



# Reflections On 2 Corinthians

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## Introduction

I'm really not sure what to call this; is it a book, a Bible study, a devotional, a small group study, a commentary? To be honest, it isn't quite any of those things, yet it has aspects of all three. It's hardly long enough to be a book; it isn't complete enough to be a commentary. It's not quite a devotional, but it could be used for devotions. It's not quite a Bible study, but it could easily be used for that, too. If you're creative, it could also be used to teach a class, but it isn't in a proper format to be curriculum.

One thing differs here from the first two collections I have released. For this collection, I have not included discussion questions, but anyone could make up their own for use in a discussion or class setting.

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All blessings to you in Christ!

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## ***The Problem with 2 Corinthians***

I'm not quite sure what I should do about the book of 2 Corinthians; that's the bottom line. On the one hand, I want to just blog right through it like I do with other books; when I've completed that, I will have blogged all of the books of the New Testament.

Yeah... that would be a good thing.

Only we're talking about 2 Corinthians here: 2 Corinthians is *different*. How is it different? Well, for one thing, it is really Paul's fourth letter to Corinth, at least it's the fourth one we know about. For another thing, it deals with a whole set of circumstances we can only surmise from its pages; we have nothing rock-solid to base our understanding upon. Traditionally we have treated 2 Corinthians like the unattractive step-sister of 1 Corinthians. We want to take 1 Corinthians to the dance, with her beautiful phrases, and her brilliant theological content that spans the ages, but poor little 2 Corinthians goes to the dance all alone, waiting off in the corner for someone to ask her to dance.

In 1 Corinthians, the context was tricky to follow, and as you will no doubt recall, there were many times when I had to pause to re-state the context of a passage so that we could see it clearly and avoid applying it incorrectly. With poor 2 Corinthians, context isn't tricky, it's downright dodgy. What we can surmise is this: About the time Paul sent 1 Corinthians to Corinth, or a little after that, there was a big blowup in Corinth. It was (probably) caused by outsiders chiming in against Paul's integrity... but maybe it was insiders. Paul travelled to Corinth to deal with things, but the trip was a complete disaster— there were harsh things said. Paul then returned to Ephesus and fired off a scourging letter (that does not survive), along with Titus.

The following year (probably) Paul arranged to get a briefing from Titus in Troas, but Titus didn't show up. After that, in a different location (most likely) they get together and Titus reported that all was well in Corinth because the Corinthians had dealt with the responsible parties and finally came to their senses. Paul returns to Ephesus (we think) and writes 2 Corinthians to sort of explain himself (we theorize) and to prop up the legitimacy of his apostleship and ministry... or so it would appear.

After that, he returned to Corinth for three months (or longer) and wrote Romans, and then returned to Jerusalem with the offerings collected for the church there.

See what I mean? Of course, with a dicey context, 2 Corinthians is a gold mine if you are looking for proof texts to use in arguments to "prove" something Paul wasn't talking about.

Well, I'll think about the 2 Corinthians problem some more, and let you know what I decide...

## Chapter 1

### **2 Corinthians Begins**

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Whatever contextual confusion there may be in this letter, it begins with the typical opening of a first century letter written in the Greek style. Paul identifies himself as the author, along with Timothy, and addresses the contents to the church at Corinth. He continues into the second part of the greeting with a thanksgiving for the recipients as he does in all of his New Testament letters, with the exception of the one he wrote to the Galatians.

This is where the similarities with the others begins to end.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. (1:3-7)*

Do you see what is different here? Paul wins the prize for most uses of the word “comfort” in a single paragraph, six times as a noun and four times as a verb in this one paragraph. I might as well tell you now, he uses it five times more as a noun, and twelve times more as a verb in this letter: Clearly, “comfort” will be a big issue in 2 Corinthians.

I think it’s safe for us to assume right off the bat that Paul has gone through some troubles recently, and so have the Corinthians, and although things have been rough, God has provided them with the comfort they needed through trials. As Paul continues in the next paragraph, he makes reference to something more specific:

*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. (1:8)*

Clearly something has happened, but what? Just as clearly, the Corinthians knew all about it, and since they were familiar with the subject, Paul did not need to spell it out, leaving us in the dark. Naturally there are theories about this, but in the end, we cannot know precisely what Paul is talking about, and maybe that’s for our benefit, for what is really important, the aspect of this that is enduring for all ages, is that even though Paul has gone through a time that caused to him to despair, God provided for his needs spiritually, and Paul came out the other side of his troubles stronger in faith than before, and since “comfort” seems to be the word of the day, we can surely take comfort reading this.

All of us endure trials in this life, trials that seem so big, sometimes they may seem bigger than can be endured; hopeless even. Yet our God, the God of all comfort will see us through.

*Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver*

*us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (1:9-11)*

It seems to me that this is the greatest lesson Paul learned in his trials: *But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. (9b)* We want to rely on ourselves, it is normal, it is natural to want to rely upon ourselves. Yet, self-reliance, even though it is often a very good thing, can also be a danger. After the resurrection of Jesus, many came to accept the gospel, yet many more preferred to rely on their own strength to keep the Law which ultimately brought about their destruction. Our faith in God is our hope, our strength. Some might see this as weakness, but in our weakness God is strong, and it would certainly appear that Paul is giving testimony to this great fact so that we will take it to heart.

### ***Accusations, Integrity and Travel Plans***

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

*Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace. For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1:12-14)*

Paul begins the main body of the letter with these words beginning a section about his integrity in dealing with the Corinthian church. Apparently, someone has convinced a number of the members that Paul has not been honest in his dealings with them. Of course, in our time we should be familiar with this kind of tactic since we see it not only in churches, but in public life as well. Thus, in these verses, Paul is beginning his defense, almost as though he were in court.

Paul is telling them that he had been confident that his relationship with them had been one of mutual trust and respect, and he looked forward to being able to teach in their midst so that he could expand upon the things he had written to them previously so that their understanding of the points he had made would be complete, but as we see in the text that follows, something happened...

*Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both "Yes, yes" and "No, no"? (1:15-17)*

Paul had made plans to leave Ephesus and stop off in Corinth on his way to Macedonia, and then to stop off in Corinth on his way back for another and final visit before returning to Jerusalem. Apparently, he cancelled his second stop, and is being criticized for doing so by those in Corinth who opposed him. His point here is that he did not deliberately promise 2 visits and then drop one of them.

In the next paragraph, 1:18-22, he tells them that he doesn't do things the way this world does, but rather as Jesus did. Jesus didn't just change His mind over nothing but was always firm in His resolve to serve the gospel. Then, Paul tells them...

