

SECOND CORINTHIANS

Introduction:

Studying Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians is like taking a peek at someone's personal correspondence. The intimate character of the letter is such that one almost hesitates to pry into it. I am not sure I would want people to look at my personal correspondence that way; but then, I am not writing inspired literature that finds its place into the canon of Scripture.

Paul is more transparent in this letter than in any of his other epistles and consequently his material is less closely organized than in his other writings. It seems best to first take a look at the letter as a whole before entering into a verse-by-verse analysis.

The Key Verse:

The key verse that sets the tone of the letter is found in the first chapter, vs. 24: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy." The Greek verb used is *sunergeo*, meaning "to be a fellow-worker, or to cooperate." It also appears as a noun in ch. 6:1 – in the phrase: "As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain." The epistle is colleague-like, a letter from one laborer to another. It does not have the character of a pastoral epistle, of a shepherd addressing his sheep, but of one brother writing to another with whom he is close. Paul says: "What concerns me, concerns you also and what concerns you, concerns me."

Our experiences are for our mutual benefits. This is evinced, first of all in the fellowship of suffering and in the comfort. It leads to the purity of the church and to the glorious freedom of the Holy Spirit. It demonstrates the frailty of the vessels in which the treasure is kept. It centers upon the preaching of God's reconciliation with men in Jesus Christ. It produces sanctification of life. It is worked out in financial support and, finally, it leads to an extraordinary revelation.

It is obvious that such a positive approach on a basis of equality to a church that has its problems cannot fail to have a salutary effect. Paul shows how problems ought to be approached and solved. He purposely emphasizes his personal experiences, presenting himself as the same kind of person they are, so that a comparison between him and them would stimulate their victory. Paul does not place himself above them but beside them. "We all need one another."

The most important problem in Corinth seems to be that people from outside the church criticized Paul. It was implied that, if Paul who planted this church, did not have the proper qualifications as an apostle, the church could not be officially recognized. It would be like a marriage that had been administered by someone who was unqualified and which, consequently, was not legal. So both Paul's apostleship and the validity of the church were at stake. We must see Paul's defense of his apostleship in this light. It was much more than mere self-defense.

The epistle must be seen in its relationship with the First Corinthian Epistle. It is generally supposed that this second letter was actually the third Paul wrote to this church and that the second one is lost. Some liberal critics propose that parts of that second epistle are mixed with the third. But there is no proof that substantiates this. It would mean that someone had used scissors and glue to paste this one together. There is no reason for us to believe that we are not looking at a translation of the original text.

The problems of the church are put much sharper in the first epistle than in this second one. Paul had planted this church, as we read in the Book of Acts.¹ There were some people who, with a church-splitting mind, called themselves disciples of Apollos or Peter; others pretended to be under the sole authority of Christ Himself. There had been moral problems of a sexual character of the worst kind in the church. Temple prostitution was so widespread in the city of Corinth that the moral thinking of the church continues to be influenced by it, even after the conversion of its members. For many it was difficult to make a clear break with their background and past. For instance, eating meat of animals that had been sacrificed in idol temple led to all kinds of unhealthy associations. Finally, the church had developed such an outspoken charismatic character that its services had become noisy, unruly, and non-edifying. There were other problems also, which Paul only mentioned in passing.

¹ Acts 18:1-17

We find none of those problems mentioned in this second epistle, with the exception of the sexual immorality and the party spirit. This suggests that there had been remarkable spiritual growth in the church in the period between the two epistles.

According to *Vincent's Word Studies*, the epistle was probably written somewhere in Macedonia in the fall of 57 AD.

It is rather difficult to see a clear outline in the book. This is partly due to the fact that Paul does not deal with specific theological concepts that must be developed in a logical manner. His main topic is the different implications of cooperation between the apostle and the church. This includes the chapters 8 and 9, which deal with the offering for Jerusalem. The unity of the theme makes it difficult to cut up the letter in sections. The fields that are covered in which this cooperation is evinced, can be identified as follows:

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| 1. In Experiencing Persecution | 1:3-11 |
| 2. In Joy through Discipline | 1:12-2:17 |
| 3. In the Ministry of Reconciliation | 3:1-5:21 |
| 4. In the Sanctification of the Carrying out of this Ministry | 6:1-7:16 |
| 5. In Sacrificial Giving | 8:1-9:15 |
| 6. In a Comparison between Paul and other Preachers in Corinth | 10:1-13:13 |

The Text:

Introduction:

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia:

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

The epistle is written in the name of Paul and Timothy. It is addressed to the church in Corinth and to "all the saints throughout Achaia."

These opening words are stereotype for Paul's letters. We find almost the same expression in Ephesians and Colossians. Paul calls himself here "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." And Timothy is called "our brother."

1. Cooperation in Experiencing Persecution

1:3-11

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,

4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.

9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us,

11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

The German philosopher, Nietzsche, once said that if one understands the “why” of a matter, one can also bear the “how” of it. The apostle Paul understood the reason for his suffering. This understanding forms the basis for his praise of God with which he opens this epistle.

The author of all suffering and persecution is the devil. God will allow pressure, tension, pain, and suffering in the lives of His children because it sometimes is the shortest way for Him to reach His goal. Suffering can have a salutary effect upon the person who has a positive frame of mind, but it can be fatal for the one whose orientation is negative. James demonstrates for us the reason for the trials that come our way. We read: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”² In this respect we are ahead of Job, who never recognized God’s purpose in the things he suffered. Because Paul understood the “why” of his terrible experiences he was able to comfort those in trouble with the comfort he himself had received from God. It made him better suited for the task God had given him.

We note that Paul introduces the statement about his unbearable pressure and agony with a doxology. This is, first of all, an act of faith. Emotionally the trials were almost too acute and excruciating. But Paul’s spirit could praise God for the experiences he went through. This proves the genuineness of Paul’s fellowship with the Lord and the truth of the words of the Psalmist: “Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.”³

After Paul passed through the experiences, he gained the right perspective upon them and was able to judge them correctly. After the crisis was over, he understood that God had used it. It is, of course, better when we praise God at the beginning of the trials, when we are still going through the darkness and before we are able to look back. Then our praise is not based upon sight but upon faith.

Paul uses three names for God. He calls Him “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.”

The title: “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” is one of the pillars of New Testament doctrine. It separates God from the Allah of Islam and from all other gods. It is about this God that Jesus said: “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”⁴ Because He is the God and Father of our Lord, He is also our God and Father. The Jews in Jesus’ days understood correctly what this relationship with God does for a person; they objected to Jesus’ words because He “was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”⁵ We cannot say that God is our Father without becoming participants in His divine nature.

In his doxology, Paul praises our heavenly Father as “the Father of compassion.” The Greek word, rendered “compassion” is *oiktirmos*, which means: “pity.” The KJV renders it: “mercy.” The word refers to the seat of emotions in the human body, often rendered in the KJV as “bowels of mercy.” It is the feeling expressed in the word “ouch!” or “ah!” God is the Father of compassion. His heart goes out toward us when He sees us suffering. Paul’s discovery of God’s emotional involvement with our condition indicates deep insight into the character of the Father. God’s tears are bigger than ours; His sorrow goes deeper. He understands us better than we do ourselves. We return again to a comparison with Job. Job never came to the point where he could see God’s compassion for him. He was too filled with self-pity to be able to discern.

Our relationship with the Father is, first of all, determined by our relationship with Jesus Christ, and then by our insight into the Father’s character. These are two important steps on the road to comfort.

The third name Paul mentions, to which the two previous ones lead us, is “the God of all comfort.” The Greek word for “comfort” is *paraklesis*, which is the word used to indicate the ministry of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to His disciples, He said: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”⁶ The KJV uses the word “Comforter” instead of “Counselor.” The same word is used in the New Testament in connection with Jesus Himself, and with the Father. We find the word as referring to Jesus in John’s First Epistle in the verse: “But if anybody does sin, we have *one who speaks* to the Father *in our defense-*

² James 1:2-4

³ Ps. 84:4

⁴ John 20:17

⁵ John 5:18

⁶ John 14:16,17

Jesus Christ, the Righteous one.”⁷ In our text the word applies to the Father. The Amplified Bible gives the following synonyms for the word *parakletos*: “Comforter, Counselor, Helper, Intercessor, Advocate, Strengtheners, and Standby.”

The word “comfort” has a particular emotional connotation for us. It is expressed in a hug, a hand on the shoulder, a handkerchief to wipe tears. In the Greek, the word had originally a legal significance. The comfort given is factual and practical. In as far as it has emotional implications, these are based upon the legal implications of our position in relationship with God. God’s comfort consists in the declaration of our innocence from guilt, in our rehabilitation, in the resurrection from the dead. Paul knew why he suffered and he knew the content of the consolation God gives to us. We read in Revelation that God will wipe away all tears from our eyes.⁸ This is not a mere gesture of kindness; it is the content of heavenly glory!

The comfort Paul experienced was a supernatural experience. I remember what God did for my wife and me, as we worked as missionaries in Papua, Indonesia, where we had to send our children away to boarding school. Every time the little mission airplane came to pick them up, God lifted our feeling of sadness and loss as if His hand simple wiped it away. We always felt a heavenly peace descend upon us.

As we said, Paul understood that what he went through was meant by God to make him better fitted for the ministry that was given to him. God wants us to be emotionally connected with the people we are dealing with. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea and all the other prophets experienced in their own lives the reality of the message they were given to preach. One lady missionary on our mission field, who lost a baby in childbirth, testified that she better understood the women of the tribe she worked with, who too often went through the same experience of losing a child. God does not want the message to pass us by without affecting us personally first. The author of the Hebrew Epistle writes: “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”⁹ Only those who have passed through suffering and who have experienced God’s comfort can effectively comfort others. Woe upon those who try to comfort others without having passed through it themselves!

Paul takes another step forward in stating that the suffering he endured is the suffering of Christ. He felt he was being treated in this world as Christ was treated. Jesus had said Himself: “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.”¹⁰ We may consider it an honor when we share in the disgrace of Christ. As the author of Hebrews writes about Moses who set the example for us: “He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.”¹¹ The first-century Christians did not know the problem of peer pressure as we know it. They considered it a sign of God’s special grace if someone was punished unjustly, because that put them in the same condition as Jesus Christ. Paul states in his letter to the Philippians: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.”¹²

Paul confesses that he experienced a great measure of the grace of suffering for Christ’s sake. The NIV does not bring this out so much with: “For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” The words “flow” and “overflows” are the rendering of the same Greek word *perisseuo*, which means: “to superabound.” This joy of being counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Christ’s sake has disappeared from our Christian experience. We read in Acts: “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”¹³

It is clear that the suffering mentioned here is associated with our fellowship with Christ. Jesus defined this when He spoke about those “who are persecuted because of righteousness, . . . because of me.”¹⁴ Suffering of believers is the opposition generated by an evil world and by the Evil One to the fact that we have clearly taken our stand with the Lord. Our suffering will only be meaningful if we have chosen the

⁷ I John 2:1

⁸ See Rev. 7:17; 21:4

⁹ Heb. 13:3

¹⁰ Matt. 10:24,25

¹¹ Heb. 11:26

¹² Phil. 1:29

¹³ Acts 5:41

¹⁴ See Matt. 5:10, 11

Lord's side. Then it becomes a part of Christ's suffering. Only thus do we become partakers of Christ's comfort.

As was stated above, this consolation is not merely emotional experiences that bear no connection to tangible facts. When we are emotionally comforted and restored, and when God wipes away our tears, it is done on the basis of the righteousness and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. If death makes us mourn, then resurrection from the dead and justification will make us rejoice. It is in the measure that we experience this personally that we become better equipped to lift up others. Our own suffering has a two-fold purpose: it benefits ourselves and others.

Catholic theologians would probably see in this section an illustration of suffering that provides merits for God and produces a certain amount of grace that would benefit the church in Corinth. But when Paul speaks about participating in Christ's suffering, he does not imply that his suffering would have any atoning value. But sharing the same kind of suffering creates a special form of fellowship. Our suffering for Christ's sake will deepen our fellowship with the Lord and our experiencing the same kind of suffering our brothers and sisters in Christ undergo will create a bond of love that nothing can break. It is this special bond that Paul emphasizes in this epistle. He tells the church in Corinth: "See how closely we have grown together in what we went through." Our fellowship in Christ forms the basis for fellowship with one another, but the fellowship with Christ's suffering provides an experience of genuine love that will stand the tests of time and will continue throughout eternity.

The experiences of suffering and of God's comfort are also proofs of a healthy spirituality. According to vs. 7, Paul sees in the fact that the church in Corinth experiences difficulties and receives God's comfort as a sign of their spiritual health.

God's comfort is a supernatural happening. No rational or psychological explanation can be given for what God does in the lives of some of His children. No one can lift himself up; only the hand of God can raise us up and carry us over the lowest points in our lives. Such experiences are not only inexplicable, they are also indescribable. God's comfort does not remove suffering, but it stimulates perseverance. As Paul states in vs. 6: "It is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer." As such, endurance falls in the same category as perseverance. James states about this: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."¹⁵ God strengthens us by comforting us. Paul calls this "hope." He knows that those who are comforted will also persevere.

It is generally supposed that the hardship Paul and his companions suffered in Asia, mentioned in verses 8-11, refers to the riot in Ephesus when Gaius and Aristarchus were dragged before the crowd and Christians were in danger of being crushed under foot.¹⁶ But Luke does not describe Paul's attitude at that time as someone who "despaired even of life." Paul's description seems to fit better the experience of being stoned and left for dead, as happened to him in Lystra.¹⁷ But that incident can hardly be fitted in here either since it occurred before Paul's first visit to Corinth. There is, however, no other biblical account of a similar event that took place in Asia.

It is relatively easy to proclaim by mouth to proclaim that one has been crucified with Christ and died with Him. It is considerably more difficult to live a life that corresponds to that confession. The hardest is when one's life is actually in danger and the matter is being put to the test in a life setting. There is a tone of panic in Paul's "despairing even of life." Evidently, he found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that he might not pull through the situation alive. Not everyone sleeps peacefully the night before his execution, as Peter did.¹⁸ The fact that Paul admits that there was a lesson he still had to learn proves that, in his life also, there were areas of unfinished business. The lessons God wants us to learn are sometimes very painful; there is not doubt about it that Paul's was. The situation is the more difficult if we do not realize that there is something we still have to learn. We can say about Job that, at least in the beginning of his suffering, he lacked this kind of understanding. This cannot be said about Paul who was deeply convinced that God was still working on him.

A person cannot live without a certain measure of self-confidence. But Paul's statement that "this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" is of a different caliber. The

¹⁵ James 1:2-4

¹⁶ See Acts 19:21-40

¹⁷ See Acts 14:19

¹⁸ Acts 12:6

first kind of confidence pertains to our emotional balance, the second to our spiritual life. The surrender of our will to the will of God is a spiritual decision. This has nothing to do with a poor self-image but with putting our relationship with God in the right perspective. The Book of Proverbs expresses this attitude in: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."¹⁹ By doing this, we place ourselves in a healthy position. This is the basis of the normal Christian life. But who among us is normal? Unless we are watchful, we will give in to the tendency to keep God out of the sphere of our confidence. It is paradoxical that, at the beginning of this epistle in which Paul speaks about his own recommendations as an apostle, he speaks about this kind of confidence crisis.

Paul expresses the feeling that the experience he went through was "far beyond [his] ability to endure." He felt that the pressure was too great for him to bear. Yet in his First Corinthian Epistle, he assures us: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."²⁰ It sounds as if, in this second epistle, Paul retracts those words. He must have told God that his burden was too heavy for him. God often pushes us to the edge of our endurance, or beyond. It is also true that, most of the time, we do not know ourselves where this limit is in our lives. We are often able to bear more than we think we can, sometimes less than we think. The important thing is that we learn to dip into a source that is outside ourselves. The Psalmist says: "Blessed are those whose strength is in you."²¹

Nobody experienced this so deeply and demonstrated it so fully as our Lord Jesus Christ. When He was in the garden of Gethsemane, He said: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," and "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."²² At that point, our Lord had arrived at the condition Paul describes as "far beyond our ability to endure." Luke's Gospel tells us that at that moment: "An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him."²³ No one ever carried a burden similar to what Jesus bore. It is this Lord, who went through this experience, who will make us experience the power of His resurrection at the edge of our endurance and beyond. The author of the Epistle to Hebrews comments on this: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."²⁴

God's purpose with Paul's experience was not a negative one. If we only read the words: "that we might not rely on ourselves," we miss the point. We said earlier that we couldn't live without a certain measure of self-confidence; it would be better to state that no one can live without confidence. The important part is to "rely ... on God, who raises the dead." We may live under the banner of that Name. Paul probably based the expression upon Jesus' words: "He is not the God of the dead but of the living."²⁵ The resurrection from the dead is implied in the Name and the character of God. The experience of resurrection, even in our temporal existence on earth, can never be detached from confidence in God. Actually, the truth is reversed: whenever we put our trust in God, we will experience some of the resurrection, even when death catches up with us. God's promise to Abraham that Sarah would give birth to a son, evoked in Abraham's heart belief that God would raise the dead. Paul states about Abraham: "He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."²⁶ "Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound! They walk, O LORD, in the light of Your countenance."²⁷

The experience gave Paul a deep feeling of safety and his faith was strengthened by it. Nothing will strengthen our faith more than passing through impossible conditions in which God gives deliverance.

We must understand how important prayer is in connection with this. The intercessory prayer of the Corinthians played an important part in Paul's resurrection experience. Paul declares: "many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many." God created us for

¹⁹ Prov. 3:5,6

²⁰ I Cor. 10:13

²¹ Ps. 84:5

²² Matt. 26:38, 41

²³ Luke 22:43

²⁴ Heb. 5:8,9

²⁵ Matt. 22:32

²⁶ Rom. 4:17

²⁷ Ps. 89:15 (NKJV)

His own glory and honor. If we learn to really thank and praise Him, we reach the goal the Creator has set for our lives. This means that God achieves several goals in our lives by leading us through suffering. We learn to know Him as “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” We learn to identify with Christ in His suffering. We learn to know God as the God who raises the dead. We learn to hope, to pray, and to thank Him. That makes it worth it all!

