

There is no end to the base suggestions that even professing Christians will make regarding the servants of God. Of course, when a Christian is out of touch with God any preaching that seems to rebuke and challenge will be resented and he will quickly change the subject by the age-old technique of throwing fiery darts of accusation at the preacher. The Corinthian critics accept contemptuously that Paul himself had maintained independence, but accuse him of being crafty and of using other people to do his dirty work for him, so that he could in safe detachment from Corinth filch away some of the offering money for his own personal enrichment. It was an ugly situation in Corinth and its relentlessness marked it out as demonic. These were people determined to believe the worst and "a man who is wounded by the Word but not healed, is one of the most dangerous men on earth." It is a time of deep of spiritual danger when we begin to refuse the Word, and however we try to justify or excuse ourselves, the fruit of that refusal will testify that we have departed from God. Paul denies the charges of craft with rigour and challenges them to accuse Titus who was possibly present when the letter was being read. He is not prepared to submit to the bondage of explaining and justifying every action any longer. To his own Master he stands or falls.

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12:19-21

Paul says very plainly to these Christians that they are not his judges and that these many words of explanation he has felt compelled to give have not been to justify himself, and certainly not to excuse himself. They can dismiss any thought that Paul is confessing to wrong in his dealings with them. Indeed the only reason he is speaking as he does is for their upbuilding and stabilising, which they are in great need of. It is here that we see Paul bringing the whole situation into the presence of God before whom he stands and to whom he must give account. He expresses grave misgivings about their spiritual condition and this would no doubt lead some to search their hearts and repent, so returning to fellowship and service. But others would resent what they considered a "slur" on their spirituality and would be confirmed in their declension. Recall Paul's words in 1 Cor. 3:1-16 and you see that the sins spoken of here (12:20b) stem from self-will and party spirit which destroy fellowship and bring outgoing service to an end. Recall 1 Cor. 5:1-13 and see that the sins here (12:21) stem from self-indulgence which is a contradiction of purity. Self-will and self-indulgence are usually found together and Paul says that if he comes to Corinth and finds the believers carelessly wallowing (in attitude, thought and

fact) in sensual sins, he will not simply mourn because he is no longer able to be proud of them, he will mourn them as men and women dead unto God. Read Gal. 5:13-26; cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11. Paul speaks in love but he speaks very plainly.

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13:1-4

In given circumstances pastoral concern and spiritual discipline are and must be severe. Everything will be exact with no place for innuendo. All statements will be substantiated by witnesses who will be examined and who will be required to stand or fall by their testimony (Deut. 19:15-21; cf. Matt. 18:15-18). The stern language and drastic measures indicated here are because the rebellion and refusal are in respect of Paul's apostleship, not just his person. This is serious as Paul knew well from his Old Testament training (Num. 16:1-11, 19-35). Note that when Paul indicates that he will not spare the wrongdoers he reveals that in apostolic times the individual churches were not self-determining units allowed to set their own standards. There was reference to outside authority. When faced with this stern business of judgment, remember how long Paul had been patient and forbearing. In this he was like his Master for one of the astonishing things in the Bible is not the judgment of God but the fact that He waits so long before exercising it. The longsuffering of God is wonderful to behold; cf. Ex. 34:6-7; Num. 14:17-20; Ps. 86:1-7, 12-15; Rom. 2:1-5; 9:22; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 3:9, 15. He is indeed a God "slow to chide and swift to bless." We must learn to be like Him in His tenderness and strength.

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13:1-4

The Christian attitude to evil is both submission and challenge, and the Corinthians must not be deceived by appearances. Christ was not only led as a lamb to the slaughter in respect of sin, He also rose again and took His seat on the throne of judgment. When He comes again He will not spare (Rev. 19:11ff.). In the Corinthian situation Paul may have appeared weak in 1 Cor. 2:1-5 and again in 2 Cor. 2:1, for he did not then vindicate his apostolic authority. Just as it seemed on the Cross that sin had triumphed over righteousness, so in Paul's life and ministry it seemed again and again that evil won the day and the righteous man was put to shame. But now, just as Christ demonstrated His rightful triumph over sin, so Paul would come to Corinth clothed with divine power to set right the wrongs that were blighting the church. "It is scarcely possible to overestimate the practical importance of this thought for those engaged in the work of the Lord It is this death-life pattern which recurs again and again throughout the epistle and affords such assurance and encouragement to those who are for the moment up against it in the costly service of the Lord. God always sees to it that the deaths we die in His service - whether they have the shape of oppositions of evil men, or wrestlings with the Devil himself - are followed by accessions of new life and power that are a constant wonder to even the believing heart, and a source of discomfiture and conviction to those whose evil brings them about." (Rev. J. Philip)