*I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. (1:23-24)*

It seems that Paul cancelled the second visit to spare them, so as not to challenge their faith... but to spare them what?

*So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you. (2:1-4)*

This isn't a great deal to go on, but here's my best guess: Paul's last visit to Corinth didn't go well— it was a disaster brought about by those who opposed him. There was conflict, not joy. Paul moved on his way, and then in “anguish” wrote another letter that we do not have today. Things were said, things were written... Paul cancelled the trip so as not to bring it all up again. His opponents, on the other hand, jumped at the cancellation and used it once again to accuse him, and this is his explanation of his actions.

It is interesting that Paul writes about forgiveness in the next section.

## Chapter 2

### ***Paul Advises Forgiveness***

*If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

Recently I received a call from a good friend who was having some problems with his pastor. He was seeking some advice on what he should do about certain things that the pastor had said, probably in jest, that my friend had found quite hurtful personally. While I am acquainted with both parties, I really had no more insight into the situation than what I was being told, which sounded pretty bad. Of course, you know how it is, this was only one side of the conversation that I was not a witness to, and often, when you hear the other side, you might have a different impression. My friend was asking what I thought he should do, and there was really only one bit of advice I could offer so I said something like, “Ask yourself how many times our Lord said we should forgive our brother, and I think you’ll know what to do.”

He laughed, and said “Well, I guess about as many times as it takes.”

Essentially, that’s what Paul is saying in these verses about the person who created all of the trouble in Corinth. As I am typing this I recall what President Lincoln told General Grant a few days before General Lee surrendered his army, effectively ending the American Civil War: “Let ‘em up easy General.” It was an amazing thing to say in a time when the entire North was demanding vengeance and retribution for four terrible years of war, especially coming from the man who felt deeply responsible for hundreds of thousands of dead soldiers and their families.

“Let ‘em up easy, General.”

Paul could certainly have wanted to get even for the pain this guy had caused, and in a way, he’d be justified. Yet, what would have been the point of inflicting more pain?

Jesus taught that we should forgive one another and pray for our enemies. While this isn’t always easy to do, Paul gave us a great example of doing just that in these verses, an example we should take careful note of, don’t you think?

### ***Ministry, Viewpoints and Aromas***

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

## 2 Corinthians 2:12-13

After Paul advocated forgiveness for the person or persons who caused all of the trouble in Corinth, he went on in this letter to tell about what he was up to after he left that city. It would seem that he travelled to Troas, expecting Titus to meet him there. Apparently, Titus wasn't there, even so God opened a door for the gospel in that location, and a number of people accepted His grace upon hearing the gospel from Paul. Yet Paul didn't stay long in that city, he was very grieved by what had taken place back in Corinth, and at the absence of Titus, and continued on to Macedonia.

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

## 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

What an unusual way to describe it! Paul breaks into a thanksgiving to God in 2:14 which follows the same structure that he will use in chapter 15 to describe the activity of his ministry, for indeed, this is the introduction to a new section of the letter that continues through 7:14 which is a defense of his apostolic ministry that is seemingly given as a response to his attackers in Corinth.

For many of us, his use of the word "aroma" seems oddly placed in these verses in describing the spread of the knowledge of Christ. That is, until we remind ourselves that "aroma" is used multiple times in the Old Testament to describe sacrifices that are pleasing to God. To put it directly, Paul is describing his work in spreading the gospel as a sacrifice pleasing to God. The spread of the gospel brings life to many, for they respond to the gospel by accepting God's grace, but it brings death to others who reject God's offer of grace through faith in Christ. Please note carefully that each made their own choice either to accept or reject Christ, and the blessing or burden of the result of their decision is entirely of their own doing.

Finally, notice that Paul hits his opponents rather hard as he ends the chapter: *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God (2:17)*. I'd say that is a bit of an indictment, but it's only the first as he defends his ministry as an apostle, as we will see.

## Chapter 3

### 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

In these verses Paul continues the defense of his apostolic ministry. You'll recall that at the end of the last chapter he mentioned that he, unlike some, isn't peddling the gospel for profit, but rather he is speaking sincerely as one who is sent by God. Now, he moves a step further:

*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? (3:1)*

As an apostle of Christ, Paul does not need credentials and letters of introduction as people of this world do; certainly, he has no need of a letter from the church in Corinth to introduce him to anyone. The reason should be obvious: That there was a church in Corinth at all was testimony enough of his dedication to the gospel because Paul was the one who took the gospel to Corinth in the first place. Was his teaching successful? The fact that it was a success should be self-evident to anyone: Where there had never been a church before, now there was a church.

I think we can infer from this that his opponents thought that he needed some kind of introduction or credential to prove he was genuine: How silly. In fact, that is so silly, it's the kind of thing we would expect in our time.

*You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (3:3)*

Paul continues...

*Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (3:4-6)*

This is an interesting statement; it was as controversial then as it is now. Paul's assertion is that he is a competent minister of the New Covenant, as evidenced by the fact that he established a church in Corinth where the gospel had never before been preached. His competence to do so came directly from God, not from his education. Actually, when we think about it, his education, which was considerable indeed, had led him to *persecute* the church. God alone made Paul competent to spread the gospel, not by academics, but by His Spirit, for it is the Spirit that gives life, not letters (academics, human learning).

I would imagine that if Paul were alive today and was applying to become a pastor in a modern church and said these things in an interview, that he would be shown the door rather quickly.

His ministry as an apostle was not conducted according to the ways of Man, but according to the ways of the Spirit... *Yes but... but... how do we...how can be sure...?*

It's a tough one isn't it?

At any rate, Paul wasn't going along with the ways of the world, and even though he was under attack in certain places, by certain elements, he was not apologizing for it.

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

#### 2 Corinthians 3:7-11

With these verses, Paul makes the transition from defending himself, his ministry, his integrity... to proclaiming the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old. As he continues through the rest of chapter 3 and chapter 4 he sounds very much like the author of Hebrews, as so many believe him to be.

He begins with a continuance of his remarks about letters versus the Spirit, moves into letter equating with condemnation and death as opposed to Spirit and life, and ends with letters- condemnation- death: *Old Covenant*... contrasted with Spirit-life: *New Testament*... very effectively, I might add. The element that he uses here to tie this all together is glory.

He hearkens back to when Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God noting that God's glory had permeated him so that he had to wear a veil for a time after that to avoid overwhelming the Israelites, for God's glory literally shown from his face... for a time. Even so, glorious though that time was, the Law ultimately brought condemnation upon Israel, for none could keep it, even though it was their great pride and glory. Sadly however, the Israelites were every bit as human as we are, and they came to rely upon their own abilities as human beings to keep the Law, while all that God ever really wanted from them was to do their best and trust Him for the rest. Sadly then, the pride of the Israelites became their undoing, and when God fulfilled His promise of redemption, they came, for the most part, to reject His Son.