2. Cooperation in Joy through Discipline 1:12-2:17

12 Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

13 For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that,

14 as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

15 Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice.

16 I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea.

17 When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?

18 But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No."

19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes."

20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us,

22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

23 I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.

24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

2:1 So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.

2 For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved?

3 I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy.

4 For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

5 If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent-not to put it too severely.

6 The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him.

7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

In this section Paul has a lot of different things to say, which makes it difficult for us to trace the unity of his thoughts. In the previous section, the apostle laid the foundation for the comparison between the church and himself in the experience of the same suffering for Christ's sake and the same divine comfort. Here the comparison is the matter of the lifestyle of the apostle and the church: carnal wisdom or grace of God. This is evinced in the church's attitude toward discipline in the church. In the fifth chapter of his first epistle, Paul mentioned the case of the man who had an affair with his stepmother. Paul does not mention here if his remarks pertain to the same matter. But, evidently, the church knew what he was talking about. The topic of the section is Paul's plan to visit the church in order to bring this case of discipline to a conclusion.

This matter is, at least partly, related to the fact that Paul speaks about “our boast.” As such, Paul presents himself to the church as the one about whom they may boast “in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Paul uses similar terminology in his letter to the Philippians whom he calls: “my joy and crown.”²⁸ The people

²⁸ Phil. 4:1

we lead to Christ are, in fact, our boast, our joy, and our crown, if, at least, they persevere in their life with the Lord. We read about them in Daniel: “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”²⁹ Those whose lives we have influenced for good will be part of our future and eternal glory. For those who have influenced our lives it will be the same. We are a crown to one another. As was the case with the Corinthians, we do not always recognize this truth. It is, however, a good habit to boast about our spiritual parents and children.

Before Paul comes to this point, he says something that makes us raise our eyebrows. He boasts in the holiness of his own life! This sounds strange to us and it goes against the grain of our concept of humility. We believe that if someone is conscious of his own holiness this amounts to spiritual pride. True humility, we believe, demonstrates itself in the denial of one’s own holiness. Oswald Chambers once said that God makes us conscious sinners and unconscious saints.

It is also true that denial of reality is no proof of humility. Jesus testifies about Himself: “I am gentle and humble in heart.”³⁰ He merely stated a fact the denial of which would have served no purpose. We must be careful not to misunderstand Paul. The apostle was not proud of his humility in spite of the fact that this is the way it seems to us. Paul was aware of the fact that he was dealing with matters that were far beyond and above his own abilities. The first five verses of the next chapter clarify his intentions. He does not boast about his achievements but about the miracle of what God has achieved through him. In his first epistle he wrote: “I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.”³¹ He was fully conscious of the fact that the planting of the church in Corinth was not the result of his superior flamboyant style but that it was the fruit of the grace of God in his life. If we truly give the glory to God we may be proud of our work. Satan enjoys it when, through false humility, we prevent ourselves from giving him some severe blows. When, in his First Epistle Paul reproaches the church: “Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?”³² He does not object to boasting as such, but to boasting about the wrong things. “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”³³ But then, let us do that wholeheartedly!

Paul then tells them about his previous plans to visit the church in Corinth and how he changed his mind. He asks himself the question whether he compromised the Lord in this, or whether he acted in a carnal way. His conclusion is a resounding “No!” The plan had been to stop in Corinth on his way to Macedonia and again on his way back to Jerusalem. Although this is not stated specifically, we get the impression that Paul had informed the church about this. TLB probably has the clearest rendering of Paul’s words: “Yes, yes” and “No, no.” We read: “Am I like a man of the world who says yes when he really means no?” The important question is whether Paul was a man of his word or not. Could people count on him when he promised something? In this Paul does not appeal to his own strength of character but to the faithfulness of God. The words “as surely as God is faithful” are not just an exclamation to strengthen the argument. What Paul means to say is that it is the grace of God that makes him reliable, not the solidity of his own principles.

It seems as if the apostle makes a giant leap from his travel plans to the preaching of God’s promises. Yet, there is a clear connection between the two topics. The traffic moves in both directions on this road. If we preach the Word of Truth, we must also speak the truth when we do not preach. The reliability of our daily conversations will lend credibility to our preaching. Our life, as people observe us, will determine how much value people will attach to our preaching. It was for Paul a natural transition from saying that his could be relied upon because the message of the Gospel that was entrusted to him is reliable.

It is a logical consequence of our being crucified with Christ that we identify ourselves with the Gospel. Most unbelievers will accept this without argument; it is the Christians who try to make a distinction between doctrine and practice. Non-Christians do not do that. Maybe, we should say that we all proclaim that confession and daily life should be one, but we like to make an exception for ourselves. God is faithful, and we, His children, must be the same.

This brings us to one of the golden verses in Scripture: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.” TLB renders this verse: “He [Christ] carries out and fulfills all of God’s promises, no matter how many of

²⁹ Dan. 12:3

³⁰ Matt. 11:29^b

³¹ I Cor. 2:3

³² I Cor. 5:6

³³ I Cor. 1:31

them there are; and we have told everyone how faithful he is, giving glory to his name.” It is difficult to render Paul’s sentence structure in Greek into good English. The text reads literally: “for as many as [are] promises of God, in him [are] the Yes, and in him the Amen, for glory to God through us.”³⁴ The Good News Bible goes even further with the rendering: “For it is he [Christ] who is the ‘Yes’ to all of God’s promises. That is why through Jesus Christ our ‘Amen’ is said to the glory of God.” Jesus Christ is the central meeting point of all God’s promises. God confirms this and we confirm this also. God says: “Yes” and we say: “Amen.” Here also the traffic moves in both directions. Everything God has promised to whomever and wherever is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of all promises in both the Old and the New Testament.

The line of God’s promise starts with Eve and runs via Abraham to Israel, to conclude with Jesus Christ. He is everything God ever promised because He is everything God ever spoke. God never promised anything less than Himself. God says “Yes” to us in Jesus Christ. But this will have little effect in our life unless we say “Amen” to Him. It will be impossible for us to accept God’s promise if we do not accept Jesus. All God’s promises will take immediate effect when we are “in Christ.” God’s promises form the basis of our living by faith.

The way Paul puts it: “no matter how many promises God has made” gives the impression as if Paul read through the whole Bible for the purpose of counting up how many things God promised. Like Abraham in his counting of the stars,³⁵ he came to the conclusion that there were too many to count.

The first promise of God was made to Eve, immediately after the fall. God promised her that this condition of sin would not exist indefinitely. A redeemer would come who, at the price of His own heel, would crush the head of the serpent, Satan.³⁶ The last promise of the Old Testament is found in Malachi: “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”³⁷ Between this first promise and the last one there are countless promises God made to individuals, groups of people, and nations. In one way or another, they all point to the coming of God’s Son. Thus Abraham saw the day of Jesus Christ in the birth and sacrifice of his son Isaac.

Paul’s intention in this verse is, obviously, to stimulate us to claim these promises for ourselves. That is implied in the “Amen” we pronounce “in Jesus.” We say “Amen in Christ,” which means that we accept God’s promises in Christ, because we accept Christ.

This must be done in a detailed and specific way. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul gives us an example of such an appropriation in presenting God’s promise to Abraham as a paradigm for our justification in Christ. We read: “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”³⁸ Paul must have had this example of Abraham in mind when he wrote this, because we find several parallels between Romans chapter 4 and the first chapter of this epistle. Paul takes the faith of Abraham who clung to God’s promises as an example for our justification in Christ. In both passages Paul refers three or four times to the resurrection. Abraham believed in “the God who gives life to the dead.” He did not let go of that faith, even when he realized that death was working in his own body. The lesson is that Jesus “was raised to life for our justification.”³⁹ Believing in God’s promises means believing in the resurrection. Because it is in this context that Paul places his testimony about his experience of this resurrection in Asia, where he learned “not [to] rely on [himself] but on God, who raises the dead.” If we believe in God’s promise about the resurrection, everything else will fall into place. If we withhold our “amen,” God’s promises do not become less true but, we will not see the realization of them in our own lives.

Three things are important in connection with the fulfillment of God’s promises:

1. We have to say “Amen” to them

³⁴ Young’s Literal Translation

³⁵ See Gen. 15:4,5

³⁶ See Gen. 3:15

³⁷ Mal. 4:5,6

³⁸ Rom. 4:1-5

³⁹ Rom. 4:25

2. We have to say this "Amen in Christ"
3. We have to honor God in doing so.

We say "Amen in Christ." That means that nothing God does for us can be detached from the death and resurrection of Jesus in our stead. We cannot grasp the promises in our own strength. Our honoring of God when we say "amen" to His promises is a safeguard against selfish motives. It protects us against the attacks of the Evil One.

In verses 21 and following, Paul takes a step further. God not only confirms His promise to us in Christ, He confirms *us* in Him. The way this reads in Greek makes for a beautiful alliteration. The words "Christ" and "anointed" are identical. The Greek words are *Christón* and *chrísas*. We can preserve the play-on-words in the rendering: "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in *Christ*. He *christened* us, set his seal of ownership on us." The implication is that we are anointed in the same way as our Lord Jesus Christ. God placed us in Jesus Christ, which makes us partakers of His anointing and of His being equipped by the Holy Spirit. We can hardly imagine the full implications of this. Much of this will only become fully evident in the future. This is the reason the Holy Spirit in us is called "a deposit."

In the same way as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at His baptism in order to fill Him and equip Him for the ministry that lay before Him,⁴⁰ so the Spirit of God descends upon everyone who entrusts himself to Jesus and surrenders his life unreservedly to God. In principle there is no limit in this; in practice, however, sin will set its boundaries and the fullness of blessing will be a growing experience. But the foundational work is done in one instance. God puts His seal of ownership upon us as a sign and a warrantee.

We see how this is done in the Book of Revelation, where we read that one of the angels calls out: "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."⁴¹ God's servants are sealed to give them immunity from the sign of the beast. This seal is the Holy Spirit. It is not only God's confirmation of our surrender but also of the presence of the Lord within us, which enables us to live as children of God in a disjointed world. The Spirit is like a pledge, a guarantee. The day of complete fulfillment is still to come. As the Book of Proverbs states: "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."⁴² That day will come; night will not eternally reign over this world.

This unction is another confirmation of the unity between the church in Corinth and the apostle Paul: "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ." God placed them next to each other in Christ.

Paul then comes to the practical point of his discourse. There had been a problem of discipline in the church that had not yet been resolved. We do not know whether this was the same problem or involved the same person as the one mentioned in Paul's first epistle.⁴³ It is interesting to observe that although Paul puts pressure on the church regarding this problem, he does not take any measures himself. The church must exercise its own discipline. We do not know whether or not this concerned the person whom Paul had handed over to Satan.⁴⁴ In any case, Paul had decided to avoid another confrontation with the church and he had therefore changed his original plan to visit Corinth, in order, in his words: "to spare you." This does not mean that Paul wanted the church just to be joyful, regardless of its condition, as if joy was the only thing that counted. Paul does not use cheap words. There can be no joy without purity. Sins that are not confessed and forgiven will inhibit joy. As there is no peace without justice, so there is no joy if sin is not punished.

Not only are discipline and joy related, discipline is also linked to faith. If Paul had acted unilaterally against the offender, he would have lorded over the faith of the Corinthians. "Faith" is used generically in this context to indicate the collective relationship between the church and God and the relationship of the members to each other. The word has a "loaded" meaning, covering confession as well as experience. Paul respected the individuality of the believers and of the church to the point that he was not willing to impose upon them anything they would not wholeheartedly back up themselves. He used the tactics of emphasizing their common experience with him in order to convince them, so that they would act of their own free will and not because of coercion.

⁴⁰ See Matt. 3:16,17

⁴¹ Rev. 7:3

⁴² Prov. 4:18

⁴³ See I Cor. 5

⁴⁴ See I Cor. 5:3-5

The actual reason for Paul's change of travel plans was that he wanted to spare them. It almost sounds as if Paul wanted to spare them from an outburst or anger he would pour out over them, but the context rather suggests that Paul wants to "spare" them from themselves. Their growing into spiritual maturity was just as important as the disciplinary action of a sinner in the church.

The opening verses of chapter 2 are a beautiful sample of Paul's playful style. He juggles words in a virtuoso way, jumping from one point of view to another. That makes his writing technique lively and full of surprises.

Who is grieved, Paul or the Corinthians? And who then must be made glad? The key to understanding Paul's intent lies in the fact that Paul understands grief and gladness to be their common possession. The whole Corinthian affair must have affected Paul deeply. Paul had sent his former epistle to them "out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears," the reason being Paul's deep love for these people.

The puzzling words: "For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved?" make us doubt that the matter was the same as the one mentioned in chapter 5 of the first letter. We rather get the impression that it was a sin committed against Paul personally, not a flagrant act of sexual immorality. That was clearly a case of breaking God's fundamental law. But someone caused grief to Paul and Paul hoped, but he was not certain of it, that the whole church would be sad on account of this because of their love for Paul. It may be that the whole matter was more one of sensitivity and love of the church for Paul than an actual offense committed by one person. It does not sound as if this was about a man whom Paul had delivered over to Satan.

The sensitivities mentioned here are so tender that Satan could easily manipulate them if the church would slacken in their alertness. Procrastination in forgiveness can be a dangerous matter. We must always ask ourselves the question how much advantage the devil can gain of a situation in which we think we are in the right. When we do not allow ourselves to be governed by love in applying God's standards, we always end up in the camp of the enemy. A German proverb states: "Every consistency leads to the devil."

In his mention of Titus in vs. 13, Paul runs ahead on what he will elaborate on in chapter eight.⁴⁵ Evidently, Titus was supposed to have been in Troas with news about the church in Corinth. When Paul could not find him there, he became so restless that he could not concentrate upon his work. To this depression of the apostle we owe the depth and beauty of verses 14-17 of this chapter.

It sounds as if Paul had let himself go and allowed discouragement to overwhelm him. The Lord had to teach him another lesson, as He had done in Asia. The fact that his depression was caused by his love for the church did not make it more spiritual. The devil sometimes manages to take advantage of the most spiritual matters. Yet, suddenly, while Paul was expecting it least, the fragrance of Christ became overwhelmingly strong in his life.

If we cannot place ourselves in the reality of the Old Testament temple rituals, the image Paul uses here will lose much of its vividness. For a Jew, approaching God in the temple in Jerusalem involved all of his five senses. The physical presence of the Shechinah must have been an indescribable experience to the Old Testament believer. This was reinforced by the praise of the temple hymns that were sung, by the colorful priestly garments, and the fragrance of the incense offering. Each of those details formed together the total of the experience of God's presence. After their returning home, every single detail would have evoked the total image. But the smell that accompanies certain experiences can be one of the strongest boosts to our memory. It is the odor that perfects the memories. Is that what Paul means when he states that God "always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him?"

In the natural, human odor is not a pleasant smell. The fact that people use deodorants speaks for itself. In the same way, people smell bad spiritually. The deodorants we use are applied exteriorly and are only effective for brief periods. God's deodorant is applied on the inside and it is permanent.

The fact that Paul uses the image suggests that, for a moment, Paul allowed his natural scent to spread in this crisis of not finding Titus. But, suddenly, the cloud of Christ's fragrance appeared, which eliminated all other scents. Jesus Christ is the only human being in God's creation who spreads a pleasant fragrance because in Him is no corruption. We smell bad because we are bad inside. Only when His inner healing becomes effective in us will our own odor be eliminated by His fragrance. Our smell betrays us.

⁴⁵ See ch. 8:16-24

We need artificial means to change the odor we spread and everyone knows they are artificial. Our natural odor is not subject to our will. This is one part of life that we cannot fake.

The image Paul uses shows us how deep is the change that takes place in our lives when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord. This transformation goes beyond anything that we would be able to change ourselves. Often we are ourselves unaware of the change. We cannot smell ourselves the scent we spread. How deep the process goes is obvious from the fact that the first one to smell the difference is God. "We are to God the aroma of Christ." Whereas before people we may show ourselves different from what we are, before God this is impossible. He who knows us through and through, before whom the hidden motives of our heart are open, will smell only Christ in us if the fragrance of Christ has become part of our lives.

This verse comes to us as a surprise. We hardly know ourselves sufficiently to be aware of all our sins and shortcomings. Consequently, we cannot imagine that the fragrance of Christ would be unadulterated in us. We have but little insight in the depth of God's grace in us. As a deodorant can eliminate unpleasant body odors, so is the smell of God's grace stronger than the smell of any sin we confess.

What is the aroma of Christ? It is the indefinable quality people observed in Jesus when He went about on this earth. He was a man without sin. That means that the harmonious relationship between God, the Father and Him had never been broken. He also was not a stranger to Himself; there was no separation between Himself and His own soul. Consequently, in His intercourse with His fellowmen, He never used that complex of masks and intrigues which we feel need of in our social contacts. He never "played games" with people. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius gives the following paternal counsel to his son Laertes: "This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."⁴⁶ Christ's aroma was the result of His true relationship with God, with Himself, and with His fellowmen. The basis of this relationship is love. The great commandment: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"⁴⁷ is the key to the solution of all human problems, the problems we have with ourselves included. Every person who ever met Jesus on earth must have sensed intuitively this harmony in Jesus' heart. Aroma is by far the best image that can be used to describe this fact.

It is clear that the aroma of Christ will never be spread without our cooperation. We are unable to produce it ourselves; it is God who spreads it. But if we shut ourselves up to the love of Christ, we will immediately experience a lack of peace in our hearts, which will spoil the atmosphere.

The aroma of Christ evokes two different reactions. Those who cling to their own corruption will make us out to be hypocrites and they will act as if we make them sick. Those who have tasted the love of God will recognize this love in us and enjoy the scent.

The most appropriate question that can be asked in connection with this is: "And who is equal to such a task?" There is always a direct connection between our personal integrity and the credibility of our words. Christ's aroma will have its bearing on our preaching. A friend of mine once stated that there were some people whose lives were such that he was willing to believe everything they said.

It may seem strange to some that there are those who preach with impure motives. Our purity is often not in what we do but in why we do it. That will ultimately be the criterion on which we will be judged.