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13:5-6

The Corinthians had challenged Paul to prove he was a true apostle and Paul challenges them to prove that they are really Christians. His objective is not personal vindication but their restoration. If they stated categorically that they were Christians he could ask them by whose ministry they had been converted and established. But he could go further and ask what proof they could show to confirm that Christ did in fact live in them by the Holy Spirit. If He is there, there must be some evidence of the life of grace. There are two areas in which we can be put to the test. In the world outside would the people who know you best say without hesitation you were a Christian and testify to your grace, humility, kindness and integrity? Have you spoken to people about Christ and given to some friendship and care long-term for Christ's sake? Then within the life and work of the fellowship are you a burden-bearer or a burden; a shepherd of lambs and sheep or one who neglects and scatters; an encourager or one who demoralises and distracts? Note how Paul insists we should examine ourselves not others. It is when we are least ready for this honest scrutiny of our spiritual worth that we are most likely to start criticising others. A backslidden state and a bitter, cynical spirit go together. A critical spirit is not a sign of superior spirituality and only the undiscerning fail to see through it and recognise it for what it is, pride. Why is it that some do nothing but criticise, and denigrate? Why are these their dominant characteristics? Self examination is a good thing. It proves a lot!

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13:7-10

It is an abiding temptation for Christians to listen to and to be taken in by those who make it their business to criticise ministers of the gospel. It is a temptation that besets ministers who can be too willing to listen to criticism of others. It is a profitless exercise and, under the influence of Satan, it becomes destructive. This is why Paul's words are blunt (5-6) but his objective is not that he should be personally vindicated nor that he should have opportunity to demonstrate his apostolic authority (and certainly not his importance to the work of God, although this was no fiction) but that the Corinthians might be reinstated in true spiritual service and fellowship. This was Paul's desire even if he remained discredited. The testimony of the church and its usefulness to God were far more important than his reputation. He was willing to be nothing so that Christ might be all. This is indeed consecration, cf. John 3:25-30. There is a tremendous singleness of heart in this man. He knows the church in Corinth will outlive him, and therefore his only concern is that when he is no longer able to minister to it, it will have been built such a solid, fundamental fellowship that it will stand. The test of a man's work is often after he has been taken from it. Who wants a church built on a minister? He will die, and if your faith is in him you will collapse. He will be much happier if his ministry leads you on past him to Christ.

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13:7-10

There is profound truth full of glorious but heart-searching assurance in v.8. The truth of God is never static and the purposes of God go on with an irresistible progress that sifts the hearts of all with accuracy and judgment, bringing to light faith and unbelief. Didn't Jesus speak about all things covered being brought to open light (Matt. 10:26), and is not this one reason why we are counselled to walk in the light (1 John 1:5-7)? Neither man nor devils can ultimately stand against the truth of the Gospel and this must condition our thinking. In this light consider Isa. 42:1-4; 43:10-21; 53:11; Acts 5:33-39; 2 Thess. 3:1; 2 Tim. 2:9; Col. 4:3. There is in Paul's heart no desire for a display of authority and he is making plain that, when the truth of God is established and flowing freely in the obedience of the people, there is in fact no need for such authoritarianism. There is no place at all for an overbearing spirit on the part of a true pastor (Mk. 10:42-43). Paul is content to be "despised and rejected of men" and indeed to be "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" so long as Christ is glorified in His church. But this kind of attitude is not maintained unless a man is indeed a man of prayer. We have been concentrating on what Paul has been saying to the Corinthians but we need to ponder just how much more Paul spoke to God *on behalf* of these Christians. His intercessions were on their behalf and did not degenerate into an exercise in criticism. Lord teach us to pray.

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13:11-13

This is a very full passage and v.11 alone has five exhortations and a glorious promise. The word "farewell" could be translated "rejoice", that is, rejoice in the Lord (Phil. 3:1; 4:4-7), because when hearts are redirected to the Lord then joy becomes a significant fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). This note is being written the morning after what, by common consent, was the most glorious Easter Sunday we have had in the entire twenty years we have been together. The reason is not far to seek. Our minds and hearts were in an unfettered and undistracted way centred on the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His presence was so manifest among us that joy was the significant note of the whole day. Paul feels that there is no better way to say farewell than to rejoice in the Lord. He calls on the Corinthians, as a church more than as individuals, to mend their ways, to be perfected (A.V.), to be made complete and to agree with one another, to be restored to working order (cf. Gal. 6:1; Matt. 4:21). In some ways it is a call to the members of the fellowship to disentangle themselves from the complications that their own distorted thinking had caused. Then he asks them to heed his appeal or, as the A.V. has it, to be of good comfort, in the sense of being encouraged. The fourth exhortation is to foster a common outlook by putting first things first and this is married to the appeal to live in that peace which is not marred by exaggerated personal loyalties which are a mark of spiritual immaturity (1 Cor. 3: 1-4ff). Of course, living in peace is the outward consequence of having inward peace, and this is one reason why restless souls can be such disturbers of the peace. They have no peace and cannot bring peace.