Contrast that sad story with the transcendent glory of God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. By God's grace we are saved not only from our sins, but from death itself, for in Christ we have inherited eternal life. We have the Holy Spirit within us, and if we will only allow Him, He will work in our lives, and through us to work in the lives of those around us to build His Kingdom. The result of this is really obvious: In days of old, the people believed that the Law was glorious, and so it was. Yet now in Christ God's glory has so surpassed the Old that the Old has simply withered away.

That is glory indeed!

With this foundation, Paul proceed to build on this theme in the verses that follow...

*Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And*

*we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

2 Corinthians 3:12-18

In the previous paragraph or so, Paul has presented a contrast between the letter, and the Spirit, death and life, and the Old and the New Covenants, and with this paragraph, he draws a conclusion from that discussion– that is our context.

In drawing his conclusion, Paul uses a metaphor, that of Moses wearing a veil when he came down from the mountain to address the Israelites after his summit meeting with God. The purpose of the veil, as you will recall, was to hide the glory of God that still shone on his countenance so that it would not overwhelm the people who saw it, until it faded away. His next step is to tell them that in a sense, that veil is still there, only not on the face of Moses, but upon their hearts, for it is only through Christ Jesus that we can see God's glory clearly. Of course, what we see of God's glory in Christ is not a bright light, at least not in the literal and physical sense. What we see is His Truth, His salvation; His *grace*. In seeing this, we come to understand the difference between the letter of the Law, and the life-giving Spirit of Almighty God working in our lives.

That is, if we care to notice.

So often we might want to rely on something more tangible like... rules, regulations... the Law, and as a result, we might well miss the Spirit in our midst. If we're honest, we'd probably say that we've all had that experience.

Yet, we do not need to stay in that place, for thanks be to God, He has set us free from the regulation of Law, from the regulation of worship, and from death and separation from God.

We have the Spirit of the Lord, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom, and that dear reader, is glorious indeed.

## Chapter 4

### ***Tenacity in Spite of Shortcomings***

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

As chapter 4 begins, we find ourselves in the midst of a unit of the letter which is a defense of Paul's apostolic ministry, that began 2:14 and runs through 7:4. With 4:1, we are entering into the next subsection of this unit and it runs from 4:1 through 5:10 dealing with Paul's tenacity in spite of his shortcomings.

We begin with Paul drawing another conclusion:

*Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God (4:1-2)*

In chapter 2, Paul made the case that the New Covenant is superior to the Old, and that the Spirit was superior to the Law. Because of these facts, Paul will not lose heart in the face of the opposition he has received in Corinth, or anywhere else. In saying that he has not used "secret and shameful ways" he amplifies and mentions what were apparently the things he was accused of in Corinth: "deception" and distorting the Word of God. Remember, this whole unit is a defense of his ministry, and in these verses, Paul has taken quite an interesting route to come back to those allegations.

This last about speaking the truth openly and commending himself to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God is rather amazing rhetorically, for it has a dual meaning. First would be something like this: "With all of this in mind, and in the sight of God, do you really think I did anything that I've been accused of? Remember, God is watching you!" The other way you could take it would be: "So, you've seen everything I've had to deal with, and you know I have taken it for the sake of Christ, and why; don't you think you should do the same?"

*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (4:3-4)*

Now Paul pours it on. An unbeliever has an excuse for not understanding the situation, for they have been blinded by "the god of this age". Yet Paul has not written this to unbelievers, he has written it to the church; they have no excuse.

Nice.

*For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (4:5-6)*

Again, Paul points out that he has never approached his ministry for any kind of gain or status. Instead, he has preached Christ only, and as a servant. As a result of him fulfilling his ministry in their midst, they all have Christ's light of truth within themselves; they have the very glory of God

in their midst, and at this point, it would be hard for anyone to give any credence whatsoever to Paul's opponents.

We, as our Corinthian brothers and sisters before us, sometimes have people in our midst who seek to tear things down, rather than build things up. Maybe they want to tear down a church leader and start a whispering campaign in the shadows. Maybe they want to distort the gospel to pursue an unsound teaching of the Word of God. Maybe they just like to stir the pot, then stand back and watch the fun...

I used to deal with things like that in teaching when someone would make a comment in class just to start something. I've also seen it in the church, and in the blogosphere; yep, some folks think that kind of thing is fun, and if I'm honest, I'd have to admit that when I was a kid, I did too.

We are supposed to grow up at some point, both in maturity and age, and spiritually into mature followers of Christ.

I will add that there are times when a person, perhaps a leader, has said or done something that needs correction, and Scripture is quite clear on how this should be dealt with. None of that guidance includes creating dissention or gossip however, for dissention and gossip are the two most common things in churches that require correction.

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*

#### 2 Corinthians 4:7-10

Paul is continuing in his defense of his apostolic ministry as we continue in this section. He has been using the metaphor of light and darkness to discuss the presence of God... or the lack of it in the preceding verses, and here he shifts the metaphor slightly, moving from light and dark to jars of clay that contain God's power. Thus, we humans are the jars of clay, and the power we contain is the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

He enters two verses of cadence in which he links difficulties and perseverance to show that in spite of the criticism, trials hardship he has faced, he continues faithfully in his mission as the apostle to the gentiles.

*We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (4:10-12)*

At the end of his cadence, he shifts the metaphor again, now with Christ's death and Christ's life both being present in his body. This neat little allusion tells us that Christ's mortality, by which His blood was shed for us, is within him; was within Paul, who faces persecution and possible death frequently for his testimony about Jesus. Yet that is combined with the presence of Christ's indestructible life as well, and so, Paul perseveres in his ministry in spite of all difficulties, for the benefit of those to whom he ministers; in this case, the Corinthians

themselves. As a result of Paul's faithful pursuit of His God-given ministry objectives, the Corinthian believers have received God's grace, and the gift of eternal life through Christ.

Of course, by extension, so have we.

*It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. (4:13-15)*

He finishes his thought in this paragraph, in which he extends his thinking to its ultimate conclusion: Since the life of Christ is within him, Paul is certain that in the end, though his physical life may be lost, he will rise again just as Jesus did. He will be presented to God along with those countless ones who have received God's grace because of his efforts.

All of his problems in this life will have been worth enduring.

Shifting his emphasis in the last verse, he points out that as this process continues, it should be a great source of thanksgiving to the Corinthians. With that, Paul has prepared us for his conclusion...