In passing, Paul says some important things about preaching. First of all, preaching must be done "in Christ we speak before God with sincerity." "Sincerity" is the rendering of the Greek word *eilikrineia*, which means: "clearness" or "purity." Our motives for preaching must be pure, and it is only in Christ that they can become so. When we fall back upon ourselves, our preaching will evince ulterior motives.

Secondly, "before God" speaks of God's authority in the words we speak. The Holy Spirit provides the power. We do not speak of ourselves or for ourselves. As a government representative speaks for his government and is backed by government power, so will our words be backed by God's omnipotence if we preach "before God" and in the Name of the Lord of hosts.

If we speak "before God" we must also be aware of His presence when we speak and we must understand that we will be accountable before Him for what we say.

⁴⁶ *Hamlet* – Act I. Scene III

⁴⁷ Deut. 6:5

3. Cooperation in the Ministry of Reconciliation**3:1-5:21**

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

2 You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody.

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

4 Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God.

5 Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

6 He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant-not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

7 Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was,

8 will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?

9 If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!

10 For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory.

11 And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

12 Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.

13 We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away.

14 But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away.

15 Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.

16 But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

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

18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

4:1 Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

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

4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

5 For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

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

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

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

13 It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak,

14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.

15 All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

5:1 Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling,

3 because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.

4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

5 Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

6 Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.

7 We live by faith, not by sight.

8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

9 So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

11 Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.

12 We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart.

13 If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.

15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

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

19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Actually, the dividing line between this section and the previous one could also be drawn in chapter 2:12. The very existence of the church in Corinth was, after all, the result of Paul's spreading of the aroma of Christ in his preaching of the Gospel to them.

In passing, Paul seems to mock the bureaucracy of some in the church of Corinth. Paul asks if he needs letters of recommendation or if the church is willing to write one for him. This leads to a beautiful image and a striking comparison between the dispensation of the Old Testament law and the dispensation of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. The living letter of Christ is compared with the cold stone of the tablets of the law that was given on Mount Sinai.

Here also, Paul follows his playful method of switching sides and perspectives. The letter is written, both in Paul's heart and in the hearts of the Corinthians. The letter is both read by Paul and by outsiders. It is a letter of recommendation for the person and the work of the apostle, and at the same time, it is a proclamation of the Gospel to unbelievers.

There are various lessons in this image that are closely packed together. First of all, the actual recommendation for the apostle and his character is his ministry. A tree is known by its fruit, not by its references. Secondly, there is the fact that someone who has accepted Christ in his life, ought to clearly demonstrate the character of the Lord in his life. We must be a recommendation to Christ in the way we

live. Thirdly, it reveals the truth that, for a Christian, the will of God is not a cold demand that exists outside him, something against which one can bump his head, but it is a desire that resides inside, in the heart. The presence of the Holy Spirit within makes it our heart's desire to do what God wants us to do. This is the greatest difference between the Old Testament and the New.

When Paul states in vs. 4: "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God," we can apply this in several ways to what precedes. It could mean that Paul is confident that the Corinthians are indeed such a letter of recommendation for Christ and for the apostle. It also implies that Paul is confident of their position in Christ as a stimulus for the church to become what they are meant to be.

Paul's image is partly inspired by two Old Testament prophets: Jeremiah and Ezekiel. God said to Jeremiah: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."⁴⁸ And in Ezekiel, we read: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."⁴⁹ The Book of Proverbs also uses the expression: "write them on the tablet of your heart."⁵⁰

The issue is that the Holy Spirit operates a deep, dramatic, and complete change in the heart of the person who hears the message of the Gospel. For Paul, this renewal of the heart, this new birth, was proof that he had preached the Gospel in the power of God and that Jesus Christ had actually entered their lives. This caused the change of heart, which accounts for the fact that their new desires were different from the desires they used to have. The will of God henceforth coincided with their own will and wishes.

"The letter kills" is one of the most misquoted phrases in Scripture. It certainly does not mean that we ought not take the message of the Bible literally. It becomes obvious that something is lost when the living Word of God, that created the worlds, that raised the dead, is translated into the tongue of sinful men. The Word of God is multi-dimensional and our language only knows three dimensions. That the Holy Spirit can perform miracles of depth and perspective with three dimensions is obvious from Jesus' words and from the Book of Revelation. We must, however, be careful not to confuse spiritual insight with aesthetic enjoyment. That is not what Paul is speaking about here. The dissimilarity between the letter and the Spirit is in the sounding board of the human heart. If the Holy Spirit does not inwardly bring a person to life, the Word of God will not echo within him. This will bring an increase of judgment for him. He, who does not hear with his ear and understand with his heart in order to turn to God, works his own ruin and perdition.

"The letter" Paul speaks of is the law. To our modern mind, the law has its letter and its mazes. We are taught to evade the one and to escape by means of the other. That concept is foreign to Paul. He speaks, on the one hand, about the person who is confronted with the will of God and who is unwilling to convert to it, and on the other hand, about the one who is born again under the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Death and life, in this context, are closely related to disobedience and obedience. Paul's meaning is best illustrated in his own words in Romans: "Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death."⁵¹ It is the reaction of man's sinful nature that does not want to submit to the will of God that brings about death. The Spirit of God creates life by means of forgiveness, healing, and love; this changes our natural inclinations and makes obedience to the will of God our natural tendency. When Paul speaks of the law as "the ministry that brought death" we must understand that he does not mean that the law of God kills us but that it reveals the death that is already within us. The comparison between the ministry of the law and of the Spirit is very striking; it makes us realize how great and glorious our present condition is.

We read about the radiance on the face of Moses in the Book of Exodus.⁵² The Israelites were afraid of Moses and they drew back from him. Moses had to call them and prove to them that he was not a supernatural being, so they could come and listen to what he had to say to them.

The human reaction to all that God intends for our glory is often to isolate and remove what does not fit into the small circle of our daily experiences. We are not only afraid of the unknown we also resist change. Most of us rather remain what we are: poor, sinful, and miserable.

⁴⁸ Jer. 31:33

⁴⁹ Ezek. 36:26,27

⁵⁰ Prov. 3:3

⁵¹ Rom. 7:9-11

⁵² See Ex. 34:29-35

We read in the Exodus record that Moses began to wear a veil and that the radiance disappeared after a while. It appears that Moses used the veil because the radiance bothered the Israelites; it was too bright and hurt their eyes. But Paul suggests that the veil came in handy for Moses, not when his face was radiant but when it was not. Moses, Paul says, used it to hide the fact that the radiance faded. We find little grounds for this insinuation in the Exodus record, but Paul's conclusion is striking in the application he makes of it. The suggestion is that the Israelites were not so much afraid of the radiance as of the disappearance of it. This makes Moses' veil a part of the hardening of their hearts. The Israelites wanted to keep the veil on Moses' face in order to maintain the illusion of believing in a Moses who did not exist, a Moses who knew no human weaknesses and who was inimitable. That made him a man who could not be followed in a practical way because his fellowship with God was never interrupted. Thus they kept themselves at a safe distance in order to continue to live a mediocre life instead of reaching for the stars that were out of reach anyhow.

Paul then draws a series of comparisons between the ministry of the law and of the Spirit. The application is twofold for those that serve and those that are being served. The point of comparison is the glory. The glory of the covenant communicates itself to those who administer and to those who receive. In the Old Testament this glory never went beyond the radiance on Moses' face, although it was meant for the whole nation of Israel. The Shechinah on Mount Sinai, the cloud that covered the tabernacle and that later filled the temple was a physical expression of God's presence.

The fact that the Old Testament Jew felt this as a condemnation was due to his lack of a sense of forgiveness. Yet we learn from Isaiah's experience that even the shadow of reality, being touched by a coal from the altar, produced an awareness of purity.⁵³ The absence of the Holy Spirit, or His sporadic appearances created a sense of impurity so that a person never became fully conscious of being cleansed of "dead works."⁵⁴ The weakness was not in the Shechinah but in the heart of man who accused himself and who, consequently, experienced the presence of God as lethal. The presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts brings an end to this condition. Our guilt feelings are washed away and the glory of God becomes an inner experience. The radiance of glory of the child of God in the New Testament is not on his face but in his eyes, those mirrors of the soul.

Paul mentions three contrasting facts that describe the old covenant and the new. The old covenant brought death and condemnation and it was temporal in character. He calls it "fading away." In opposition to this is the new covenant, which is the ministry of the Spirit, bringing justification; he calls that "the glory of that which lasts." Of the glory of the Old Testament, the apostle states: "what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory." The majesty of God's revelation on Mount Sinai, which the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes so impressively,⁵⁵ and the cloud that prevented the priests who served in the temple to continue their work,⁵⁶ pale next to the glory in the heart of a simple child of God. And that glory is a lasting glory. This glory, however, is present within us in the form of an unfolding bud. Paul uses the word "hope" in connection with that glory. In his Epistle to the Colossians, he speaks about "the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."⁵⁷ The guarantee is unshakable, but the full unfolding is still to come. The end result of it all will be that the believers in Jesus Christ, which is called "the New Jerusalem," will shine with the glory of God.⁵⁸ We are not there yet. The seed of glory has already been planted in our hearts and it has already begun to grow.

In the threefold comparison between the two covenants, Paul first looks at the effect the covenant has upon man: death or life. Then he traces the way along which this point is reached: condemnation or justification. And finally, he establishes the relationship between the two covenants: the one is temporal, the other is lasting. His conviction that he serves in the new covenant, which is lasting, which gives life and justification, which is incomparably more glorious than the old, gives Paul a boldness in his performance that puts Moses in the shade. We can hardly imagine what it must have meant to a Jew to hear such things said about Moses.

In speaking about the veil that covers, Paul demonstrates the same playful spirit we noticed earlier. Once he places the veil upon Moses' face and then upon the hearts of the Israelites.

⁵³ Isa. 6:6,7

⁵⁴ See Heb. 9:14 (NKJV)

⁵⁵ Heb. 12:18-21

⁵⁶ I Kings 8:10,11

⁵⁷ Col. 1:27

⁵⁸ Rev. 21:11

We suggested earlier that Moses wore the veil because he might not want the Israelites to see that the glory disappeared. That would mean that Moses used the veil more to cover his own weakness and frailty than to protect the Israelites from a bothersome glare. This would depict Moses as someone who wanted to show himself better than he actually was. But in this part of Paul's epistle the context puts the responsibility on the Israelites. They wanted to see Moses as a superman, someone who had reached a level of sanctification that was beyond their reach. This makes the veil on Moses' face a veil on their heart. The veil covered them more than it covered Moses. They did not want to reach for this glory which Moses had and which was meant for them also.

On the other hand, in comparing himself with Moses, Paul is not saying that Moses was fallible and failing and he was not. The risk of an uncovered face is that faults become very visible. That, however, is a necessary part of forgiveness. We know what salvation is in the forgiveness of our sins.⁵⁹ Being open about our sins and failures is a necessary condition for glory. Glory becomes greatest where failure was deepest. It is in the experience of being forgiven that we begin to understand what the Bible has to say to us. For the person whose sins have not been forgiven and who has not turned to God in repentance, there lies a veil upon the reading of the Old Testament, as well as the New.

It is interesting to note that Paul uses the name "Moses" for the whole Pentateuch. That is an indication of Paul's understanding of the authorship of those books. Insight in the truth is related to our conversion and our fellowship with Christ. Much of the problems we may have with the authority of the Bible will disappear as our fellowship with the Lord deepens.

In the last two verses of this chapter Paul reaches a great spiritual depth. It is obvious that much more is involved than the contrast between the letter of the law and the Spirit, as was mentioned in vs. 6. We come here to the essence of the Person of God. Jesus, in His conversation with the Samaritan woman, had already made the same statement. In answer to her question regarding the proper place of worship, Jesus said: "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."⁶⁰

It is difficult for us to understand what it means that God is Spirit. In Jesus' words in John's Gospel it seems to refer to God's omnipresence. In the context of this epistle it is related to freedom and glory. As creatures with physical bodies, we tend to place the spirit in opposition to the body which consists of matter. We often act as if there were an unbridgeable gap between the two. Yet, we know that our spirit is the life of our body. We can put the tendency to contrast the two on account of sin. It is, of course, not true that the Spirit of God would not have been present on Mount Sinai. The difference is that there He was outside of the hearts of the Israelites; now He dwells within. This is the point Paul wants to make that the Lord, who is Spirit, lives in us.

The statement "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" presents a paradox. The Spirit being omnipresent, there is no place where He is not present. The implication that is hidden is Paul's words is that man has the liberty to invite the Spirit of God to come into his life. Paul does not speak about places where the Spirit would not be present, but he wants us to realize how great and rich our position is when we have opened ourselves up for Jesus Christ and are being filled with the Spirit. The freedom here is the freedom of the uncovered face. Veils and masks disappear in the presence of the Lord because the inner bindings of sin are being loosened. Jesus says in John's Gospel: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."⁶¹

With the words "But we all"⁶² Paul returns to the main theme of his epistle: cooperation between himself and the church. The Corinthians not only share in the same persecution and the same joy, but also in the same glory.

The first difference between the ministry of the old covenant and the new is that, in the old covenant, only Moses reflected the glory of God and in the new everyone does. There is no longer any difference between priests and laymen in the church of Jesus Christ. Secondly, the phenomenon of the glory on Moses' face was temporal; for us it is eternal. Thirdly, the radiance in the Old Testament was a physical occurrence; it was measurable, it hurt the eyes of the Israelites who saw it. The reflection of glory

⁵⁹ Luke 1:77

⁶⁰ John 4:23,24

⁶¹ John 8:34-36

⁶² NKJV

in the New Testament is spiritual. It is reflected in the soul. In a way, the radiance on Moses' face was frustrating; there was a need for veils to be put on and to be taken off. The glory of Jesus Christ within us is liberating. Finally, the glory of Mount Sinai made only a superficial difference; it was cosmetic. It rather accentuated man's unwillingness to change; it emphasized man's hardness of heart. The glory of the Holy Spirit is the power that raised Jesus from the dead, that changes us and makes us partakers of God's glory. It is the essence of our ministry.

This glory is not a kind of sunshine in which we can bask; it is part of the task that is given to us. There is no glory without ministry. If it does not stream through us to others, if we do not pass it on, it stops. That may have been the problem Moses faced. It caused the radiance on Moses' face to disappear. Moses could not pass it on to anyone.

Lastly, our transformation and the increase of glory in us is proof of our own incompleteness. The seed has been planted but the fruit has not yet ripened. We have the principle but not the completeness. The original image represents the measure and the content of it all. We are like a piece of photographic paper in a tray of photo chemicals. The paper has been exposed to the light and the picture begins to develop, but it is not yet finished.

In the next two chapters Paul states several times that he does not lose heart, or that he is confident.⁶³ This speaks of the encouragement of the ministry of reconciliation. This encouragement is needed because of the sharp disparity we find between the glory of Christ and the world in which we live. Our natural tendency would be to throw in the towel, because the discrepancy is so great. It would be much easier to flow with the current than to stand against it.

The first application of this encouragement is on the level of morality. Since Paul has caught a glimpse of Christ's glory he has "renounced secret and shameful ways" and he does "not use deception, [or] distort the word of God." Those things belong to the realm of darkness. The connection between seeing the light and renouncing darkness is clear. Rejecting darkness is an essential part of the reflection of God's glory. If we practice sin, the glory fades. It is the purity of our conscience that is our recommendation to others. Purity of life takes courage. If we lose heart we get bogged down in sin.

The immediate cause for this remark is found in the thought that some people distort the Word of God and manipulate it to their own advantage. We can use the Bible as a stepping-stone for our own gain. The prophet Jeremiah lambasted the false prophets of his day for pretending to speak the Word of the Lord. We read: " 'Therefore,' declares the LORD, 'I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me. Yes,' declares the LORD, 'I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares.' 'Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,' declares the LORD. 'They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least,' declares the LORD."⁶⁴ God then said to Jeremiah: "But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds."⁶⁵ The preaching of the Word of God may never be separated from an intimate fellowship with God. We have to beware of a disappearance of glory, of losing heart! There is always a danger that we promote ourselves when we preach. Christ must be preached in Word and glory. Some surrogates are very deceiving. King Rehoboam was a master of substitution when he replaced the gold shields in the temple with bronze ones. We read: "In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem. He carried off the treasures of the temple of the LORD and the treasures of the royal palace. He took everything, including all the gold shields Solomon had made. So King Rehoboam made bronze shields to replace them and assigned these to the commanders of the guard on duty at the entrance to the royal palace. Whenever the king went to the LORD's temple, the guards bore the shields, and afterward they returned them to the guardroom."⁶⁶ All that is needed is a little polish to give an impression of glory. If there must be any veil, let it be on unconverted people who do not want to hear the Word of God, not on those who preach it.

Many people do not recognize the image of God in Jesus of Nazareth. This is particularly true of Jews and Muslims but also of some outside these groups. Paul puts this failure of seeing the truth on the account of Satan. The modern concept of "contextualization" and "group receptivity" were foreign to the

⁶³ See ch. 4:1,16; 5:6,8

⁶⁴ Jer. 23:30-32

⁶⁵ Jer. 23:22

⁶⁶ I Kings 14:25-28

apostle. But his approach of “not preach[ing] ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” is very modern indeed.

His emphasis of the miracle of God’s creation in him is very important. The light of God that illuminated the earth on the first day of creation also shines in our heart as the beginning of a new creation by the Holy Spirit. The comparison between the universe in which we live and the cosmos within us puts some important factors at the foreground. The first truth that is brought to the surface is that there is a connection between the world in which we live and the world inside us. The first is physical and visible; the second is spiritual and invisible. God created both and both are expressions of His reality and character. Both are called into being by the Word of God. The Psalmist says: “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”⁶⁷ Just as much as the physical universe is created and sustained by His powerful Word,⁶⁸ so is the spiritual dimension of our life dependant upon the power of His Word. “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”⁶⁹ We have been called to life by this Word of creation and by the same Word we are being fed and raised to maturity. Moses reached out to this glory without ever attaining it. He was only allowed to see the glory of God from behind.⁷⁰ That which was denied Moses is our daily portion.