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13:11-13

The call to be of the same mind is a searching one in a fellowship made up of so many different kinds of people. "To be of the same mind does not mean that individual judgment and opinion should be set aside, but that as fellow Christians, with all their diversities of ability and temperament, they should be united in what is essential, namely, in the love and doctrine of Christ. It is Christian unity, not artificial uniformity or submission to the 'mind' of an authoritarian officialdom, which binds together; and it is unity in depth arising from agreement in the mind, which in turn implies agreement in the truth. As Rom. 15:5 shows, this sameness of mind one with another is something which, human nature being what it is (even in the redeemed community where the 'old man' ever lurks), Christians should look to God to grant, and which is qualified as being 'according to Christ Jesus'. That qualification, indeed, demarcates the only genuine basis for Christian unanimity." (P.E. Hughes) Rom. 12:1-8, 14-18; 15:1-7; and Phil. 2:1-8 can be read with great profit in this matter. Agree with one another and without confusing right and wrong, truth and error, refuse to yield ground to slights and innuendo, real and imagined, if such a disposition would lead to disturbing the holy peace of the fellowship of the saints. If we can maintain this attitude and disposition we will be far better able to deal with the realities of the situation and far more able to see that within the unity of the saints there are varieties of relationships which allow for close togetherness of sharing as well as general and open fellowship. Friendships are made on the basis of things held in common and are nurtured on the basis of spiritual growth. This is something that goes a long way to transcending personality, intellect and cultural background.

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13:11-13

In v.12-13 we are dealing with the need to express in genuine terms what we feel in our hearts in the bonds of Christian fellowship and service. Love, joy, peace, friendship, care, concern, sympathy and respect all need to be expressed: it is not enough just to feel them. Interest must be shown and expressed in a way that is not facetious, formal, over-familiar or superficial. A handshake, a smile or even a holy kiss can be quite meaningless. The holy kiss is a recognition of mutual membership of the one sweet family and is the kiss between brother and sister, child and parent. One is reluctant to refer to this "holy kiss" or its contemporary equivalent as a matter of duty but it is so important that our Christian lives will be the poorer if we neglect it. We must not baffle each other by smiling with open friendliness on one occasion and passing by with a dull, sullen gaze on another. Quite apart from it being bad manners, for which there is no real excuse, it is a denial of Christian grace. Granted we may be having a bad spell on a given occasion but that is no reason to insist that our friends should also be depressed. No matter our immediate feelings, the facts of fellowship and mutuality of life and service are not changed. This is not a plea for an over- use of the word "wonderful" nor for a superficial attitude of "praise the Lord, everything's great". Neither is it a plea that we should never be apart from our close friends. When we see too much of each other we are seldom good for each other. We need the gracious discipline of loneliness *in measure*; don't cut yourself off; how can love be expressed in that situation? Paul is calling here for us to grow up in our Christian lives and in the expression of the love of Christ. Love one another as Christ has loved and does love us.

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13:11-13

Think again of the fellowship of the saints in the whole church of Jesus Christ. All the saints salute you. What glorious international communication there is between those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord (1 Cor. 1:2). If we could remember this, we would be delivered from much of the demoralisation and sense of inferiority that comes upon us by being over-aware of the smallness of our cause in any given area. The local church is only a small visible outcrop of the church which Christ Himself is building, and the life and destiny of the church are glorious indeed. Think what this means in terms of the magnitude of the work and the fellowship of prayer that circles the earth and undergirds history. We are not in any sense the broken down remnant of a struggling and defeated army but part of the church militant and triumphant. How we need to exercise this ministry of personal and mutual encouragement and how clearly it is the work of the Devil when the saints criticise or neglect each other. It is a denial of all the love of God and of His immense kindness to us. How

can forgiven sinners, recipients of such love and blessing from the Lord of Glory, be so unwilling to share that blessing with others? But this is not an optional matter; it is a commandment, as Jesus made plain in John 15:12. And it is no meagre love that is meant but love *as* Jesus has loved us. There is no other way. This kind of love and fellowship will never devalue another and it will always keep us in remembrance of how much we owe to the care and prayers of others.