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

#### 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

You will recall that we are in a unit that began in 2:14 and which continues through 7:4 in which Paul is defending his apostolic ministry, and in a subsection that began at 4:1 and continues through 5:10 dealing with his perseverance through his own shortcomings. Of course, all of this derives from the opposition to Paul's ministry that cropped up in Corinth at some point after his first letter. We now enter the final phase of this subsection, with Paul's conclusions drawn from the previous verses, and amplified in 5:1-10.

Naturally, we know for certain that we have arrived at his conclusion because of the word "therefore" in 4:16. In these three verses he ties his previous comments together into a conclusion that essentially says that the glory to come outweighs any hardship in this life.

Yes, Paul has his problems. Yes, he is sometimes persecuted, he has known his share of danger, and he has made some mistakes along the way. People accuse him unfairly, he is sometimes insulted, humiliated or cursed, but he continues to be faithful to his calling because he knows that in spite of any affliction in this life, which is itself temporary, his future in Christ is beyond bright, and God provides him with everything he needs inwardly to stay the course in this life.

I must confess to you that I am not an apostle and I'm sure you aren't either. Yet we all have a calling from the Lord Jesus Christ to build His Kingdom, to share the gospel and to help others along the way. All of us know that we have the same Spirit within us that Paul had within him and thus, what Paul has declared in these three verses applies just as much to each one of us as it did to Paul. We also know that the strength God provided Paul was more than enough to

keep him going until his last day on earth, and consequently, we also know that God will do the same for us if we are determined to remain faithful.

So, the only question left for us is whether or not we will determine to remain faithful to our callings.

I don't know about anyone else, but as I think about that, at first it seems a little daunting to me because I'm never terribly comfortable having to depend on someone else, even God. Yet, I also know that in every case that I have placed my trust in Him, He hasn't let me down. When I come to this point, I begin to realize that these are three of the most empowering and liberating verses in all of Scripture: How about you?

## Chapter 5

### ***Moving on to a Better Future***

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

These verses serve a twofold purpose. First, they amplify the point Paul has been making in this chapter, and second, they transition into his next subsection in his larger discussion defending his apostolic ministry. The new subsection will deal with preaching the ministry of reconciliation, as we will shortly see.

To accomplish this expansion and transition, Paul will use two metaphors, the first of which is seen in 5:1...

*For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.*

The “earthly tent we live in” represents our mortal bodies, this earthly existence. Paul uses a building “not made by human hands” to represent our eternal future in Christ. Thus, if and when our tent is destroyed, after all, a tent is a temporary shelter, we will have a really cool house to live in. Of course, who would want to live in a tent when there’s a cool house waiting for them?

After this, he mixes metaphors:

*Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (5:2-4)*

I suppose we could read these verses and identify the exact number of writing and communication rules Paul has broken here in the way he introduces and mixes his metaphors, but in the final analysis, I think he made it work. The tent and house of verse 1 have become articles of clothing, and now our contrast is between being clothed and being naked. While that would normally be confusing and would make his meaning unclear, it seems to be clear enough that when we die, when that tent is destroyed, we will not be left with nothing i.e. naked. Instead, we will be “clothed” with that new house not built by human hands, by the fact that we have inherited eternal life in Christ.

I should also point out that in these verses, Paul has shifted the meaning of “we”, for in the last two chapters, “we” meant Paul, as opposed to “you” Corinthians. Now, “we” means Paul and his readers. This reminds me of the time I was at a luncheon and sitting next to an English Professor. I asked her where she thought the line was between questionable grammar and style. Her response was, “Honey, you’ve written for three presidents; when you do it it’s *style*, when my freshmen do it it’s bad grammar.” Having completely understood her meaning, I’m happy to point out Paul’s unique writing *style*.

*Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. (5:5)*

Whatever we might say about Paul’s writing style, this is a wonderful verse. God has created us to have an intimate relationship with Him for all eternity. Honestly, this all by itself is wonderful, incredible and heartening. Yet the next part is simply amazing, for by giving us His Spirit in this

life, God has given us a foretaste of what is still to come and a guarantee that He is serious about our eternal future. Sit back and think about that... We have God present within us 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Yes of course, sometimes we feel overwhelmed by the day-to-day, our problems or challenges; maybe we have health issues or pain or... whatever it may be. We may groan a bit, we may long for our eternal destiny, but even then, God is with us and we can turn right into His loving presence if only we would remember to do so.

*Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. (5:6-10)*

Paul is concluding this part of his defense of his ministry in these verses. The first thing we notice here is that in this, his final conclusion, he has dropped all of the metaphors, moving his descriptions to a clearer dichotomy: Either at home in the body or at home with the Lord.

While we live on this earth at home in our bodies, we live by faith, for we are not seeing our Lord directly and instead we have his Spirit within us as a deposit, a guarantee of what is coming. As we go through this life, we will desire to live in a manner that is pleasing in His sight, and thus we will want to ask His Spirit within us to guide us in all that we do; this is the natural and normal response of any reasonable follower of Christ.

We know that when our Lord returns, He will return to judge all humanity for what we have done, whether good or bad, so of course, we want to do only good. Clearly, Paul is winding up his subsection by implying that the very thing he has been attacked for doing in the church in Corinth, is what is good in God's sight; preaching faithfully the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yet if we really think about it, these verses might beg a question: If we fall short, is Paul saying we are doomed?

To be quite honest with you, the answer to such a question depends entirely on how you approach the text. If you only read verse 10, you might get the idea that one little slip-up means you're toast. The only problem is that verse 10 does not stand all alone, it is found in a larger context, and in that context, it is quite clear that Paul is telling us no such thing. We, along with Paul, would always want to do our best to be pleasing to God in the way we live, but remember that Jesus changed the paradigm on the cross. In fact, sharing that fantastic news is something that is always pleasing in God's sight, and Paul's whole point here is that in preaching Christ, while some people may not appreciate it very much, it is the one thing God always appreciates.

With that, Paul moves into the next subsection which is all about preaching the gospel of Christ.

### ***Ministers of Reconciliation***

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

Paul moves into this topic by referring to his critics who apparently have claimed that he was out of his mind for believing that Christ died for our sins and then rose again from the dead. Come to think of it, nothing much has changed; people today say that we are "deluded" in our beliefs

along these lines. Yet for Paul, and hopefully for us as well, it was a great deal more than just a belief in Christ, for that belief brings with it far reaching implications:

*For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (5:14-15)*

We don't simply believe the historical fact that Jesus died for our sins on the cross, was buried, and then rose again from the dead; now, what's for lunch? Instead, when we accept this set of facts, we are compelled by His great demonstration of love for us, to make changes in our lives, not because He forces us to, but because we *want to*. When this transformation takes hold, people say we're crazy. Paul sums up the changes this way:

*So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! (5:16-17)*

In verses 18-19 Paul restates his message of Christ's ministry on the cross and its result, and then says...