We are being enlightened by “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” We may look the Lord of glory right in the face. We are reminded of Jesus’ conversation with Philip who saw Jesus but did not recognize the image of the Father in Him.⁷¹ The miracle of transformation does not occur in Jesus but in us. We need the power of God’s Word of creation to have our eyes opened so we recognize the reality of the glory that is ours. We are being enlightened with “the light of the knowledge.”

The difference in God’s speaking when He created light and God’s speaking to us is that we are not some dead nature but living personalities. Nature did not have the choice to obey or not to obey, but we are not enlightened against our will. When God speaks to us and we listen we become partakers in the divine nature. Jesus says that those to whom the Word of God comes are called “gods.”⁷² That is the result of this illumination.

The contrast between the content of this revelation and the circumstances of our life is overwhelmingly great. God purposely maintains this tension in order to protect us against ourselves. Paul says: “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” Form and content are incongruent. There is always that danger that we would credit ourselves for things the Holy Spirit does for us and through us. That is probably the essence of the original sin in which the devil fell. He became proud of what God had given to him.

Occasionally, the measures God, in His wisdom, takes to protect us seem too drastic to us. We should remember, however, that we do not have enough information to form an opinion. Paul’s conclusion about the reason for his “thorn in the flesh” is, therefore, a reasonable one. We read: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh.”⁷³

In the following verses, the apostle elaborates on the image of the “jars of clay.” In verses 8-15 the topic is the pressure of circumstances which we ought to resist; in 4:16-5:10, Paul speaks about the aging process and the decline, as well as the encouragement that comes with it. This all fits under the heading: “Therefore we do not lose heart.”

Vincent’s Word Studies gives an interesting explanation of the image of “jars of clay.” Speaking about the king of Persia, Herodotus writes: “The great king stores away the tribute which he receives in this fashion: ‘he melts it down, and, while it is in a liquid state, runs it into earthen vessels, which are afterward removed, leaving the metal in a solid mass.’” *Vincent’s Word Studies* also refers to the story of Gideon’s victory over the Midianites in which the torches were kept in earthen jars.⁷⁴ After all, the treasure

⁶⁷ Ps. 33:6,9

⁶⁸ See Heb. 1:3

⁶⁹ Matt. 4:4

⁷⁰ See Ex. 33:18-23

⁷¹ See John 14:8-11

⁷² John 10:35

⁷³ II Cor. 12:7

⁷⁴ Judg. 7:16

here is the light that shines in our hearts. But the jar must be broken for the light to become visible. The circumstances Paul describes are part of this breakage.

God ordains the pressure of our circumstances. Paul's evaluation of his own situation is particularly striking. He was constantly stressed out. But he never found himself without a way of escape; the way on high was always open. Paul did not see himself in an "existential world" in which all elements were his enemies who were out to destroy him. He knew that he lived in a world created by God and governed by Him. He needed counsel because he was a reasonable creature whose acts and decisions made a difference in the course of events. He also knew that he did not have all the information that would enable him to decide properly. What he needed was an insight that would go above and beyond his circumstances. He knew the Person who is the source of all wisdom. He acknowledged God in all his way and, therefore, his paths were straight.⁷⁵ Paul did not live in a toy world of existentialism; the despair of nihilism was foreign to him.

The words "persecuted, but not abandoned," remind us of the autobiography of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, entitled "*Lonely, but Not Alone*." Fellowship with God does not safeguard us against persecution. To the contrary! Jesus said: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."⁷⁶ And in the Beatitudes, our Lord speaks with more fervor than at any other point about the blessedness of those who are persecuted.⁷⁷ No one in his right mind would wish or seek to be persecuted. Yet, the church of Jesus Christ has known its greatest growth in times of persecution. Communist China is an example. Not only is growth greater under persecution, so is purity. Fellowship with the Lord is felt more strongly under pressure. It was only Christ who was forsaken by God when He hung on the cross. That happened so that God would never again abandon us.

We see a climax in the two series that Paul contrasts with one another. There is a mounting curve both on the positive and on the negative side. On the one hand we read: "hard pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted, struck down," ending with identification with the death of Christ. On the other hand, we read: "not crushed, not in despair, not abandoned, not destroyed," and manifesting the power of the resurrection of Jesus. In this complex, Paul sees reflected in this paradigm the life of our Lord Jesus Christ on earth. In a way, Paul experienced what Jesus went through. It was the hope of the resurrection that made suffering and even death bearable for him. In that way, Paul saw the sense and meaning of what happened to him. It is the stimulus of man's search for meaning that keeps him going. The pressure of circumstances is like the breaking of the jars of clay. It is in the measure of our brokenness that the glory of Jesus will be visible in and through us.

This brings again to the foreground the importance of Paul's relationship with the church. Our being broken does not always directly benefit us personally, but ultimately, it will be of endless benefit to us. This is not always clear in the beginning. Paul says: "So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you." It is probably for this reason that Paul makes mention of faith. When the results are not immediately visible and when what is visible often appears to be a defeat, faith is needed to grasp the victory that is still invisible. This faith that sees through the outward appearance comes from the Holy Spirit. Both the church and the apostle possessed this Spirit of faith. This is another link that ties the two together. The question is, does Paul speak here about the Holy Spirit or the human spirit that possesses and exercises faith? According to *Vincent's Word Studies*, it is a combination of the two. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, exercised by the human spirit.

In this context Paul quotes from Psalm One Hundred Sixteen: "I believed; therefore I said 'I am greatly afflicted.' And in my dismay I said, 'All men are liars.'" ⁷⁸ *Vincent's Word Studies* states about this quote that it is based on a faulty rendering of the Septuagint. That fact in itself could throw an interesting light on the doctrine of biblical inspiration! Yet, the context of Psalm One Hundred Sixteen fits exactly in Paul's argument. Paul's speaking, his testimony, is a proclamation of the truth of the spiritual facts, in spite of the outward appearance of his circumstances. For that reason he uses the words "we know" as a synonym for "we believe." Faith is not a vague hope of things that may occur but a logical conclusion based on historic facts.

It is no offense to our intellect and not contrary to the laws of logic to suppose that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has only true content and meaning if it presents a pattern for man's future. One does not

⁷⁵ See Prov. 3:6.

⁷⁶ John 15:18

⁷⁷ See Matt. 5:10-12.

⁷⁸ Ps. 116:10,11

commit intellectual suicide if one assumes there is sufficient evidence in man, and in the nature, and the cosmos that surrounds him, to accept the existence of God as the source of intelligence and logic. That leads to the conclusion that God would not do anything that would not somehow be related to the stream of history and the ultimate purpose of the universe. It is, therefore, not nonsensical that Paul, without hesitation, draws a straight line from Jesus' resurrection from the dead to his own resurrection.

Admittedly, the resurrection of the body preoccupied Paul, and probably the church at that time, more than it does for most of us at present. We seem to be more interested in the salvation of our souls than in the resurrection of our bodies. There is, with Paul, no misunderstanding about the destiny of the soul either. Paul shows no evidence of believing in a slumber of the soul at the moment of death or in a cessation of all existence. He wrote to the Philippians: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far."⁷⁹ The urgency to be a complete human being again, which was so prevalent in Paul's thinking, seems to have been lost in ours. It may be good to realize our loss and go to school with Paul. We conclude from the complaint of the souls under the altar in Revelation, that they experienced as a lack the fact that the resurrection of the body had not yet occurred. We read: "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?' Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed."⁸⁰

Paul had not merely the hope of heaven; but he felt that the insult done to his body in the physical persecution he suffered, and later in his death, had to be avenged. That stimulated him to go on.

This hope of the resurrection was another link of fellowship between the apostle and the church. Paul did not see himself standing alone before God; the people of the church of Corinth would stand next to him. Sharing the glory of the resurrection is the greatest form of unity and fellowship that can be imagined. If we keep our eyes fixed on this future hope, we will be strongly motivated to work out in the present all our different and negative aspects in mutual relations with fellow believers. In this respect Paul was a very effective cooperator to their joy. Jude expresses this truth in an impressive way with the statement: "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy..."⁸¹ This hope will keep us from falling!

Sowing and reaping requires heavy labor. We can sometimes focus too much on the heavy workload and complain about the sweat, blood, and tears it takes. Fixing our eyes on the harvest will help us keep the right perspective.

Great efforts give satisfaction when great results are obtained, but work that is in vain produces sadness. When Paul says: "All this is for your benefit," he speaks about both the heavy labor and the harvest. There is a direct link between suffering and glory: they both honor God. The harvest is expressed in the number of people that are saved. Paul describes this as an increase of grace. Luke uses a similar expression in the Book of Acts: "And the word of God increased."⁸² Grace increases when people's conviction of sin increases. As Paul states in Romans: "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more."⁸³ Salvation always begins with an awareness of forgiveness of sin. Knowledge of being forgiven will always lead to praise of God. And praise is an essential part of our relationship with God. We are created for God's praise. This means that we can glorify God also in our pain and suffering.

As Paul intones for the second time "we do not lose heart," he focuses particularly on the physical decline of the human body. In the preceding verses the emphasis was particularly on encouragement in the face of outward pressure; here the pressure comes from inside.

Paul must have thought of the person King Solomon describes in Ecclesiastes, who experiences that "the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when men are afraid

⁷⁹ Phil. 1:21-23

⁸⁰ Rev. 6:9-11

⁸¹ Jude vs. 24

⁸² Acts 6:7 (KJV)

⁸³ Rom. 5:20

of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred.”⁸⁴

It can be very difficult and depressive for a person to grow old and face sickness and decline. Unless “inwardly we are being renewed day by day,” we are not facing a happy future. It is imperative, as we grow older, that we draw strength from our relationship with God on a daily basis. This process of revitalization cannot be interrupted, otherwise old age will be, in the words of Ecclesiastes, “the days of trouble.” This revitalizing will not consist of renewal of physical energy. Physical decline seems inevitable for most aging human beings. The renewal is spiritual. What is important is our character, our fellowship with God and with our fellowmen. Physical endurance and sports achievements are ultimately unimportant.

When Paul speaks of “our light and momentary trouble,” he gathers persecution and physical decline under the same heading. We find the same comparison between persecution and glory in the Epistle to the Romans, where we read: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”⁸⁵ Paul’s remarks here are not devoid of humor. We tend to see persecution as a heavy, unbearable burden. Paul says that the weight of glory is much heavier. If we have so much trouble lifting the weight of temporal things, what will we do when trying to lift the eternal one? We can almost see the sparkle in Paul’s eyes when we read these words. The funny part is that we believe the eternal things to be lighter than the temporal ones because they are invisible. We work under the false premises that we live in a hard reality and that what falls outside our field of vision is less real. Paul shows us that we have turned things upside down. Our problem at present is not that the burden is too heavy, but our shoulders are too weak. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Great Divorce*, depicts the scene of people who suffer walking on grass, which pierces their feet, because their feet are not solid enough. If, at present, we would be in the same condition we will be in glory, the weight of persecution would be nil for us. Carrying our present load, therefore, must be seen as a muscle exercise. We need this so that we will not be found to be too weak when we have to carry the real weight of glory. Weakness may have been the reason Daniel and John fainted when they were confronted prematurely with glory.⁸⁶

We must remember, though, that the weight is a spiritual weight and the muscles are spiritual muscles. Much of what we experience now as a heavy load comes to us in a physical form. That fact does not make the weight easier to bear. But our link with the spiritual things is more important in our physical trials than we often suppose. We cannot call Jesus’ suffering, for instance, “light and momentary troubles.” Yet, Jesus’ heaviest load was spiritual. Because He suffered so greatly spiritually, even to the point of being forsaken by God, His physical suffering became so much greater. Jesus also paid a terrible physical price for His incarnation. Satan had reserved his maximum tortures for Jesus. This marvelous defense system of our bodies, in which pain warns us of danger to our life, was turned against our Lord in His body. His whole body screamed in rebellion when He hung on the cross. Yet, it is said about Him that He “for the joy set before him endured the cross.”⁸⁷ Even for Jesus, the weight of His suffering was lighter than the weight of His glory.

Much of the weight of our suffering, however, is like an optical illusion. Discouragement adds to our burdens. The key of the secret, as it was with Moses, is that we see beyond the present. We read about Moses that “he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.”⁸⁸ We will only be able to see the invisible things if we see Him who is invisible. This makes Jesus’ reference to the wind, in His conversation with Nicodemus, so striking.⁸⁹ The Spirit of God in us helps us to experience this invisible reality. Our eyes differentiate between visible and invisible. That makes the distinction subjective. The fact that there are things we are unable to see with our eyes does not make them, necessarily, eternal. Paul only wants to say here that our eyes are incapable of seeing things which are eternal and have imperishable value. If we deny the existence of eternal things because we cannot see them, we are like people who deny the existence of certain stars that are invisible to the naked eye. We must learn the lesson of not judging on the basis of visibility. That is what naturalists do to their own detriment.

But not judging in itself is not enough. Not denying a spiritual reality is not the same thing as seeing that which is invisible. Our encouragement will begin when, not only we see that which is invisible,

⁸⁴ Eccl. 12:2-5

⁸⁵ Rom. 8:18

⁸⁶ See Dan. 10:7-19; Rev. 1:17.

⁸⁷ Heb. 12:2

⁸⁸ Heb. 11:27

⁸⁹ John 3:8

but when we focus upon it. The Greek word Paul uses is *skopeo*, which literally means: “to take aim at something.” We focus upon the invisible in order to determine our course in life. Seeing the One who is invisible and leaning upon Him is the only basis of our encouragement. We find a classical illustration of this point in the story of Elisha’s servant. We read during the siege of Samaria: “When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. ‘Oh, my lord, what shall we do?’ the servant asked. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ the prophet answered. ‘Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ And Elisha prayed, ‘O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.’ Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”⁹⁰ He, who believes that the shadows of reality by which he lives are the real things, is poor indeed. Without being born again, no one will be able to see the Kingdom of God or enter it.⁹¹

The basis of our hope is in seeing the One who is invisible. The content of our hope, that which encourages us, is what God will do with us, both spiritually and physically.

Paul says that the more he feels the breakdown of old age in his body, the more he is reminded of the fact that the caterpillar will turn into a butterfly. A metamorphosis is awaiting us that will put everything on earth in the shade. Death and corruption are the devil’s handiwork. But see what God does with it! Our temporary tent is being remade into an eternal dwelling.

The comparison between our mortal body and our resurrection body as a tent and a house is striking. *Vincent’s Word Study* suggests that, for Paul as a tent maker, the picture must have been clear. Seeing a piece of cloth, he, immediately, saw the potential of a tent in it. Historically, for the Jew a tent was the picture of the transient character of life on earth. The tent had become a symbol of Israel’s journey from Egypt to Canaan. So is our body a temporary dwelling. It is constructed in such a way that it can be easily disassembled. This helps to remind us of the fact that we are on a journey and that our goal is to go somewhere else. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews translates this thought beautifully in Abraham’s expectation of “the city with foundations.” We read: “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”⁹² He continues: “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”⁹³ If our mortal body is as a tent, then our resurrection body is as a house; not only a place to live but a monumental structure. We will move from a hut into a palace!

Paul’s groaning in vs. 2 does not refer to any particular sound but it describes the reaction of the whole human being to the pressures of life on earth. Our bodies crack and groan as we become older as a sign of longing for renewal. Our dust is on its way to return to dust and we long for the rebirth of the atoms and molecules of which we are made. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul indicates that all of creation is involved in this renewal. We read: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”⁹⁴

That which happened to Adam when he fell into sin ruined all of creation. The resurrection of our bodies and the revelation of the sons of God will also mean the renewal of the fauna and flora of this planet. For that reason the creation waits with eager expectation for what will happen to us. The destruction of our bodies is only bearable if we understand that its purpose is a complete renewal. Paul says that if we would only be broken down without any renewal, we would be found “naked.” He calls this the fear of

⁹⁰ II Kings 6:15-17

⁹¹ John 3:3,5

⁹² Heb. 11:8-10, 14-16

⁹³ Heb. 13:14

⁹⁴ Rom. 8:19-23

nakedness. That is the tension of mortality in which we live in the present. It is the only thing our senses can observe. It is only when the Holy Spirit moves in with us that we can see the outline of the resurrection taking shape. The Holy Spirit makes us understand that He is not the Spirit of the dead but of the living. Mortality will be swallowed up by immortality. "Death has been swallowed up in victory."⁹⁵

It is for this that God prepares us. That is our destination. The Spirit within us is the warrantee and guarantee that this will come to pass. That is why it is reasonable for us to praise the Lord for our rheumatism and high blood pressure.

We must remind ourselves that that topic of this section is encouragement. This is obvious from Paul's use of the words "confident" and "we do not lose heart."⁹⁶ Paul compares our present residence in the body with a journey to a foreign, far away country. We will, ultimately, feel at home only when we are with the Lord.

It is a common experience for someone who leaves his homeland to feel unsure in the culture, the language, and the civilization of other parts of the world. It turns out that our life, in which we feel at ease and sure of ourselves, is built upon a whole series of props and little certainties. The falling away of those supports causes a phenomenon which is called "culture shock." Those experiences can also be taken as a picture of life with God. Paul says: "As long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord." Our desire ought to be to go home. It is interesting to see that Paul, who was a world traveler in his time, uses these images. Our feeling at home on earth, our ability to relax is a shadow of the real rest that awaits us in heaven. Our present relaxation in fellowship with the Lord is an act of faith.

The immediate lesson Paul draws from this is that it is important to live a morally clean life before the Lord. At this point, he does not speak about abstaining from sin based on a fear of punishment. He mentions that later on. Here it is the encouragement of "home sickness" that makes him act as if he were already home. He says: "So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it." The Greek word used is *philotimeomai*, which is derived from a word that means, "to be fond of honor." It could be rendered: "We take pride in..." What he does or does not do is not merely obeying the rules. His behavior and way of life is geared to please the Person of the Lord Jesus. How much misery and failure we would save ourselves from if, in all we do, we would ask ourselves what God thinks of it. "What would Jesus do?" (WWJD) is a good way to conduct our lives.