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13:14

These are possibly the most familiar words of the Bible to all inside and outside the church, yet they are beyond exposition. Grace, love and fellowship are bottomless mines of blessing and they are applied here in a direct and personal way even though they contain a thorough doctrinal statement concerning the Trinity. We are reminded of the distinction of persons and function in the eternal trinity and in the economy of redemption. Christ, by the eternal Spirit, offered Himself without spot to God (Heb. 9:14). In the experience of salvation there are the same elements, and so Christ is spoken of first because it is in Christ we are confronted with the revelation of God, the word of God (Heb. 1:1-3) and the hope of the Gospel. It is through God the Son, the one Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5) that we return to God the Father who has set forth the Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2; 4:10), and it is by God the Holy Spirit that we are quickened, convicted, called and enabled to grasp the truth, to come to Christ and to rejoice in all the glorious hope that is to come. It is by the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts that we live in the power of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and are bound together in the fellowship of the saints which we spoke of in yesterday's note. This glorious benediction comes at the end of the most turbulent of all Paul's epistles and that may signify where all true blessing is found. It is in the battles of faithfulness that God's richest gifts are gathered. "Out of the presses of pain comes the soul's best wine."

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13:14

Compare this Pauline benediction with the Aaronic blessing in Num. 6:22-27 and think of how in both the message is that all God is, has and does is for us and with us all. Grace is a word that speaks of no merit. It reaches out to the unworthy, unfit and undeserving and in a real sense seeks no return, whereas love does look for response. Grace is all bound up in Christ by whom grace and truth came to the world (John 1:16-17). This grace that Paul speaks of is something dynamic, not just something in Christ to be admired. Consider these references: Heb. 4:16; 13:9; 2 Tim. 2:1; 2 Cor. 12:9; 2 Pet. 3:18; Tit. 2: 11; Eph. 2:5, 7-8; 2 Cor. 8:9; 1 Cor. 15:10; Jas. 4:6; Col. 1:6; Rom. 3:24; 5:2, 20; Acts 20:32; and John 1:14. This is truly the amazing grace we sing about in various hymns and which has such a glorious message to sinners.

"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed."

"Grace taught my wandering feet
To tread the heavenly road:
And new supplies each hour I meet,
While pressing on to God."

"O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let that grace now, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee."

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13:14

The doctrines of grace are wonderful to consider and to rest in. They kindle worship, and lead us to the love of God. Consider Deut. 7:6-9; 8:2, 11-18; 9:4-6; 32:9-11. There was no obligation laid upon God, for who can require Him to do one thing rather than another? Yet He chose a people for Himself, bound Himself to them in a covenant of grace and remained faithful to that covenant in spite of all. It is here we begin to see the love of God and the God of love. God is love, and all He does is love, whether or not His actions are immediately recognised as loving. As the hymn-writer says, the love that will not let us go must at times seek us through pain, that being in the circumstances the only means by which God can in fact reach our hearts to awaken us to Himself. The love of God, which does indeed pass knowledge (Eph. 3:18, 19) is mightily powerful yet wonderfully sweet, personal and practical, as is testified to by passages such as Isa. 43:1-7; 49:8-18; Hos. 11:1-9; 14:1-7. Of course this love is redeeming love which determines to separate the loved one from his sins, for it is in the way of holy obedience that blessing is found. Consider the challenge and promise of 2 Cor. 6:16-7:1 and at the same time, having due regard to the costly road of discipleship, remember the facts of Deut. 33:27, together with Ps. 91:1-2, 11-16. God is love. It should not be too difficult to love Him. There is no reason at all why we should not love and trust Him, and every reason why we should.

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13:14

One of the most demoralising factors in experience is loneliness because it so often produces fear, which in its turn increases the sense of alone-ness. This has been provided for by the God of grace and love. Think of Jesus' words in John 14:15-18, where the word orphans speaks volumes. In John 14:21 there is for us a recollection of how, after His resurrection, Jesus came to His own shattered disciples, making Himself known for their blessing. And in John 14:21 there must also have been for these Jewish disciples, as there is no less for us, a stirring of all the wonderful stories of the Old Testament concerning the Tabernacle and Temple, and how the Shekinah cloud of glory signified that God the Lord was in fact dwelling among His people. In our recent studies (in Leviticus) on Saturday evenings we were reminded again and again of this overwhelming desire of God to be near His people and to draw them to Himself in love and blessing and so provide for them in their whole life of service. It is the work of the Holy Spirit within us and among us to make this communion and fellowship a reality, and He is gloriously competent in His allotted task. Grieve not the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30ff) for this would simply detach you from the companionship, partnership and service of the fellowship of the saints. We are the children of God (Gal, 4:6), no longer strangers, outsiders, taken in simply on sufferance (Eph. 2:19). We belong, and our fellowship is with the Father and with each other (1 John 1:3-7). This is the work of the Holy Spirit whereby the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God become our actual and practical possessions. To such a Benediction we can only say, Amen.

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