*We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (5:20-21)*

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are His ambassadors in this world, which is no longer our home; everything has changed. God is making His great appeal to all humanity to be reconciled to Him through Christ, and His great appeal is being made through us. Just think for a moment, God's eternal plan to redeem humanity, the plan that was hidden for ages is now underway. We have been reconciled to Him, and now we have a part to play in achieving God's ultimate purpose, which is that we would not keep His grace only for ourselves, but that we would share it with everyone we come into contact with, and by putting His grace into practice, we would become His righteousness in a world where true righteousness is in short supply. Notice that this righteousness is not about keeping rules, but instead, is all about sharing God's love.

With a message like this, we are faced with a question: What will I do today to bring His message of reconciliation to someone who needs it?

## Chapter 6

### ***An Appeal for Open Hearts***

2 Corinthians 6:3-13

As Paul continues his defense of his apostolic ministry, he moves from the discussion of the ministry of reconciliation, to which we have all been called, into a discussion of faithfulness through hardships. He begins with a double negative, depending on your point of view, it could even be taken as a triple negative:

*We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.*

Strictly speaking, a double negative isn't the clearest way to communicate one's thoughts; they lead to confusion. It would have been clearer if Paul had simply said, "We have done nothing to discredit our ministry". In any case, that is precisely the point he is making in this passage. At first glance we might get the impression that Paul is complaining a bit; there's a note of unfairness on display here. Yet I don't think that was his intention; I certainly hope not, for that would surely undo his point. Instead, I see a little shaming here—take a close look at this:

He begins with ... *Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses* then in verse 5 he cites 6 hardships: *in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger.* He follows these 6 hardships with his responses to them in 6-7: *in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left;*" notice the contrast between his hardship and his attitude through the experiences.

Then he continues by citing his experiences in contrast with his condition:

*through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (6:8-10)*

Finally, in 6:11-13 he brings the discussion home to the Corinthians:

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

Looking at this passage in its entirety, it's fair to conclude that Paul is lodging a complaint. He has served the Corinthians faithfully and lovingly, yet they haven't always been fair with him in return. They have listened to those who would lie about him, they have been eager to find fault with him and though he has been faithful in his service to them, they have not been faithful in return. Yet there isn't an accusatory tone in what Paul has presented here, for you see, Paul has given us an example of resolving personal disputes in love.

Yes, he has mentioned the facts of the situation, but in doing so, his tone has been one of conciliation, not condemnation. I think we can learn from this, don't you?

## **A Warning**

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

2 Corinthians 6:14-16a

I have heard sermons in the past that used this text to teach that Christians should not marry unbelievers, but wouldn't that be a funny thing for Paul to get into in a defense of his apostolic ministry? More to the point, wouldn't there be a potential conflict with his instruction in 1 Corinthians 7:10-14 in which he told the people not to abandon their unbelieving spouses?

Hmm... What is old Paul up to here?

Paul's wording is interesting: "yoked together". There are similar references in two other places, Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:10. In Leviticus, different kinds of animals aren't to be mated together; in Deuteronomy, two different kinds of animals are not to be yoked together to plow a field. To me, particularly since Paul has not given any of his usual hints that he's changing the subject, the Deuteronomy reference makes a lot more sense than understanding this as a new unit about marriage. Remember, this section began in chapter 3 with outsiders coming into the church to convince people of a host of accusations against Paul...

Oh yes, he is referring to two kinds of animals plowing a field...

So, Paul is going back to the situation that led to the whole problem that broke out in Corinth and nearly destroyed the whole church there, when non-Christians used lies and slanders to attack him, and by extension, Christianity, while in their midst. With this understanding, the rest of this chapter is easy to follow. In our verses above, he uses a series of contrasts to illustrate his point. I should mention that Belial is a name that appears nowhere else in Scripture but was used numerous times in Jewish non-Scriptural literature of the times as a direct reference to Satan.

To support his position, Paul cites three Old Testament passages, and then concludes:

*Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*

2 Corinthians 7:1

To be holy means to be "set apart". For the church be holy, it must be set apart for God; that is what it means to live in holiness. Being set apart is not to be better than everyone or to be self-righteous and speaking harshly about other people. Rather, we are supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves. However, it does mean that the church should not allow itself to be led astray or heavily influenced by non-believers. I have no doubt that the Corinthians who received this letter would happily testify to the disaster that this error caused in their midst.

As we continue, Paul will express his great joy that the Corinthians have repented of the mistake, the mistake he has just been talking about.

## Chapter 7

### *The Matter is Resolved*

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

As we all know by now, Paul has been defending his apostolic ministry since chapter three, and this passage is his conclusion; or maybe I should more accurately say the epilogue. When you come right down to it, the conclusion of the persuasive defense was in the last passage, for here we have more about the result of the matter than a final appeal.

Everyone was now happy.

First, let's recap the events: Paul spent a significant amount of time in Corinth preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and working with the new believers there to build a church. After that he went to Ephesus where he remained for a long time. While in Ephesus he kept in touch with the church in Corinth and sent at least one letter there. Later, they sent a letter to Paul asking about a number of things they were having trouble with and Paul wrote back answering their questions and adding his thoughts on a few things they hadn't asked about; we call that letter 1 Corinthians. Paul had plans to return to Corinth for a visit...

Then, word reached Paul that a group had arisen, mostly from outside of the congregation, in opposition to Paul, apparently telling the people there that Paul had mis-taught the gospel, taken advantage of them and was apparently attempting to abuse their contributions made for the church in Jerusalem. I think we can infer that these allegations became rather personal: Paul went to Corinth to confront his accusers, and that confrontation wasn't pretty; things were said, emotions rose... Paul went to Macedonia.

From Macedonia, Paul shot off another letter to Corinth, a letter containing some pointed comments. Paul, who had expected to meet up with Titus in Troas, was very grieved; Titus was not there or anywhere in Macedonia. The people in Corinth were also very grieved; what had they done?

Finally, Titus appears on the scene and he was able to report that the Corinthians had come to their senses, dealt with the troublemakers and repented entirely of their little rebellion against Paul. As a result, Paul is all the more impressed by the Corinthians, for they have come to see a mistake and they had rectified it themselves: Harmony was restored and everyone is happy again. Then, Paul sent another letter, we call it 2 Corinthians.

Reading though the text we have already seen quite a few lessons to apply to our own times. Yet there are a few more we should consider...

First, there are a lot of people who would like to sow chaos in the church, and we must not allow ourselves to be misled by them.

Second, Christians should not take church advice from non-Christians.