Even the way Paul speaks about the judgment seat of Christ is not really frightening. When, as believers, we stand before Christ on the day of judgment, He will not condemn us, but we will be forced to reveal what we are in Him. Our masks will fall off and we will see ourselves as we are, because we see Him.

The NIV reads: "that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." The Greek word, rendered "receive" is *komizo*, which may be translated "to carry off." What we carry away will either be a reward or a reproach. It is generally understood that Paul does not speak here of the judgment on the last day. On that day, God will pronounce sentence upon all of mankind. What we see here is an evaluation of Christians. We will see ourselves in the perfect light and we will evaluate ourselves, as did Isaiah⁹⁷ and Peter.⁹⁸ "Carry off" is a strange concept in this context. It suggests responsibility for our acts, but it also evokes the image of the scapegoat that carried off the sins of the people of Israel on the Day of Atonement.⁹⁹

One of the problems is that Paul speaks here about "good or bad." Maybe, "good" ought to be seen in the light of Isaiah's words: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags."¹⁰⁰ The implication would then be that we would be cleansed from all that does not measure up to the standard of God's righteousness.

The main thought in this section is that we are responsible for our acts, whether we are conscious of God's presence or not. This is also the conclusion of the writer of Ecclesiastes. We read: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the

⁹⁵ I Cor. 15:54

⁹⁶ See II Cor 4:1,16; 5:6,8.

⁹⁷ See Isa. 6:5.

⁹⁸ See Luke 5:8.

⁹⁹ See Lev. 16:20-22

¹⁰⁰ Isa. 64:6

whole [duty] of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”¹⁰¹

Paul is right; there is encouragement in the fact that we are responsible! If we are responsible, the matter is in our own hands and we can do something about it. There is a strong tendency in all of us to evade responsibility for our acts and for our life. This is not the same as surrender our right to self-determination. We would like to be free to act as we wish, but we do not want to be held responsible. We like to have our pie and eat it too! The only way to be free from this pressure is to surrender our will to God; thus we will not be condemned on the Day of Judgment. The knowledge that without Him we can do nothing is our safeguard.

Beginning with Chapter 5 verse 11, we see a different emphasis on the same theme. There are those who are far away from the Lord, but who long to be home; and there are some who are quite happy to be far away. In these verses, Paul speaks about the alternative to homesickness. A lack of longing for home will bring with it a lack of ethical perspective. If we have no personal relationship with God, we will not be able to judge our actions in the light of God either. Paul is concerned about that kind of people. He knows the love of God, but he also trembles when he thinks how the wrath of God will hit those who shut themselves up from God’s love. This fear, which is based on the knowledge of God, is the strongest motivation for Paul’s testimony. This is linked to the love of Christ that compels Paul. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians Paul wrote: “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”¹⁰² In all this, Paul is obedient to God’s call in his life.

An important part of Paul’s uneasiness was due to the condition of the church in Corinth. There was a lack of unity in the church. A lack of unity and of mutual love will also become evident before the judgment seat of Christ. No one who belongs to Jesus Christ can afford to be compelled by less than the love of Christ Himself! Not only ought we not to live in sin and discord with one another, we have no other option than unity and mutual love. We have no choice! There is no alternative. That is the reason for Paul’s strong effort to evoke a team spirit and to right the wrong relationships. He wants to cooperate with them to promote healing. What he says is: God knows what I am doing and why I am doing it, and I hope you know it also. I believe that to be the meaning of verse 11: “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.” Those who must be persuaded are, first of all, the Corinthians.

Paul uses some good psychology in verses 12 and 13. It must have been hard to accept for Paul that there were people in the church in Corinth who did not want him. It may have pained him more than he was willing to admit. This pain is a reoccurring theme in this epistle. We find it in his words in Chapter 3: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?” There can be no doubt about Paul’s spiritual condition; he was filled with the Holy Spirit. That, however, did not protect him from the pain of rejection. He could not get over the fact that people in the church he had himself planted would put him down. His giving them opportunity to take pride in him must be seen against this background. But that was not all. The spiritual aspect of rejection was more important than the psychological one. In his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul identified himself with the Gospel. He states there: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.”¹⁰³

The words “If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God” in verse 13, refer to a spiritual ecstasy, which he will elaborate on in Chapter 12:1-10, where, he describes his vision of the third heaven. What he says at this point is that he did not have these extraordinary experiences solely for his own benefit but for the advantage of the church. The church is not only built by persecution and comfort in suffering but also by these rare moments of supernatural rapture. Nothing God does for us is exclusively for our own blessing and benefit. In everything, God has His eye on the church as a whole. What Paul is saying is that, neither from a spiritual angle, nor from a natural one, would there be any reason for the church in Corinth not to have a bond of unity and love with the apostle. There is nothing for which they must be ashamed before outsiders. The fact that Paul speaks about “what is in the heart,” not what is in the spirit, indicates that the problem was more emotional than spiritual.

Paul’s being compelled by the love of Christ is based on his insight in the truth. It is not a matter of mere feeling but of an understanding of reality. Paul made a simple calculation and came to the

¹⁰¹ Eccl. 12:13,14

¹⁰² I Cor. 9:16

¹⁰³ Gal. 1:6

conclusion that if one died for all, then all died. This may not be factually true, but it is true in principle. It is the way God reckons it. God had condemned all of mankind to death and this sentence has been executed in Jesus Christ. As far as God is concerned, the legal question of our guilt and punishment is finished. The file is closed.

New proofs can change nothing in the matter because our guilt does not consist in the sins we have committed but in our sinful condition. Our wrong acts are the result of our wrong being. The tree bears responsibility for its own fruit. The finality of God's dealing with our sins is also expressed by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, when he states about Jesus: "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."¹⁰⁴ God does not rake up old stories. It is important for us to understand God's position in regard to us, so we will understand God's plan for us.

It is obvious that God is not interested in our death. Death is not His goal but the means to achieve the goal. He wants us to live, not to die. Paul's formula is mathematical: One died for all; that gives to all the status of being dead.

But if Christ did this for us, if His death is given in exchange for our life, then it is logical and fitting that we give our life for His death. God expects us, henceforth, to live for Him and not for ourselves. It is our natural tendency to live for ourselves. We need to make the shocking discovery that Jesus' death was necessary for us to come to the place where we would turn our life around and focus on Him instead of on ourselves. It does not mean that we cease to function, but it means that what we do, we do no longer for ourselves but for Him. This is the essence of eating from the tree of life.

It is important to note that Paul not only mentions the death of our Lord but also His resurrection. The power needed for our transformation is found in His resurrection.

The problems in the church of Corinth were symptomatic for a deeper lying problem, which was a lack of the insight Paul expounded above, and of drawing the proper conclusions from it. All frictions between personalities, all conflicts of character can, ultimately, be traced back to the fact that we do not live for the Lord but for ourselves. This makes us fall under God's judgment. The best guarantee against coming in the judgment is to love the Lord Jesus Christ and, in consequence, be willing to give our life for our fellowman. Love provides the key to this insight, as well as the content and the result of it. That which will be revealed at the judgment seat of Christ is our love or the lack of it.

This is enough reason to fear the Lord, because fear is the opposite of love. John expresses it this way: "In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us."¹⁰⁵ This is the love of Christ that compels us.

Verse 16 in the NIV, states: "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." The Greek reads literally: "Wherefore we henceforth no man know after flesh: though we have known after the flesh, Christ now henceforth him no more know we." The NKJV stays closer to the original: "Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer." The problem is in the interpretation of the word "flesh." The general connotation of the Greek word *sarx*, in the way Paul uses it, is "carnal." Paul, elsewhere, contrasts those "who walk not after the flesh" with those who walk "after the Spirit."¹⁰⁶ The Greek word *sarx* has different meanings according to the context in which it is used. It can mean "flesh" in the sense of "stripped of the skin," or "the body, as opposed to the soul." It can also be used to denote human nature in general. It is difficult to determine whether Paul thinks of some people who had known Jesus during His life on earth, before His death and resurrection, or whether he speaks of people who only knew Him as a historical person without ever having the life-changing experience of being born again. The NLT takes this interpretation with the rendering: "So we have stopped evaluating others by what the world thinks about them. Once I mistakenly thought of Christ that way, as though he were merely a human being. How differently I think about him now!"

In the context in which Paul uses the expression, that is in the light of no longer living for ourselves but for Him who died for us and was raised again, we believe that Paul speaks of knowing Christ spiritually. Living for God finds its expression in living for our neighbor and serving our fellowmen. We cease to consider our fellowmen as potential enemies and we begin to treat them as objects of God's and

¹⁰⁴ Heb. 1:3

¹⁰⁵ I John 4:17-19

¹⁰⁶ Rom. 8:4 (KJV).

our love. Human beings are often no better than animals who do not hesitate to devour one another. The principle of jealousy and rivalry is often not different among humans as it is with a dog whose hair stands up straight at the sight of another dog. Maybe that is what Paul meant with “we regard no one according to the flesh.” That was the way Paul knew Christ when he persecuted the church. It does not seem likely that Paul had met Jesus while He traveled around Palestine. It is also very unlikely that there would be people in the city of Corinth who had met Jesus that way in Jerusalem. There is the contrast between knowing Jesus Christ as savior and Lord to whom one surrenders and knowing Him as adversary whom one resists.

Yet, although there is, of course, a spiritual aspect in knowing Jesus, Paul, apparently, does not intend to contrast here spiritual knowledge with natural knowledge. The apostles John and Peter emphasized the human relationship they had had with Jesus. Speaking in the home of Cornelius, Peter said: “He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen-by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”¹⁰⁷ And in his second epistle, Peter writes: “We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”¹⁰⁸ John opens his first epistle with the words: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.”¹⁰⁹ If this is the kind of knowing “Christ according to the flesh” Paul has in mind, we must say that the other apostles seem to have particularly treasured this knowledge. We believe, therefore, that Paul, probably, speaks here about knowing Christ in the light of his experience on the road to Damascus.

Verse Seventeen is, undoubtedly, one of the golden verses in the Bible: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” Paul elaborates here on the thought he expressed earlier: “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 the glory of God in the face of Christ.”¹¹⁰ God spoke to us and thus He made His light shine upon us. Paul does not only draw a parallel between the natural and the spiritual world, but he also states that the first creation, which was ruined and fallen in sin, is being replaced by another creation on a different level. The Greek word *hoste*, translated “therefore” in the NIV can be rendered also “so.” It answers the question “how?” This new creation is in Jesus Christ. It becomes ours and we become part of it when we accept Jesus and He accepts us. The main characteristic of this new creation is love; no longer living for oneself but for Him.

The expression “in Christ” is loaded with meaning. It is one of Paul’s favorite terms in his epistles. This is the position in which God places us when we are converted and accept Jesus as the Savior and Lord of our life. Paul expounds the full meaning of the words in his Epistle to the Romans.¹¹¹ He explains there that God considers all of humanity as one single person and He treats us as such. Our relationship with God is governed by the fact that God considers us to be represented either by Adam or by Christ. This depends on whether we are rebelling against God or reconciled with Him. Our state of mind and the direction of our daily life are determined by the position in which we are before God.

It is difficult to sound the depth of Paul’s triumph as expressed in the words “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation!” We are not only individually new creatures but we belong to a completely new creation. The changes that occur in our personal life are the result of our transition from death into life, from the old into the new. We often fail to realize that when God says: “I am making everything new!”¹¹² man is God’s bridge between the old and the new. The slow changes a converted person observes in his own life are the buds and blossoms that announce the coming of an eternal summer. Every change for good and all growing closer with the Lord is based on the fact that “in Christ” the old has gone and the new has come. John expresses this in his First Epistle: “Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.”¹¹³ That which is reality in Jesus Christ will become real in us as we hide ourselves in Him.

The Greek interject the little word *idou*, “behold,” or “see,” which the NIV omits. The KJV preserves this element of surprise, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” The “new” is not merely announced but “see” it is here.

¹⁰⁷ Acts 10:41

¹⁰⁸ II Peter 1:18

¹⁰⁹ I John 1:1

¹¹⁰ II Cor. 4:6

¹¹¹ See Rom 5:12-21.

¹¹² Rev. 21:5

¹¹³ I John 2:8

Jesus conveys this surprise when He says to John: "I am the Living one; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!"¹¹⁴

The church of Jesus Christ is the final result of God's plan of evolution. This is evolution, not in the Darwinian sense of the word, but the evolution by the Holy Spirit. No one can work himself up to becoming a new creation; it is exclusively God's initiative. The initiative of reconciliation is in Jesus Christ. We must not hastily conclude from Paul's words in verses 16-21 that the apostle considers the Corinthians to be unconverted and that he pleads with them to be converted. This whole epistle testifies to the fact that Paul wants to engage the people as his coworkers. Paul does not state anything new here. The Corinthians had heard this before and they accepted it. They failed, however, to draw the right consequences from it. It is possible to receive the grace of God in vain. To live a reconciled life means to daily apply God's reconciliation. That is why, when Paul states that God "has committed *to us* the message of reconciliation," he does not merely mean himself, but the church and himself. After all, the theme of this whole epistle is partnership. Paul's call "Be reconciled to God," therefore, is an appeal to take reconciliation seriously.

Reconciliation consists of two parts: forgiveness and rehabilitation. There is, first of all, forgiveness because God does not charge for our sins. There is rehabilitation in that God entrusts the ministry of ambassadors to those who before were rebels. Our reconciliation is not complete if it consists only of a clean slate. We must also accept the dignity of the ministry: kings, priests, and ambassadors. God does not employ laymen.

"Be reconciled to God" does not involve any activity from our side. It is a matter of surrendering to the process God began in us when we turned away from sin and toward Him. Our role in reconciliation is completely passive. But the process of reconciliation will not be complete without our cooperation. Christ died for our sins before we were even born in this world. Our consent was not needed for this. But it is impossible for us to become "the righteousness of God" without our collaboration. The word "become" speaks of a process, of a real change of our inner being. God's righteousness is not imposed upon us, but it is planted within. It is the seed of the sower that is sown in our heart.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The miracle of this mutual exchange will fill us with amazement and adoration throughout eternity. God cast the whole load of our sin and guilt upon the shoulders of His Son in order to lay upon us the full weight of His glory. We must let this fact penetrate us and see how deep it goes and how far reaching are its consequences. This exchange means, first of all, that we go free in the judgment that will pass over this world. When I stand next to Jesus Christ before the throne of God, and the Father looks at me, He will see Jesus loaded with my guilt and me covered with Jesus' righteousness. God's wrath over sin hits Him, not me. I am declared free. That is the judicial meaning of the crucifixion of our Lord. The whole complex of guilt feelings I may carry within me cannot change this basic condition. He takes all the blame and I end up with His glory.

As far as that is concerned there is an even exchange. But there is also a fundamental difference in it. The sin Jesus took upon Himself did not pollute Him inwardly. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us," but He did not become a sinner. Inwardly, He remained spotless. The Lamb of God that carried away the sin of the world was and remained the perfect Lamb. We see Him as such in the Book of Revelation.¹¹⁵ The fire of hell did not touch Him because no worm of corruption ate Him inside.¹¹⁶ But this is not the case for us when the righteousness of God is laid upon us. The load upon our shoulders is not like a coat of varnish that is applied outwardly but that does not affect the inside. It will change us to the depth of our souls. "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."¹¹⁷

The expression "the righteousness of God" is worth a separate study. The concept of God's righteousness is the theme of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Paul states: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"¹¹⁸ From what follows in Romans, it becomes clear that Paul defines righteousness as the solution of the tension between God's holiness and God's love in relation to the sin of mankind. The

¹¹⁴ Rev. 1:18

¹¹⁵ Rev. 5:6; 7:9; 14:1

¹¹⁶ See Mark 9:47,48.

¹¹⁷ II Cor. 3:18

¹¹⁸ Rom. 1:17

addition that righteousness is by faith suggests that man ought to experience the effect of God's righteousness in his daily life. The solution of the tension consists of the fact that God punished our sin in Jesus Christ, that is in Himself. God's love takes upon Himself the punishment that His holiness demands. This has a twofold effect upon us. The immediate result is that we experience God's righteousness as redemption and renewal.

Paul does not say, however, that we merely *receive* God's righteousness but that we *become* the righteousness of God. This means that we give our life as He gave His. It means that we willingly sacrifice ourselves for the salvation of others because we love them. When we become God's righteousness, the tension between God's love and God's holiness is being resolved in us also. But we do not become God's righteousness in ourselves; it is "in Him." It becomes part of us inasmuch as we have fellowship with Him. Without Him, we can do nothing! The addition "by faith" means that the key is in our trusting God.

The warrantee that we will be filled with His glory and will possess His righteousness is found in His promise, that is in His Word. Paul calls that "the message of reconciliation." We have enough reason to believe that we will become God's righteousness in Christ because we know that God can be relied upon. We may not feel righteous in our present condition (thank God for that!) but there can be no doubt about it that Jesus was made sin for us. We have experienced enough of the effects of this in the renewal of our life in order to know that "the old has gone, the new has come!"

To recapitulate: The topic of these chapters is Cooperation in the Ministry of Reconciliation. This began in Chapter Three and ends with the last verse of Chapter Five. The next point in which cooperation between the apostle and the church is demonstrated is in the sanctification of the ministry.

4. Cooperation in the Sanctification of the Carrying out of this Ministry 6:1-10

1 As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.

2 For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

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

4 Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;

5 in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;

6 in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;

7 in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left;

8 through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors;

9 known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed;

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

It is again difficult to draw a line between this section and the preceding one. Where does "becoming God's righteousness" end and sanctification begin? Paul presents the church with the overwhelming aspect of God's glory of which we become partakers in order to remind us that nobility carries with it its obligations. As the French say: "Noblesse oblige!"

We discern three lines in these two chapters that outline the effect and the application of righteousness: In Chapter 6:1-10, we see the effect in Paul's own life as ambassador of Christ; in Chapter 6:11-7:1 we see the effect in the church, where a line is drawn between those who are converted and those who are not. Chapter 7:2-16 explains what this means in the relationship between Paul and the church.

a. Paul's Lifestyle 6:1-10

The rendering "God's fellow workers" is open for discussion. The word "God" is not in the Greek manuscript, but it may be implied grammatically, since the Greek word *sunergóúntes* is in the third person singular. Young's Literal Translation simply reads: "And working together..." Paul does not introduce himself to the church as God's fellow-worker but as co-worker with the church. He and the church together are Christ's ambassadors. We looked at this earlier, also in connection with the fact that Paul said to them: "we work with you for your joy."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ II Cor. 1:24

Here, Paul presents himself as the cooperator of their reconciliation with God, meaning that they must become conscious of being forgiven and that they must understand the consequences of that condition. The admonition Paul gives is not like that of a clergyman to laymen, but as one laborer in the Kingdom to fellow-laborers. They all find themselves in the same condition.

The warning issued says: “do not to receive God’s grace in vain!” Paul uses the same expression in his First Epistle: “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.”¹²⁰ The words “in vain” refer to a lack of fruit in the life of the believer. It does not refer to conversion, nor is it a call for reconciliation as in the previous chapter. The point is that the fact that Christ was made sin for us ought to produce in us His righteousness. If that fruit fails, reconciliation is incomplete and grace is received in vain.

We have no excuse for not bearing fruit. Harvest time is now. “Now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.” Isaiah calls it “the year of the LORD’s favor.”¹²¹ The day of salvation is the day of the new creation in Christ Jesus. If fruit fails to grow in our life, we cause incalculable damage to the cause of the Gospel.

For this reason Paul gives his personal testimony. The ministry of the Gospel is the all-encompassing factor in his life. His whole conduct is subjected to it. Some people consider such an attitude to be hypocritical, but it is actually nothing other than having the right kind of priorities. This is not a matter of the work being number one, but of no longer living for oneself but for Him. Work is merely part of that attitude.

The first words that sum up what Paul considers himself to be state: “We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.” In his Epistle to the Romans and in First Corinthians, Paul elaborates on this statement.¹²² Everyone knows what the moral qualifications are which a servant of God ought to possess. When Paul says: “as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way,” he appeals to that what is generally known. If we know how a servant of God ought to live, we demonstrate that we know something about the character of God. How else would we be able to pass such judgment? Most people know, generally speaking, more about God than they want to admit. This is also evinced in the criticism people have on those who proclaim to be servants of God but do not demonstrate the dignity that matches the Gospel message.

The list of the characteristics that are required consists in three parts:

In Verses Four and Five, Paul demonstrates his attitude in adversity.

In Verse Six, he mentions the characteristics that are the fruit of his fellowship with God.

In Verses Seven through Ten, he speaks of features that relate to his preaching of the Gospel.

When Paul speaks of “great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses,” he does not, necessarily, refer to things done to him by fellow human beings, but “beatings, imprisonments and riots” are what people have done to him. There were in Paul’s life spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional trials. Paul testifies that in none of these he dishonored his Lord.

We understand that the very reason God allows this kind of hardships to enter our lives is so that we can prove that we are His servants. This helps us, as Paul stated in the opening verses of this epistle, to “not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”¹²³ The more severe the hardship, the greater the victory and the blessing! What Paul mentions here is all related to the hardships he suffered in Asia, mentioned in Chapter One. If this were not the case, the apostle would merely be bragging.

The list of Verse Six is of a different character than the one in the preceding verse. Here, the flowers of paradise are in bloom and the fruit of the Holy Spirit ripens. The first of six features Paul mentions is “purity.” James connects purity to wisdom and states: “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure.”¹²⁴ We tend to relate purity to sexuality and often in a wrong way, as if any sexual thought or desire would be inherently impure. It is, of course, true that sex can be polluted and there is often a whole complex of impurity in the sexual experience of many people.

Impurity is caused by mixture with foreign elements; only unmixed ingredients are pure. Purity knows only one source and one goal; it is free of foreign matter. Purity in sexual life is not the absence of desire for a partner, but unadulterated love for the one to whom one has bound oneself by a pledge of

¹²⁰ I Cor. 15:2

¹²¹ Isa. 61:2

¹²² See Rom. 14,15; I Cor.8.

¹²³ II Cor. 1:9

¹²⁴ James 3:17

fidelity. Thus, the purity Paul speaks of consists in loving God in Jesus Christ with all of our heart, soul, mind, and energy. That is purity without any reserve and without any pollution. The apostle Paul served Christ in purity of heart. All else was subservient to this. That constitutes purity.

It may amaze us that the second item in Paul's list is "understanding." The Greek word is *gnosis*, which means "knowledge," but which is derived from a word that means "understanding." Paul's order is logical, because we may consider purity to be the essential quality for all that follows. The content of serving Christ in purity is "understanding, patience and kindness..." We could place a colon after purity. We find the same construction in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, where a colon could be placed after the words "wisdom from God." "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."

Knowledge or understanding is the first element of purity. Why do some suggest that serving God would cause a decrease of knowledge? Autonomous knowledge, that grows on a tree by itself, can be deadly, but understanding, that is the first fruit of the tree of life, is divine. Would fellowship with the omniscient God not produce knowledge and understanding? Solomon states in Ecclesiastes: "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."¹²⁵ This may be true but it does not mean that there is a contradiction between knowledge and faith. The same Solomon proclaims in the Book of Proverbs: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." We find the same paradox in Paul's writings. In First Corinthians, he writes: "We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."¹²⁶ All knowledge that is detached from a relationship with God is dangerous. True knowledge is pure. It is the polluted kind of understanding, that which is not drawn from the source of God's omniscience, that puffs itself up. We must make all knowledge and understanding subservient to the service of God.

Patience and kindness are closely related. Patience by itself is not necessarily a divine attribute. Satan can be as patient as a cat wanting to catch a mouse. Kindness is patience combined with love. It is patience in relationship with God; it originates in the same source.

The Greek word, translated "kindness" is *chrestotes*, which carries with it the connotation of moral excellence and usefulness. In the context in which Paul uses it, it refers to usefulness to God because of moral excellence. It seems nigh to impossible to cover the whole meaning of this rich Greek word with one simple English expression. The Greek word combines friendliness with integrity. It is part of the nine-fold fruit of the Holy Spirit Paul mentions in his letter to the Galatians.¹²⁷

What strikes us is that Paul mentions the Holy Spirit in this list of characteristics, as if He is among the fruits of the tree instead of being the tree itself. In the mention of these qualities, Paul refers to, what is called the "Spirit controlled temperament." This is the fruit of the fullness of the Spirit in our lives. It is the facet that comes first to the surface, that which people first notice in us. Luke uses the same terms in describing the apostles and Stephen in the Book of Acts.¹²⁸

The Holy Spirit in us is the most intimate and inter-personal relationship possible. Some of this most private relationship, however, overflows and refreshes the lives of others. It is the profusion, this overload Paul speaks about here. It would, of course, be impossible for streams of living water to flow from within us if the source is not inside us. There cannot be any overflow without intimacy.

The words "sincere love" supposes that love can also be insincere. It is possible for us to say we love and be hypocrites. The same can be said about the words of Peter in his First Epistle: "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart."¹²⁹ There is a difference between acting as if we love people, without really loving them, and loving people for Jesus' sake, while we do not feel any natural affection for them. The sincerity is not in the emotions. The test of love is in the willingness to give one's life for another; it is not in experiencing a feeling of love. Therefore, hypocrisy consists in claiming to love but not being willing to sacrifice. Peter shows us the upward way to this mode of love. Purification occurs in obeying the truth. Here again purity makes its appearance. The foreign elements in the soul must be removed.

Verses Seven through Ten pertain to the preaching of the Gospel in all its aspects. We would consider it to be self-evident for a preacher of the truth to see himself as a servant of God. The practice,

¹²⁵ Eccl. 1:18

¹²⁶ I Cor. 8:1

¹²⁷ See Gal. 5:22

¹²⁸ See Acts 4:8; 6:3; 7:55.

¹²⁹ I Peter 1:22

however, indicates that corruption is greatest in this domain. The closer one gets to the source, the more vulnerable one becomes to aberrations. Self-seeking and self-serving in those who claim to bring the Word of God is the most serious deception Satan has ever invented. If we are preachers of the Gospel, we must always ask ourselves the question of whom we are serving, the Lord or ourselves. It seems obvious that the power of God, if it manifests itself in our ministry, would be sufficient proof that we are serving God, but even that cannot be taken for granted. Supernatural manifestations are not identical to sanctification. The fact that God entrusts us with a gift of grace does not prove that we act responsibly with that gift. Later in this epistle, Paul confesses that God gave him a “thorn in his flesh” to keep balance with the extraordinary character of the revelation given to him.¹³⁰ We may look upon God’s blessing on our ministry and the manifestation of His power through us as an indication of God’s approval, but that should not make us blind to the dangers that lurk on our path. We so easily credit our own account for what God gives us in grace. Commending ourselves as God’s servants in the manifestations of God’s power ought to bring us to the place where we are careful to give to God all the glory for what happens in and through us.

Paul does not elaborate here on the figure of the weapons of righteousness as he does in his Epistle to the Ephesians.¹³¹ From Ephesians, we learn that the weapons Paul holds in his right and left hands are the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. The image suggests that there is an enemy that has to be defeated, and that the battle must be fought according the rules of righteousness. Paul returns to this topic later in this epistle.¹³²

Paul’s terminology reveals that there is an aggressive side to the ministry of reconciliation. This aggression, however, is not directed toward people but toward Satan. This is what distinguishes biblical offensive from worldly belligerence. On the human level, in interpersonal relations, aggressiveness is unpleasant because it is directed against humans. A Christian should never consider his fellowmen as enemies against whom he must wage war but as objects of God’s love. A soldier of Christ must be relentless and uncompromising against demonic powers but kind toward his brothers and sisters. The weapons Paul describes in his Ephesian Epistle are both aggressive and defensive. This may be expressed in the fact that he mentions here the right and the left hand. As servants of God we commend ourselves not only in the way we attack but also in the way we defend ourselves.

The array of “glory and dishonor, bad report and good report” speaks of two levels of judgment. Glory and dishonor show the objective side of the matter; bad and good report stands for the subjective way in which people judge Paul. Paul uses two Greek words that are found only in this text in the New Testament: *dusphemia*, meaning “defamation,” and *euphemia*, which is “good language,” or “praise.” The underlying idea seems to be that in either case, people lack sufficient ground for judgment, which does not keep them from voicing an opinion. At the same time, glory and dishonor are also things people may heap upon us.

The way we handle ourselves when people honor or dishonor us shows whether or not we are genuine servants of God. Honor or dishonor is not bestowed upon us by God but by humans. God honors those who serve His Son. Jesus states in John’s Gospel: “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”¹³³ Yet, there is often a connection between the honor God gives us and the honor given to us by our fellowmen. If that is our case, we must realize that people honor us, not because of who we are but because of whom we serve.

It would be precarious if people honor us because God dishonors us. If the opposite is true, we belong in the category in which Jesus places the Old Testament prophets in the last beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”¹³⁴

As far as these reports Paul mentions is concerned, we tend to take the good reports much more seriously than the bad ones. Some people are inclined to project fantasies upon us that build us up or pull us down, projections that have little or no basis in facts. We much prefer the good unrealities that add to our credit and leave them for what they are, but if bad reports about us are circulated, we get upset and try to

¹³⁰ See II Cor. 12:7

¹³¹ See Eph. 6:10-20.

¹³² See II Cor. 10:3-6

¹³³ John 12:26

¹³⁴ Matt. 5:10-12

rectify the rumors. In both cases, we ought to show ourselves as God's servants in Jesus Christ, as God's children.

In describing his methods of evangelism, Paul uses the terms "genuine, yet regarded as impostors." The Greek reads literally "as deceivers, and yet true." The Greek word Paul uses is *planos*, which means "an impostor or misleader." The word "misleader" evokes associations with sin, because the first human sin was based upon deception. Paul seems to reclaim here Satan's methods of deception for use in the kingdom of light. The devil's temptation was based upon a false representation of the facts, to which Adam and Eve showed themselves to be susceptible.

Deception in connection with the Gospel leaves the facts for what they are but it appeals, in the same manner, to the susceptibility of the human being who has been ravaged by sin. We find the same thought present in the expression Jesus coined when He called the disciples with the words: "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."¹³⁵ Some modes of "deception" are allowed in evangelism. We may use bait to catch people. There are, however, some religious advertisements that should not be used in trying to draw people to Christ. The scope of our study does not allow us to enter into any detail. Bait draws people because it presents itself as something it is not. Some bait is edible but it is never meant to be real food.

Evangelism catches men because man himself does not know what is good for him. There are certain legitimate appeals to people's emotions. We may, for instance, use medical help to minister to people's spiritual needs. The reliability of the "deceiver" lies in the fact that the purpose of catching people is their salvation. Unreliability of the messenger will always diminish the content of the message.

The next point Paul mentions, in connection with being God's servant, is popularity. It is, generally, not up to us whether we are "known," or "unknown." Our gifts and qualifications do not always bring us into the public eye. The only thing of importance is that we are known to God. If God decides to propel us into a prominent place where we are in the limelight, we ought to accept that with humility. If popularity is kept from us, we must not seek it. At present, the apostle Paul is world-famous. In the first century, the important people of the world had never heard of him. The Jews in Rome told the apostle: "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect."¹³⁶ If God knows us, all else will fall into place.

The words "dying, and yet we live on" describe best what serving God is all about. The words speak of death as a result of sin, and of the resurrection because of righteousness. It also depicts the present tensions of life, as people who partake of Christ's resurrection and yet remain mortal. Paul does not state that he was dead and is now alive, as Jesus said to John in Revelation: "I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!"¹³⁷ He did make a similar statement elsewhere, but here the words pertain to people who know themselves to be surrounded by death and who know that, one day, they will be resurrected. Paul shows himself to be God's servant in such an impossible situation.

The writer of Psalm One Hundred Sixteen expresses this experience. He had tasted death and received life as a gift from God. He reacted by saying: "O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains."¹³⁸ Paul alludes to this sentiment also in the opening statements of this epistle when he referred to the hardship he experienced in Asia. Serving God under these circumstances consists in reliance upon God who raises the dead.

"Beaten, and yet not killed" fits the same category. These words acquire a double meaning in this context. Paul's physical torture never exceeded what the body could endure. The "forty-lashes-minus-one," administered to him by the Jews, were calculated to let the victim survive the punishment. But in the larger sense of the word also, as God's means of correction, the castigation was not meant to destroy and to kill, as Satan intends to, but to heal and to save. On a lesser level, my wife and I have had multiple experiences of deep sorrow of separation from our children. Immediately following upon this sadness and weeping, the Lord would give us a deep peace and the enjoyment of His presence. Christian life consists in a strange mixture of sadness and joy. Sadness, however, is never the lasting element; but joy is.

When Paul says "poor," he does not merely refer to the lack of material possession, but also to the manner in which we deal with our assets. Whatever we possess is on loan from God. "Making many rich,"

¹³⁵ Matt. 4:19

¹³⁶ Acts 28:21,22

¹³⁷ Rev. 1:18

¹³⁸ Ps. 116:16

clearly, has a spiritual overtone. The amount of money that passes through our hands is, usually, not sufficient to make others rich, but the Scriptures promise that “streams of living water will flow from within [us].”¹³⁹ “Having nothing” also points more to the handling of possessions than to the amount. If our very lives are not our own, we can hardly speak of anything as being ours. Even the wife and children of a slave were the property of the slave’s master. How much more for us, who are the property of Jesus Christ and who depend upon God for each breath and every heartbeat, it must be said that we own nothing. The more we are convinced of this truth, the more God will entrust to us! We own nothing as much as that which we have surrendered to God. No one expresses so clearly as Paul himself that, in our relationship with God in Jesus Christ, there is a sharing of possessions and a mutual surrender. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, the apostle states: “So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”¹⁴⁰

5. Cooperation in the Separation of the Church 6:11-7:1

11 We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you.

12 We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.

13 As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also.

14 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?

15 What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?

16 What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

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

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

7:1 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.

Paul states here that the church of Christ must take a broad and wide stand in this world. Interestingly, the word “wide” has a completely different meaning from what we would attach to it nowadays. In our modern age, we would consider Paul’s stand narrow. We see the same conflicting wording used in the matter of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.¹⁴¹ Paul called those “weak” who had made up their minds to abstain from eating! The strong ones are those who eat everything. So it is here: the broad-minded people are the ones who separate themselves from those who do not share the same faith and the same convictions. According to Paul, the liberal person is the one who rejects the modern concept of ecumenism.

How is this possible that modern man uses the same word as the apostle Paul and means something with it that is the complete opposite? This is not merely a matter of semantics. Paul draws an absolute line between the truth of God and the lie of the devil. He considers that which originates in the enemy camp as a narrowing of the truth. A synthesis of black and white would have been impossible to Paul. Height and breadth and depth and space belong to God. Everything that does not come from God is narrow and limited.

In elaborating the principle of the truth and space, Paul develops two lines of thought. There is the positive line of the relationship between the church and the apostle in being coworkers of the Lord. The negative line traces the relationship with unbelievers and the world. The narrowness of which Paul accuses the Corinthians is the smallness of their relationship with God. If we consider ourselves to be broad-minded, people who have an open mind for the opinions of others, who do not draw the line between what is of God and what is not of God, we show that the Holy Spirit does not have sufficient room in our lives. This means that we are too narrow. Largeness toward the world means narrowness toward God. Largeness

¹³⁹ John 7:38

¹⁴⁰ I Cor. 3:21-23

¹⁴¹ See Rom. 14 and II Cor. 8.

in our relationship with God demonstrates itself immediately in the fellowship of Christians one with another. The expansiveness of Paul's heart is, at the same time, the fullness of Christ and the measure of his love for the church. This is the reason for Paul's frank talk with them. The reproaches he makes are rooted in his love for them and their purpose is to produce joy. In the beginning of this epistle, he had stated: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm."¹⁴² The words "I speak as to my children" are full of love and warmth.