Third, we are all human, and even the best and most mature among us are susceptible to being carried away with emotion: Be careful what you say to people.

Fourth, when there is a real threat to the unity of the church, deal with it sooner, not later.

Fifth, when we realize that we have made a mistake, admit it, repent and move on in the Lord, don't worry about saving face.

Sixth, always remember that in Christ, forgiveness is the default setting.

I'm sure I can come up with a few more, and by all means, feel free to chime in with your own thoughts if you'd care to. For me the bottom line is this: Even in the first century when churches had direct communication with the apostles, they had problems. People made mistakes, people said things they shouldn't have, and had their feelings hurt. Yet they faced their issues, they repented when they needed to, and they forgave when they needed to; it was never perfect, it was never easy. Yet they persevered and built the Kingdom, and their legacy is with us to this very day, a legacy of purpose, of hope and of life, and we should thank God for them and follow their example as best we can in the Lord.

## Chapter 8

### ***Show us your love***

#### 2 Corinthians 8

In this chapter, Paul returns to one of the main issues that caused the recent controversies in Corinth; the gift of financial aid to the church in Jerusalem. As we have already seen, his accusers in Corinth made a lot of this action, apparently claiming that Paul was involved in something less than honest, yet Paul and the Corinthians had now moved beyond these attacks, had dealt with the accusers, and reconciled.

Haven't they?

What is really interesting here, is that Paul, full of optimism and joy, is giving the Corinthians an opportunity to demonstrate their rejection of those accusers, and their commitment to Christ and His people by giving their money for the relief of the Jerusalem church.

Was Paul pushing his luck when he wrote this? Remember, he didn't know what the response would be...

Over the years, I've listened to many an annual sermon about tithing come from these verses, and I've often wondered if that was the best application of the text. If I'm honest, I have to say that I still wonder about that.

Yet putting our love into action might well mean that from time-to-time we must part with our cash. No, I don't mean "tithing". After all, tithing is part of the Old Testament Law that is "obsolete and useless" according to the author of Hebrews. What I mean is that so many of us say that Christ is first in our lives, that He is our center and our rock, and then refuse to give our earthly treasure to His cause. Is it just me, or is there perhaps the slightest bit of hypocrisy at work there...?

I'll let you be the judge of that, and I'll just say that Paul is clearly challenging the Corinthians to put their money where their mouths are.

As for us, I think it is safe to say that we should be good stewards of our material resources, wasting not. I think it is important for us to avoid being a burden upon others if it is at all possible. At the same time, it is also important that we be quick to give to those who have a real need, for how can we say that we love our brother and sister, all the while refusing a legitimate need? No, we shouldn't become enablers to enable people to waste their resources and very often it is hard to be sure where the need actually comes from.

Yet as the rich man said, "I may have lost millions in business, but I never lost a cent that I gave away."

## Chapter 9

### 2 Corinthians 9

In the first 5 verses, Paul wraps up his discussion from chapter 8 about the collection for the church in Jerusalem. In this conclusion, he tells the Corinthians that he has told the people in Macedonia all about their willingness to give, how the Corinthians have assured him that they will be all in when the time comes to produce their contribution to the fund. He gives them a heads up that the men are coming to collect their gift, so they won't be surprised; so they can be prepared, in other words.

Of course, he did manage to mention how embarrassing it would be if they didn't come through with their pledge... no pressure or anything.

After this, there is a subtle shift from this specific collection, to a more general theme on giving, one we can all benefit from.

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

Who can argue with any of this?

In my experience, quite a lot of people argue with this. Oh, of course they agree with every word when they're talking about someone else, but if there is the slightest implication that it might apply to them, they become indignant: "They just want my money", they say. If you ask me, I'd say that if this is how you feel about it, then you should keep your money; every penny of it.

*This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (9:12-15)*

With these verses, Paul makes the whole point of the exercise clear: We are asked to give because we need to give, not because God cannot provide in other ways. As people who have so fully received God's blessings, doesn't it follow that we would want to be a blessing to others, particularly to our brothers and sisters in Christ whom we love? Wouldn't we want to be a blessing to that neighbor of ours whom we love as ourselves?

Wouldn't we want to bring glory and praise to God through our giving to fill the legitimate needs of others?

Well, if the answer is no, then by all means, keep your money; we'll pray for you that God will open your eyes to see the blessing you are missing out on.

Yes, I think that about sums up what Paul is saying here, don't you?

## Chapter 10

### ***An Introduction***

As chapter 10 begins, Paul has started the last section of the letter; it runs through chapter 13. For centuries, scholars have been puzzled by this section, for it really doesn't seem to fit; this is another section in defense of Paul's apostolic ministry, but unlike the first section of defense that was based around Paul's love for the Corinthians, this one adopts a harsh tone, and is laced with sarcasm— why would Paul do that now?

In the past, a great many scholars believed that chapters 10-13 were the contents of Paul's harsh letter that was referred to back in the beginning of the letter. Yet in more recent times, scholars have mostly moved away from that view in favor of a view that after Paul had sent Titus and the others to Corinth with his letter (chapters 1-9) he received more bad news from Corinth about the same issues as before, became very angry, and then wrote chapters 10-13 as an additional letter.

More recently another view has come into vogue, this one originates with experts of Greek literature of the period. In this view, Paul's earlier defense of his ministry was directed at the majority of the church who were inclined to be most receptive to Paul, as opposed to the outside agitators and the minority of hardline members who were less likely to be receptive. Paul would, in essence, make his peace with the receptive majority, explain himself and set the table to renew his appeal for the offering. With that accomplished, he would then single out the agitators and hard liners and blast them with all guns in a furious broadside to completely discredit them in the eyes of the majority.

So, which of these views is correct?

I can't say for sure for the simple reason that we don't have any clear evidence to support any of these views, other than the fact that right when we come to what should be the end of the letter, the part where we would expect to find Paul's final greetings, he went off on his opponents. Objectively then, that's all we can say for certain.

Since I am not an expert on first century Greek literary technique, I really am not in a position to confirm or deny the claims of the most recent theory, but I can tell you that being trained in rhetoric myself, that's how I would go about it today if I were in Paul's situation. I would reconcile with the majority who are likely to side with me, and then discredit the opposition; yes, it would be persuasive if done right. The tricky part is to make fools of the opponents without going so far that my allies would be put off.

Did they use the same rhetorical tactics then that we use now?

Sadly, the answer is... sort of.

Since we really can't be sure, I'll just leave the "why" open to your interpretation, and deal with the "what" as we go through this rather raucous section.