The verse "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" is often used to argue that Christians should not marry non-Christians. That application is permissible, but Paul does not speak about marriage in this context. He refers to the Mosaic law, which reads: "Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together."¹⁴³ The topic is the work God entrusts to us, not general social intercourse. In the work of the Lord, we ought not to team up with people who do not belong to Him. Inasmuch as marriage is an expression of the relationship of Christ and the church, it is important that both partners in a marriage also have the same kind of relationship with God. One of the best illustrations of this is found in the Book of Ezra where the Samaritans, who claimed to serve God, offered assistance to the Jews in the rebuilding of the temple. Zerubbabel and Joshua refused this offer.¹⁴⁴ We must be careful, not only with people who are antagonistic toward God, but also with those who do not love Him with all their heart, soul, and strength. There are people for whom serving God is only part of their life, next to several other things of equal importance. God expects us to accomplish the task He gives us by putting ourselves on the line with all that is in us and that we only work together with those who have the same ambition. Everything that does not measure up to this is too narrow.

It is obvious from what Paul wrote in First Corinthians, that Paul does not speak here about general social or business-related matters. We read there: "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people- not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside."¹⁴⁵ God does not expect us to completely withdraw from this world.

Paul proceeds by giving a series of five opposites in which he contrasts two categories. He places righteousness over against wickedness, light over against darkness, Christ over against Belial, a believer over against an unbeliever, and the temple of God over against idols. These comparisons bring some interesting features to light. In contrasting righteousness with wickedness, Paul uses the Greek words *dikaiousune*, which in this context means righteousness as the fruit of God's justification, and *anomia*, which literally means "no law." This suggests that righteousness evinces itself in observing the law of God.

The contrasts between light and darkness, Christ and Belial (or Satan), are self-explanatory.

"Believers" and "unbelievers" divides into two the categories that form the topic of this section. Paul does not differentiate here between people who acknowledge the existence of God and atheists, but between people who practice what they profess and those who do not. There are those who live a life of faith and others who say they are Christians but put their trust in matters that are not related to God.

The most telling contrast in these verses is between the temple of God and idols. There is no common ground whatsoever between those two. Both in the Old and New Testament, the difference between the temple of God and temples of idols is in the matter of revelation. God reveals to man where and how He wants to be worshipped. Idol worship depends on man's initiative. It does not consist in an act of obedience and surrender in love of people, but it is a form of self-defense, of holding one's own. Idolatry also means being manipulated by Satan.

The greatest difference, the great surprise, is that we not only serve God in His temple, but that in doing so, we become God's temple ourselves. God not only show us the place where He reveals Himself to us and where we become reconciled with Him, but He does it in us. The Shechinah, the hope of glory, is within us. That is the reason we ought to rid ourselves from all narrowness and give space to the Holy Spirit. God's last Word in this creation is that the church is the temple of the living God. The author of Hebrews states: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in

¹⁴² II Cor. 1:24

¹⁴³ Deut. 22:10

¹⁴⁴ See Ezra 4:1-3

¹⁴⁵ I Cor. 5:9-13

various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."¹⁴⁶ His last Word is the revelation of His glory in the fellowship of those who love Him.

We do well to constantly remind ourselves of this truth, since it seems so strange to us and so incongruent with the world in which we live. When the moment has come for the New Jerusalem, filled with the glory of God, to come down from heaven to earth, all this will appear clear and logical, but now and here, in the pollution and mist of a sinful world, we must consciously and purposely keep this truth before our eyes. God is in our midst; He lives within me.

Once I visited two famous heathen temples on the island of Java, Indonesia, the Borobudur and the Prambanan. I was aware of the spiritual confrontation as part of this sightseeing tour. Both temples are imposing ruins, monuments of human error and thirst for truth. I am a representative of the truth, part of a living temple. That which is within me and of which I am a part is infinitely greater, more glorious and imposing than all I went to see in these beautiful ruins. But if we allow ourselves to be polluted by that which is unclean, we will lack the awareness of God's presence in us.

The words: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people" are a direct quote from the Books of Leviticus, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.¹⁴⁷ God's promise: "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people" is fulfilled in the church of Jesus Christ and it will come to complete fulfillment in the New Jerusalem. One of the things John states about this city is: "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city."¹⁴⁸

We are usually too little aware of the germinating power of the seed God planted in our hearts. A full insight into this would bring about a complete change in our attitude in life. The apostle John referred to this when he wrote: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."¹⁴⁹

God called the church to be separate from the world. That is implied in the meaning of the Greek word *ecclesia*. Inasmuch as we distance ourselves from that which is unclean, we will become conscious of the fact that God has accepted us. The Lord, God Almighty, has adopted us as His sons (and daughters). That is the reason for us to perfect our holiness out of reverence for God.

The suggestion in these words is that our holiness at present is not what it ought to be. We can certainly say "amen" to that, but that should not be our last word.

6. The Meaning of Holiness in the Ministry of Reconciliation in the Relationship between Paul and the Church 7:2-16

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

3 I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you.

4 I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

5 For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.

6 But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus,

7 and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

8 Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—

9 yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us.

10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

¹⁴⁶ Heb. 1:1,2

¹⁴⁷ See Lev 26:12; Jer 32:38; Ezek 37:27.

¹⁴⁸ Rev. 22:3

¹⁴⁹ I John 3:2

11 See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

12 So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are.

13 By all this we are encouraged. In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you.

14 I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well.

15 And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling.

16 I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.

Paul reaches a climax in these verses, if not spiritually, then emotionally. We come here to the core of the matter as far as the real reason for Paul's writing of this epistle. Paul speaks about certain events that happened in the church, but he does not specify what they are. It is reasonable to suppose that the letter he mentions in Verse Eight is the First Epistle to the Corinthians. But Bible scholars are divided over this. The letter is probably the same as the one mentioned in Chapter Two Verse Three. Toward the end of this epistle Paul speaks about a third visit, but that does not mean that there are three Corinthian Epistles.¹⁵⁰

Paul, probably, picks up the thread that he had dropped in the Second Chapter of this epistle. He has concluded that the matters that necessitated the writing of his letter have been dealt with sufficiently. There have been wounds and there are scars left. In this chapter he concentrates on the healing part. The important issue is not the matter that caused all the trouble, but the effect all this had upon the relationship between him and the church, both personally and in their common exercise of the ministry of reconciliation.

It is with this in mind that Paul again knocks at the door of the church, as he had done already in Verses Eleven through Thirteen of the previous chapter. Much of what he writes here would have been unnecessary had he been able to visit them. The wordless body language that is so important in our communications is absent in a letter. That is the reason letters sometimes cause misunderstanding. Paul compensates for this lack in a remarkable manner with a whole series of expressions of warm and deep emotions. Somehow, we have lost this art of letter writing over the centuries. Paul never did any spiritual or material damage to the church with his epistles. Evidently some reproaches had been made and Paul will return to this last aspect more in detail toward the end of this epistle in the twelfth chapter.

Paul's words remind us of Samuel's farewell speech.¹⁵¹ But Paul's words are not meant as a farewell. Paul hoped that the deep love he felt for these people would become mutual. He was ready to give his life for them. That attitude is what makes a person a leader, a shepherd of his fellowmen. Jesus said that the sign of a good shepherd is the willingness to give one's life for the other.¹⁵² Without this willingness, no one has the right to guide others. The rule is as valid in a marriage as in the church.

Unfortunately, the NIV reversed the Greek word order in the phrase "you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you." The Greek reads literally "you are in our hearts to die and live with you." The order is important and shows Paul's deep insight in human nature. It is sometimes easier to die for someone else than to live for him or her!

Paul had been deeply concerned about this church, even to the point of being depressed. The Greek word *tapeinos* literally means, "depressed," or "humiliated." It expresses Paul's emotional upheaval, not his spiritual condition. It is uncertain when Paul was in Macedonia and had this experience of an emotional low. It may have been shortly after he wrote his first letter, or after he received an oral report about the condition of the church. But at one point, Paul was the prey of such deep worry that he decided to send Titus to look the situation over and report back. We tend to consider such an emotional involvement to be a lack of spirituality. Paul shows himself to be a human being with human weaknesses. But his reaction to God's comfort in that condition was also very human, it caused a joy that was greater than ever. It remains true that God comforts the downcast and the depressed. The pressure of circumstances caused Paul's depression. God comforted Paul by bringing about a change of circumstances, not by giving him the

¹⁵⁰ See II Cor. 13:1

¹⁵¹ See I Sam. 12:3-5.

¹⁵² See John 10:11.

victory over them. Maybe Paul could have done better, but who are we to talk! The paraphrase of Verse Six in the Living Bible is refreshing: “Then God who cheers those who are discouraged refreshed us by the arrival of Titus.”

As we mentioned above, we do not know for sure which letter Paul refers to in Verse Eight. There are enough issues, mentioned in the first epistle, that would have caused the apostle’s despondency and the sadness of the people in Corinth also.

Verse Ten makes an important statement about sorrow, because it shows the spiritual value of it. Sorrow in itself is not good or bad. There are two kinds of sorrow, one God wants us to have, and the other sorrow as the world knows it. In a way, God never intended man to experience sorrow, because all sorrow is related to the presence of sin in this world. As physical pain is a warning for the body, so sorrow is a warning for the soul. C. S. Lewis states in his book *The Problem of Pain*: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, he speaks to us in our conscience, but he shouts to us in our pain.” In the same way, God sends us strong signals in our sorrow.

We can draw a line from Paul’s experience of sorrow in Macedonia and Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane. God never wanted sin to enter the world. But sin is here and it would be unhealthy for us if we were not from time to time deeply affected by its presence. But we are also on the road to the experience of an unspeakable joy, which will fill us to overflowing.

Paul’s words regarding “the one who did the wrong or of the injured party” suggest the case of a brother who takes a fellow believer to a worldly court of justice for compensation. Such a case is mentioned in his first epistle to the church.¹⁵³ The church in Corinth must have taken the matter very seriously. If that is the case Paul had in mind, we are dealing with a grave problem. Roman justice was no child’s play. Our western system of justice is based upon Roman law. The topic here was a private matter, a dispute among members of the same church. It was not a case of social injustice. In our day, we would hesitate to put our legal disputes before the elders of the church. Yet, that is what the Corinthians must have done. They resolved their disagreement with prayer under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This is, probably, what the “eagerness” in Verse Eleven refers to. “Eagerness to clear yourselves” must have been what the one party offered the other in compensation. “Indignation” is then the reaction of the church to the injustice that was done. “Alarm” was caused by the realization how the matter appeared in the light of God. If we allow God to let His light shine upon our affairs, we come to the point of exclaiming: “What have I done!” “Longing” and “concern,” in this context, speak for themselves. The “readiness to see justice done” may refer to a fine that was imposed upon the guilty party; whatever form that may have taken. Justice is never a matter of mere words; what is wrong must be put right.

Verse Twelve suggests that Paul did not consider the matter itself that important but that he was more concerned about the principle. In a sense, this is true for everything we do. For God our motives are more important than what we do. In most cases, God places events upon our path for the purpose of seeing how we react to them. God wants us to play the game according to the rules. The reason God allowed a matter of discipline to evolve in the church of Corinth was to put the church to the test. Initially, their reaction was not good enough, but with Paul’s prompting, they corrected themselves. That was very important. God wants us to place everything before Him so that we can judge matters in the light of eternity; He also wants us to be obedient to the human authorities under which He has placed us. Paul expresses this in the words “before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are.” Thus, they could see in Paul a coworker of their joy.

Titus’ visit to the church must have been the first one he made. Paul’s following remarks form a very diplomatic introduction to the topic of the offering, mentioned in the next chapter. Paul had prepared Titus by assuring him of the impressive reception he would receive in the church of Corinth. If the church had not made good of their reputation, they would have made Paul out to be a liar. Thus they confirmed Paul’s reputation of always speaking the truth. At the same time they won Titus’ heart. After all the emotions Paul went through, it must have been a great encouragement to hit upon a situation that turned out as it was supposed to be. In the words of the apostle John: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”¹⁵⁴

7. Cooperation in Financial Sacrifice 8:1-9:15

¹⁵³ See I Cor. 6:1-11.

¹⁵⁴ III John vs. 4

1 And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,

4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

5 And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.

6 So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.

7 But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

10 And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.

11 Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.

12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.

14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality,

15 as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

16 I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you.

17 For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative.

18 And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel.

19 What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help.

20 We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift.

21 For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.

22 In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you.

23 As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ.

24 Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

9:1 There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints.

2 For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.

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

4 For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident.

5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

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

9 As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

11 You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

12 This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

14 And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.

15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Chapters Eight and Nine are beautiful examples of Paul's sanctified diplomacy. Paul makes some double comparisons in which he plays out the one against the other and thus achieves the highest results.

The section is divided into four parts.

- a. The church in Macedonia is presented as an example to the church in Corinth (8:1-15).
- b. Financial matters are treated as a means of a spiritual testimony (8:16-24).
- c. The Corinthians are presented as an example to the church in Macedonia (9:1-5).
- d. The result of their supposed generosity is expounded (9:6-15).

a. The church in Macedonia is presented as an example to the church in Corinth (8:1-15).

Paul chose the example of this church in order to achieve the greatest effect. The people in Macedonia are depicted as living in "extreme poverty." Yet, the city of Corinth was a prospering harbor city in Paul's days and most of its citizens must have drawn some profit from this. We may draw the cautious conclusion from Paul's remark that conditions in the church have not changed much over the centuries. The work of the Lord is not supported by the gifts of the affluent but by the pennies of the widows. An economic boom is rarely a favorable condition for the flourishing of spiritual work. According to percentage, the poor always give more than the rich. When a person catches the vision to give, it is because of the grace of God. And grace usually grows in conditions of trial.

There is a recurring theme of trial, which promotes the unity of this epistle. The immediate result of the trials was an overflowing joy and rich generosity. Paul's testimony about these people is that they were poor as a church mouse; they gave what they actually needed for themselves and could not afford to give. It is interesting to see that Paul uses terms of extravaganza to describe them: "the most severe trial," "their overflowing joy," "their extreme poverty" and "rich generosity." There is too much of everything, except money! Their contributions were their own initiative. They considered it an honor to be allowed to participate in the offering. This proves that generosity in giving is not a matter of availability of money but of a spiritual disposition. The presence of large amounts of money is often more a hindrance than an advantage. The Scottish writer, George MacDonald, said that God sometimes punishes a person by making him rich.

The key to the condition of the Macedonians was their surrender. They had observed the right priority in their surrender: "they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will." In this they obeyed the will of God. When people do this, it is clearly a miracle of God. Paul had not expected this. His faith in God had not been great enough to expect such a rich harvest from the seed he had himself sown. The result of this surprise was that Paul's eyes were opened for similar opportunities at other places. We owe these two chapters to Paul's new vision.

Evidently, starting a fundraising campaign in Corinth had been tried before. After all, Corinth was an affluent city. We do not know whether, at one point, Titus had given up hope of succeeding, but we may

read this between the lines. The events in Macedonia made Paul decide to try again. Paul is even ready, at this point, to give the Holy Spirit a helping hand.

There may be some hidden irony in the words of Verse Seven: “But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” Paul was not against using irony or sarcasm with this church as we see in his first epistle, where he wrote: “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!”¹⁵⁵ The church in Corinth may have been a spiritually flourishing church, but the members’ pocketbooks had not yet been converted. That seems to be easier for the poor than for the rich.

The basis for all generosity is, of course, the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation. If we come to the point of comparing ourselves with Him, we will ask ourselves, “What can I do in response to this?” David asked this question in one of his psalms: “How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?”¹⁵⁶ We prove in the way we handle our possessions how real our love for God is. That is the reason Paul says: “I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.” The perfect test of love is in the example of our Lord Jesus, who demonstrated perfect love in giving His life for us. In comparison with that sacrifice the few dimes we contribute do not amount to anything at all. Jesus was the richest person in the whole universe, but He became poor for our sake. The Flemish poet, Guido Gezelle, expressed this beautifully in a poem about the death of Jesus: “All rights denied, naked Christ died.” Everything was taken from Him at His crucifixion, to the most elementary covering. The soldiers threw dice over His clothing. Christ allowed this in order to give to us the full heritage of eternity. God says to us what the father of the prodigal son said to his oldest boy: “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”¹⁵⁷

The example of our Lord’s generosity also illustrates the enriching effect of charity. That which we cling to will disappear. We will only keep what we give up. Everything we do must be related to the cross of Christ. We must give in Jesus’ Name and for Jesus’ sake.

Paul is cautious in his suggestions. He achieves his goal by making comparisons. He says in Verse Eight: “I am not commanding you.” And in Verse Ten: “Here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter.” One year earlier, the Corinthians had demonstrated enthusiasm, but that had never resulted in anything. That is not uncommon among humans. We make promises and then forget about them. There is for the potential giver a great psychological boost in promising to give. For some people the satisfaction of giving a promise is sufficient. But if giving is done for our own satisfaction, instead of for the meeting of a need of our fellowmen, we only give to ourselves. This makes us live in a world of unreality, in which we cleverly put our own need in the place of the others. Help must be figured, not in terms of enthusiasm or willingness, but in actual contribution. It is true that the penny of the widow is of greater spiritual value than the gold and silver of the rich, but it takes a lot of widows to fill the offering plate. The present husbands of the future widows should take this into account! And if the world is filled only with widows who have good intentions, nothing at all will ever come in.

In Verse Ten, Paul makes an observation “about what is best for you in this matter.” The NKJV reads: “It is to your advantage.” Giving is just as much God’s grace in our lives as it is beneficial to our person. In speaking to the elders of the church in Ephesus, Paul stated: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”¹⁵⁸ Those who share with others enrich themselves. Without the grace of God, no one would come to the point of cheerful giving. Only by means of a divine miracle in the human heart will neighborly love and generosity become evident. Paul showed himself to be amazed when he observed this in other people, even when those people were his own coworkers.

Paul captures the pivotal truth diplomatically in the words: “so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.” In other words, he says: “You should do what you promised.” The value is calculated not in what you promised but in what you give.

Paul declares himself in favor of equal distribution, not in the utopian way that everyone receives the same amount, but that everyone receives according to his actual needs. That is not necessarily the same as what one thinks one needs.