### ***Opening Salvo***

2 Corinthians 10

The first thing we are likely to notice when we turn the page from chapter 9 and start reading chapter 10 is that Paul is no longer talking about giving glory to God by experiencing the blessings of giving. It would be an understatement to say that the switch was abrupt; there is no transition whatsoever.

One thing is clear enough in the first six verses: Somebody has been saying that Paul is much bolder when he writes a letter than he is in person, which could be a serious charge if it is coupled with the accusation that he can't back up what he writes about when he is challenged. There is an alternative possibility as well; he might not be a natural public speaker, a little shy perhaps.

*You are judging by appearances. If anyone is confident that they belong to Christ, they should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as they do. So even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it. I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present. (10:7-11)*

These verses give us a bit more insight into the charges levelled against Paul; his writings are forceful, weighty and seem to contain a little boasting about his authority as an apostle. Come to think of it, he pulled rank a few times in both 1 Corinthians, and earlier in 2 Corinthians, and of course there are at least 2 letters we haven't seen... Yet in person, he's "unimpressive". We have no real way to judge whether or not these apparent allegations are true, but we should be able to see how they might be true. In our time we have social media. Anyone who has had any experience with social media is aware of the fact that people tend to be much more abrasive when typing on a computer at home than they are face-to-face, which is why there are so many more fights on social media than in person.

Back in the days when people wrote letters, the same was true. In fact, don't some people write a letter or a note, or send a text or email to express something that they would be too uncomfortable saying in person, even an expression of love? Why yes, they do. So, we can see how this charge might have been true, even though we cannot be certain of it.

Having pointed this out, we also know that it is a lot easier to make accusations behind someone's back than it is to their face.

In 10:12-18, Paul has a charge of his own: His boasting falls within the limits of what he has accomplished in the Lord in his ministry to and for the Corinthians. His boasting speaks to God's being glorified in their midst, but those who oppose him seem to have the audacity to commend themselves purely by their own standards, not by God's. They congratulate themselves, they approve of their own actions, while Paul is commended by the Lord and his actions are the Lord's actions.

*For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends. (10:18)*

As we read through these verses trying to figure out what happened, I'm struck so far with one thing in particular: Over the past two thousand years of human development, nothing much has

changed. Humans seem to have a need to criticize others who actually try to do something positive, we want to tear down, to belittle. What's the point of that?

Maybe Paul will reveal more in chapter 11.

## Chapter 11

### **False Apostles**

#### 2 Corinthians 1-15

When you read these verses, you will see that Paul can be pretty direct in his language, that he doesn't mind the use of sarcasm, and that he doesn't always pull his punches.

*I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, please put up with me! (11:1)*

When we read something like this from Paul, we can be sure that he isn't going to be telling jokes, no, there's a gut punch coming. He tells the recipients that he had hoped to present the Corinthian church to Christ as a pure bride, but that they, like Eve, had been deceived by serpents. These serpents, however, are entirely human. They, the "super-apostles" were fakes and frauds who all too easily had led them astray.

*I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way. Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? (11:5-7)*

These three verses are nothing less than fascinating, for we can glean some insight into both the accusations levelled at Paul by the super-apostles, and at the manner in which Paul lived while in Corinth. Paul it would seem, was not a great orator, but unlike his foes, he knew what he was talking about. Paul did not act the "right" way, for he lived in humility, rather than for profit; he didn't charge a fee to share the gospel. Unlike the people the Corinthians were used to, Paul came to them as a servant, rather than as a master.

That is an interesting bit of insight for us to ponder.

*I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! (11:8-11)*

I would imagine that this bit of text would be rather shaming for the proud Corinthians; The bothers from Macedonia who were in Paul's party took care of all of the expenses, so Paul could serve the Corinthians by teaching them about Christ. Faced with such a loss of face, what would any proud Roman do? Accuse Paul of stealing from the Macedonians, of course. Paul was having none of that as he once again threw it in the faces.

*And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve. (11:12-15)*

As we see, Paul isn't going to change the way he is doing things, and he isn't going to hold back, comparing his opponents with none other than Satan himself. I doubt there is much for me to add about Paul's self-explanatory remarks in these verses. However, there is something much closer to home that I should mention. You see, what was going on in Corinth with these opponents and critics of Paul's was a manifestation of spiritual warfare. Paul makes this clear enough as he makes this comparison of their tactics to those of Satan. Let's think about it...

Who is the Accuser of our brethren?

It is Satan. These people came along and presented a false gospel together with false accusations based entirely upon a deceitful twisting of the facts about Paul for the sole purpose of discrediting both he, and the gospel of Christ that he preached. Why would they bother? They did it to destroy the Body of Christ. Satan tried to directly destroy the Son of God by scheming to have Him nailed to a cross, but God raised Him from the dead in triumph over sin, death and Satan himself: Satan cannot defeat the Lord Jesus Christ, and he cannot defeat the Father in heaven, but he can deceive the followers of Christ, His Body the church; at least he tried to.

Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles stood in his way, but Paul was not backing down, instead, in this section, he doubles down and calls out the deceivers, and by the power of Christ, the deceivers will be overthrown. Yet in another amazing shift, Paul will show us that those who would act as the agents of Satan will be overthrown by weakness, not by brute strength, at least, not Paul's brute strength.

### ***Boasting in Weakness***

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Paul has been accused of all sorts of things in Corinth. I can fairly say, from the text, that there have been people, false "super-apostles", who have accused Paul of weakness and inadequacy both real and imagined, and for what reason?

To build themselves up so that they become the "great ones" who should be listened to and followed.

Paul is now doing the very same thing; he's building himself up so that he will be thought of as a "great one" who should be listened to and followed. The only thing is, he is adopting the tactics of his opponents, i.e. of boasting about himself, but is using a heaping helping of irony and sarcasm in the process, for he is boasting about all of the reasons he is not great: His weakness.

He calls this being "a fool" and says he must be out of his mind to do it.

*I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then tolerate me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! (11:16-21a)*

So then, who is really the fool; is it Paul or his accusers and those who listen to them?

It sure isn't Paul, he's taking all of them out to the woodshed.

In the next paragraph Paul mentions the times he has been arrested, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, hungry, thirsty, cold, naked, destitute, and rejected. To be sure, he lays it on pretty thick. Then he begins to come around to his real point:

*If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands. (11:30-33)*

Paul brags about how weak he is, how humiliated he has been, how inadequate; all in complete contrast to his would-be great accusers. Yet unlike his accusers, Paul has been faithful to the gospel, and his accusers have been faithful to themselves.

If you haven't read this whole passage in a long time, I would encourage you to do so now; it's really quite something. Yet Paul isn't finished just yet; I can't wait for chapter 12!

## Chapter 12

### **More Boasting**

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

*I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. (12:1)*

With this little bit of transition, Paul takes us in to a second subsection in his enhanced defense of his ministry in Corinth; his readers are still in the woodshed. Here, Paul is getting into a subject that he really doesn't mention much about in his writings, and apparently in his public teaching: visions and revelations he has experienced. We can infer from this that his opponents, those super-apostles, have big claims to special revelation. If that was true, then we know why Paul would talk about something here that he normally avoided. Why would he normally refrain from discussing these subjects? Because there is "nothing to be gained".

*I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. (12:2-4)*

So, Paul knows a guy who, 14 years ago, during the period in Paul's life we know nothing at all about, who was caught up to the "third" heaven... After the story, Paul has an interesting comment to make:

*But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations. (12:6b-7a)*

It sounds like this guy was really Paul after all, doesn't it? Now look at 7b:

*Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*

Linking the story with his thorn in the flesh makes it pretty clear that Paul is that man. Yes, the super-apostles make their wild claims and tell their entertaining stories, but Paul, who really doesn't like to talk about it, has *real* stories to tell. Yet even though he has such stories to tell that also have the benefit of being true, he refrains because his message is about Christ, not about himself. I'll lay out what Paul only implied: If the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't enough for you, if you need entertaining fiction to seal the deal, that's your problem.

As for the thorn in his flesh, we don't know what it was. In the old days it was taught that the thorn was lust and burning sexual desire, but that explanation has been pretty well discarded now for lack of evidence. More recently people have theorized that the thorn was some sort of medical problem, possibly his eyesight, or maybe malaria or leprosy or chronic migraines or...?

The truth is that we don't know, and as always in cases like this, beware the teacher who claims to know for certain that which is not revealed in Scripture. Much more to the point is what our text actually does say:

*Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more*

*gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (12:8-10)*

This thorn, this “messenger of Satan”, is something God chose not to take away; it almost reminds one of the story of Job, doesn't it? God, for reasons of His own, has apparently allowed Satan to torment Paul physically so that Paul would not become prideful and/arrogant in the pursuit of his mission as the Apostle to the Gentiles, with its crowning accomplishments, signs, wonders and miracles, for such pride and arrogance would surely damage Paul's ability to carry out this great calling. Instead, in spite of Paul's weaknesses, which evidently were obvious enough, Paul would overcome his weakness by the power of the Spirit working through him.

Don't we all have a weakness or weaknesses? I certainly do. In an odd way, as I read these words of shame for the Corinthians who chose to follow false apostles, I find comfort and a great deal of encouragement, for they tell me that even though I am weak, God is strong, and when I serve His purpose as best I can, He provides me with His power to get the job done... in spite of the fact that I am unworthy and inadequate.

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

2 Corinthians 12:11-13

In these verses, Paul has begun his transition into the reasons for his having written this entire section of the letter. He loves the people of Corinth and has been grieved by their willingness to be led astray by those he has come to call “super-apostles”, clearly a derisive term. Paul does not believe that he has treated the Corinthians any differently than any other congregation he has dealt with, even though his critics have apparently told them that he was trying to take advantage of them financially. On that score he actually has treated them differently; he didn't take any support from them, and so, he apologizes for that. Do I detect the slightest little hint of sarcasm?

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

2 Corinthians 12:14-18

Things are starting to clear up for us in this paragraph, for now it is clear that the super-apostles have claimed that Paul took the people in by tricks to part them from their money... only Paul didn't accept any of their money. Yet they, some of them at least, believed the lies. Much like our politicians, it appears that the super-apostles also claimed that Paul was dishonest with

them because while he was tricking them out of their money, he didn't take any from them. Oh yes, we see people in the news do this all the time, claiming both sides of a question at the same time, and expecting us not to notice.

Paul seems to have noticed.

*Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. (12:19)*

With these words, Paul has another transition. In the remaining verses of chapter 12, Paul makes it clear that his larger concern is that when he returns to Corinth he will discover that nothing has changed, that those opposing him and spreading falsehood about him will still persist in their sin. In chapter 13 we will see that if this is the case, he won't be so nice as he was last time...

## Chapter 13

### **Getting Real**

It would appear from these verses that Paul is wrapping up this final defense of his ministry by taking the offensive. He will shortly make another trip to Corinth, and when he arrives, any remaining opposition will be dealt with in strength, not by Paul's strength, but with the strength of the Lord.

*This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you. (13:1-4)*

Paul has had enough of the Corinthian rebellion; Jesus has had enough of the Corinthian rebellion— it's about the get real.

*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. (13:5-6)*

In these remarkable verses Paul is telling the people in Corinth to examine, to test themselves to determine whether or not they are in Christ at all. If they are, they should have the Holy Spirit within them, and if they do not, then they have failed the test and were never in Christ: Ouch!

Of course, should they pass this self-examination, the Spirit will confirm that Paul is for real and that their whole rebellion is wrong, a complete fake. This assumption of Paul's brings us to the heart of the entire matter and to a point that all of us need to learn. If we are in Christ and someone comes along and challenges the church or its leadership, we usually insist that the church, or its leadership must defend themselves against such charges, for this is the way of Men. Yet Paul has just turned the tables entirely, by telling them to examine themselves, their motivations and whether or not they are really followers of Christ. If they are really followers of Christ, they need to seek God's guidance and be prepared to prove their allegations with two or three honest witnesses— God is not amused by people who sow dissension and division in His Body, the church.

Naturally, God is even less amused by people in positions of authority or leadership who abuse their positions in the church, so if you are indeed His follower, you must have your facts straight and be prepared to prove them before you launch an attack against anyone.

That is where these individuals in Corinth have gone wrong.

It would seem from our text that this is going to be their last chance to get things right in Corinth, because when Paul comes to town, there will be no end of trouble for anyone who hasn't either repented or gotten their facts straight, for the truth will come out. It would seem that Paul is optimistic about the result:

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

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

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (13:11-14)*

As we've seen before, most of the Corinthians had come to terms with what was happening in their congregation and had come to realize that the outside instigators of these problems were troublemakers who simply desired to tear down the Church. With these words of encouragement for everyone, coming after Paul's injunction for self-examination, I think that Paul believed the Corinthians would have the issues settled before his arrival there. Things happen in this life, sometimes people are led astray for a time by criticism, by lies, by instigators... Sometimes people who appear to be the very strongest in the church are fooled and have a hard time recognizing their mistake; this is the human condition.

Yet in the final analysis, people who truly love the Lord and who honestly seek His guidance, not to win the argument, but to follow Him, will find the path of truth, as long as the others will adopt the path of love and allow the ones in error to repent and be restored.

Oh, and just in case, Paul is on his way to make sure they get it right.