¹⁵⁵ I Cor. 4:8

¹⁵⁶ Ps. 116:12

¹⁵⁷ Luke 15:31

¹⁵⁸ Acts 20:35

Verse Fifteen gives an interesting quote and interpretation of the story of the manna in the Book of Exodus.¹⁵⁹ In reading the Exodus record, one gets the impression that God supernaturally equalized the amounts of manna gathered. But according to Paul, the miracle consisted in the fact that the Israelites shared equally. That would, in fact, be the greater miracle.

In Verses Sixteen through Twenty-Four, Paul gives a thorough treatment of the truth that the handling of finances is part of our Christian testimony. Paul sent Titus to Corinth for the second time, accompanied by an unnamed brother. Since no name is given, it would be useless to speculate who this could be. The important thing is that both Titus and his traveling companion have a reputation of being reliable in the work of the Gospel, so that the church has a guarantee that their finances are in safe hands.

It is of the utmost importance that the Lord's finances are handled in a responsible way, and with the giving of full accountability. Those who think that funds given to the Lord's work are all above suspicion are naïve to the extreme. Satan will certainly set his trap to catch well-meaning servants of the Lord. I know of several instances of people whose testimony was ruined, not because of dishonesty, but because of sloppiness. Our reputation is always more valuable than whatever amount of money we handle; thinking that smaller amounts require less punctuality can be harmful. Paul was very much aware of the dangers in this domain. He takes extreme pains to assure the givers that their money will be safe, because at least three people will be involved in the handling of it.

It was, undoubtedly, also his intention that the church in Corinth would draw a lesson from his example. If the church in Corinth resembled in any way some of the younger churches on some mission fields, a firm role model of someone who administered the Lord's treasury was sorely needed. In as much as Paul put himself up as a coworker with the Corinthians, we may assume that the main purpose of the extensive treatment of the topic of finances was the setting of an example of how things ought to be done. Safety in the handling of God's money is found in the number of people involved. Most dishonesty occurs when the Lord's money becomes someone's private business. The biblical paradigm is that responsibility for church money should not be borne by one individual alone. The giving of financial reports and control of bookkeeping is an absolute necessity in the Lord's work.

But the purpose for the creation of a finance committee is not only to create confidence in the handling of church finances. Paul had boasted to the churches in Macedonia, and also to the delegates who were carrying the money, about the supposed generosity of the church in Corinth. They could hardly do anything else but safeguard their reputation.

In the first five verses of Chapter Nine, Paul reverses the roles and puts up the Corinthians as models to the Macedonians. The transition is so smooth it is almost unnoticeable. We silently slipped from one section into the next. These verses form the summit of irony in the Bible and in world literature. No one can deny that Paul had a keen sense of humor. In the previous chapter, Paul set out to boast about the generosity of the Macedonians and he admonished the Corinthians not to fall behind. Now it appears that the Macedonians dipped into their pockets because Paul had depicted the Corinthians as ready to give. Thus far they had only made promises and not paid one dime. One wonders how much money Paul ended up with as a result of this juggling.

Paul introduces this section with the words "There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints." It is clear, however, why, in spite of these words, he takes two whole chapters in order to make his point. Paul speaks about "a faith promise."

Like the Corinthians, our giving is often emotionally motivated. I do not mean to say that our emotions should never enter into the matter, but if our emotions are the only basis for our giving, our giving will stop when the basis crumbles. God wants us to be businesslike and calculating on the basis of our love for Him and for our neighbor. Our giving should be wise and systematic, not impulsive. We do well to make up a budget for giving. The founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, A. B. Simpson, said that we should calculate what we think we can give, add some to this so that it becomes a sacrifice, and then add some more so that it becomes an act of faith. Impulsive promises that are given without calculation and faith will lead to disappointment. There is only a fine line of separation between not paying off a promise and dishonesty. David made a confession of sin of sorts when he stated: "I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people."¹⁶⁰

The zeal of the Corinthians Paul speaks about was a zeal on paper. This becomes useful, only when the money comes through. Paul's purpose in sending this delegation to Corinth was that the

¹⁵⁹ Ex.16:17,18

¹⁶⁰ Ps. 116:14

Corinthians would fulfill their vows to the Lord. Paul did not want this church to become ashamed of themselves.

Verses Six through Fifteen deal with the harvest. Man harvests what he has sown. Generosity and liberality are investments that produce fruit. Outwardly, sowing resembles throwing away; the gestures are identical. The devil tries to convince us that giving away is the same as throwing away. He maintains that we could use our money in a better way. For those who see money as a symbol of security in life, it can be particularly difficult to separate themselves from it. There is something irrevocable in parting with possessions. That is, in fact, the essence of sowing.

But sowing is also positive, in that it demonstrates faith in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus used this illustration when He said: "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."¹⁶¹ We will only become unselfish and generous if we believe with all our heart that God raises the dead. Paul could not have used a better picture to illustrate this matter of finances. If we give up little, we can only expect a small return. In this case it is true that God helps those who help others.

God does not need our money. There is a sense in which we can never give anything to the Lord. This is the reason the amounts are not important. What interests Him more is our joy when we give. "God loves a cheerful giver." Yet, cheerful giving is a rare phenomenon. Most giving is done for the purpose of seeing returns. We expect people to whom we give to return thanks. We consider that the recipients of our generosity have an obligation toward us. That is the reason giving sometimes causes resentment. Those who give feel themselves insufficiently rewarded with gratitude and those who receive feel under pressure because of the obligations that are put upon them. Sometimes it is more difficult to receive than to give. A large part of the unpopularity of Americans in Europe can be traced back to the Marshall plan, in which American money was used to put Europe back on its feet after the ravages of the Second World War. Giving is an art that must be learned. As Paul stated in the opening verses of this section, it is God's grace.

People often interpret Verse Eight as an assurance that we will do well financially if we give. But that is not necessarily true. The grace that God can make abound is the grace of giving, which is the subject of this section, the grace of gratitude and joy. If we receive that grace, we cannot but try to demonstrate our love for others by giving. If this is a grace God gives to us, it means that we cannot work ourselves up to it. It is not a natural human tendency. It is not a part of our character. Only the new birth and the infilling by the Holy Spirit can reverse our natural trend to first think of ourselves. Hanna had this grace when she prayed for a son whom she could dedicate to God.¹⁶² What would be the good of "in all things at all times, having all that [we] need," if "[we] will [not] abound in every good work?" If we put a period after "so that in all things at all times, having all that you need," we miss the point. That is what Jesus meant when He said to the young man: "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Even if he had done so, he, probably, would not have achieved what he wanted to get, because we read that he left sad,¹⁶³ and God loves only the cheerful giver. The real giver will not even know when he really gives sacrificially.

The words of Verse Nine: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever" are a literal quotation of Psalm One Hundred Twelve.¹⁶⁴ The quote puts Paul's words in their right perspective. The Psalm opens with: "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD."¹⁶⁵ And it continues by stating about the results of this fear of the Lord, that "his righteousness endures forever," and "his horn will be lifted high in honor."¹⁶⁶ This eternal righteousness and honor are the result of the blessedness, not of the generosity of the person. He who gives to the poor proves that he is saved; he is not saved because he gives. Otherwise, the comparison with the ungodly would not make sense. Or else, every godless person could be saved by putting some money on the offering plate. The exercise of generosity tends to confirm righteousness.

Paul expresses himself beautifully and powerfully in Verses Ten and Eleven, when he says: "Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and

¹⁶¹ John 12:24,25

¹⁶² I Sam. 1:11

¹⁶³ See Luke 18:22,23.

¹⁶⁴ Ps. 112:9

¹⁶⁵ Ps. 112:1

¹⁶⁶ Ps. 112:3,9

will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.” Once again Paul draws an illustration from nature. God provides the farmer both with seed to sow and a harvest to reap. In the same way, He provides His children with material means to produce acts of kindness. As long as we use our possessions as seed to be sown, God will see to it that there is enough. If we use that which is meant to be seed for our own consumption, the well will soon dry up. That may, actually, be the better outcome. If God continues to give and we continue to only feed ourselves, rather than others, we will ruin ourselves. But God can also punish us by allowing us to become rich.

Paul calls the generosity of the Corinthians: “the harvest of your righteousness.” May God give to us all a full field of such a harvest! The harvest itself is not called “righteousness” but it grows upon the field of our righteousness. That which grows is the fruit of our righteousness. The enrichment God gives is not meant for our personal enjoyment but to enhance our liberality. Paul states: “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.” There are millionaires in the world who are among the poorest of all people. George Mueller, who founded the orphanages in Bristol, England, by trusting the Lord to supply all the needs, was one of the richest people who ever lived on earth. When he died, he had only a few pennies to his name. God’s purpose in giving to us is that we would be grateful and make others grateful. Jesus’ advice to us is to “use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves.” God wants people to praise Him because of what we do with our possessions. (It is amusing to see how Paul cleverly inserts the words “and through us” in all this). The purpose of all creation is, after all, praise to God. Glory and worship must be created by all kinds of means, including our means. It is important, also in our relationship with money, to possess the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul does not mention here who God’s people are, whose needs must be met. But in his Epistle to the Romans we read: “Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way.”¹⁶⁷ Undoubtedly, this pertains to the help that is the topic of this chapter. In his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul reveals that his taking up these offerings is the result of an agreement he and Barnabas had made earlier with James, Peter, and John.¹⁶⁸ The apostles in Jerusalem were of the opinion that the Gospel ought not to be preached to the gentiles “free of charge.” Evidently, the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem had robbed the church of all her wealthy members. It could also be that the fire kindled at Pentecost, by which people had sold their possessions and distributed them among the poor, had died.

The promotion of financial help of one church to the other was one of the apostle’s carefully worked out strategies. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul applies this principle on a broader and higher level. He hoped that the Jews would see what the gentiles had done with the Gospel of their Messiah and that this would generate a sense of jealousy among them, which would call them back to reality.¹⁶⁹ The church of Jerusalem, somehow, fitted in this frame. They had been the first ones to receive the Holy Spirit. Heavy persecution, however, beginning with the death of Stephen, left the Christians in Jerusalem shocked and destitute. They needed to see an example of a church on the mission field in order to realize what the grace of God could do in a person and in a fellowship of believers. The Christians in Jerusalem were made to feel jealous of the churches in Achaia and Macedonia. This jealousy would not be limited to the grace of giving of their material goods but also because of the abundance of spiritual gifts that were present in those churches. Those gifts may have begun to disappear in the mother church of Jerusalem.

Paul concludes this vivid and interesting section with a rather cryptic doxology: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” He does not specify what this gift is. He seems to refer to the Incarnation. The coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh is the greatest gift God could ever give to this world. This gift forms the basis of the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is demonstrated in the content of the manifestations of every known spiritual gift. This whole gamut is comprised of what Paul calls God’s indescribable gift, for which he praises God.

¹⁶⁷ Rom. 15:25-29

¹⁶⁸ See Gal. 2:10.

¹⁶⁹ See Rom. 11:11-24.

8. The Implications of cooperation between the Apostle and the Church, worked out in a comparison between Paul and other preachers in Corinth 10:1-13:14

Some Bible scholars are of the opinion that Chapters Ten through Thirteen are not part of the original epistle. They believe that these may be a fragment of another Second Epistle to the Corinthians that is lost. It is true that the tone of this section differs from the other chapters. At one point, for instance, Paul states that he was encouraged by the church's reaction to his First Epistle and by the report Titus brought to him.¹⁷⁰ That kind of encouragement seems to be lacking in these chapters. But it is also true that Paul stated, already in the first chapter: "I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth."¹⁷¹ That statement seems compatible with the tone of Chapter Ten. We may conclude that, at different points, Paul addresses different elements in the church in Corinth. In the last chapters of this epistle, he speaks, particularly, to those who criticized him for the purpose of covering up their own deficiencies.

There is a sense in which these chapters form the core of the epistle. The purpose of Paul's defense is to prove that, as a servant of Christ, he could, successfully, make the grade in a comparison with the other so-called apostles. More is at stake here than a personal vindication. Paul never made a distinction between the content of the Gospel and the personal testimony of the messenger. A church stands or falls with the qualifications of its founder. If, for instance, it turns out that the person who performs a wedding ceremony lacks the qualifications to perform, the marriage is not legally binding. Paul's defense in these verses implies a defense of the Gospel message and a defense of the church in Corinth itself.

We can divide these chapters as follows:

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|---|-------------|
| a. Choosing the Weapons | 10:1-11 |
| b. The First Skirmish | 10:12-11:6 |
| c. Taking Measurements of the Opponents' Strength | 11:7-29 |
| d. Giving the Decisive Blow | 11:30-12:10 |
| e. Conclusion of the Duel and End of the Epistle | 12:11-13:13 |
|
 | |
| a. Choosing the Weapons | 10:1-11 |

1 By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you-I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you, but "bold" when away!

2 I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world.

3 For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.

4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

6 And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

7 You are looking only on the surface of things. If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he.

8 For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.

9 I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters.

10 For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."

11 Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present.

A closer look at the text reveals that Paul gives here a virtuoso performance. Whether Paul was, in fact, timid or not is difficult for us to determine. It rather sounds like the apostle repeats what was being said about him. He may be using irony in this statement. Meekness and timidity may sound like two words

¹⁷⁰ See II Cor. 7:8-16

¹⁷¹ See II Cor. 1:23.

for the same concept but they are, actually, each other's opposites. Timidity is based on fear of people. We can be timid and, at the same time, inwardly be boiling with rage. But meekness is not a form of self-defense in the rivalry with our fellowmen; it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and the result of our fellowship with God. Timidity is related to the sin in us and around us. Without fellowship with God no meekness is possible.

Paul appeals to the meekness and gentleness of Christ. Evidently, he knew of Christ's character traits. This fact could serve as an argument in favor of the supposition that some editions of the Gospel were already in circulation in Paul's day. We may assume that Paul never met Jesus Christ personally on earth, except in his vision on the road to Damascus. Yet, Jesus is his example. He had adopted Jesus' words: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart."¹⁷²

Jesus' character will demonstrate itself in us if the Holy Spirit lives within us and we put our trust in Christ. When Billy Graham conducted his first evangelistic campaign in London, some journalists attacked him in a ferocious and unfair way. He invited one of them to meet with him on the journalist's own turf. The two met somewhere in a pub. The man admitted, after the interview, to have been disarmed completely by Billy Graham's kindness and humility.

Paul had been accused of being afraid and timid and of living "by the standards of this world." Even for a worldly-minded person, such accusations sound contradictory. The standards of this world, in general, do not call for timidity. If the accusers had possessed enough spiritual insight to see the difference, they would never have accused the apostle this way. In appealing to the meekness and gentleness of Christ, Paul disarms his opponents. This appeal presupposes that everyone who calls himself a Christian ought to demonstrate the characteristics of Christ in his life. Paul tells these people: "We ought to be kind toward each other in our intercourse and moderate in our judgment of one another."

The whole tone of these verses is one of benign irony. Paul knows the vocabulary of his accusers. The NIV translates the Greek word *sarx*, "world." In the Greek the word has a gamut of meanings, ranging from meat, used as food to "human nature," in the sense of "human frailty." The KJV often renders it "carnal." Paul uses the word in two different settings, one meaning, "living in a human body," and the other, "being worldly minded." "Living in the world" is a demonstration of the mentality of a person who has not surrendered his life to the control of the Holy Spirit. It stands for human rebellion against the Creator. It is difficult to see Paul's play on words in the English translation of the Greek. TLB conveys the idea clearly with the paraphrase: "It is true that I am an ordinary, weak human being, but I don't use human plans and methods to win my battles." Paul displays here a deep insight in human nature and in the principle that governs the battle. In his Epistle to the Ephesians, he states that the battle is not against human beings but against evil spiritual powers.¹⁷³

Paul's spiritual weapons are sharp because his motives are pure. The mark of "the flesh" is that we do everything from ulterior motives for the purpose of our own betterment. The carnal person manipulates without realizing that he himself is being manipulated by the devil. The person who has surrendered to the Lord offers his body to God as an instrument of righteousness. That is the difference between being used and being manipulated.

Paul's weapons are not the weapons of the world. Those who have the best weapons and the largest quantity usually win a war. That was the important issue in the "cold war" a few decades ago. There is a difference between modern times and ancient history in that we no longer fight wars with horses and slingshots but with nuclear weapons and guided missiles, but that does not mean that the principle of warfare has changed. Mau Dze Dung is credited with the saying: "Power comes from the barrel of a gun." But in Zechariah's beautiful vision of the candlestick and the olives trees, we are told: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty."¹⁷⁴

When Winston Churchill met Joseph Stalin during World War II to discuss strategy, Churchill mentioned the Pope. Stalin's retorted: "The Pope, how many divisions does he have?" Both world leaders were wrong at this point. The Pope and the spiritual power for which he stands, still exists; the power of communism, of which Stalin was the representative, has faded into history. (This illustration is not meant to make propaganda for the Roman Catholic Church).

The power of the light of the Holy Spirit spells the defeat of the powers of darkness. A drop of water can do a better job in splitting a rock than a stick of dynamite. The main point is that both man and

¹⁷² Matt. 11:29

¹⁷³ See Eph. 6:12.

¹⁷⁴ Zech. 4:6

Satan rebel against God. Adam hid when he had sinned and modern man barricades himself against God, but God's question, "Where are you?"¹⁷⁵ pulls down all of man's defenses. Man's defense consists in "every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God."

Our pretension is our way of escape from God in disobedience. The French existentialist philosopher, Albert Camus, was wrong when he stated that accepting faith in God would constitute intellectual suicide. Our human interpretation of knowledge amounts to a cover of our "ego" against God; it has nothing in common with genuine knowledge. We often use this pseudo knowledge to defend ourselves against God as a hiding place and a pretext. The knowledge we possess as sinful human beings is related to the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which Eve and Adam picked and ate the day they fell into sin. Their eating of the fruit was not an effort to obtain objective knowledge; it was an act of rebellion against God. In eating they detached true knowledge from fellowship with God. They tried to use knowledge as a weapon of defense and as a barricade. All this has nothing to do with real knowledge and understanding. Man committed intellectual suicide when he ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge instead of eating the fruit of the tree of life. His fundamental mistake was that he chose knowledge instead of life, as if knowledge could exist outside fellowship with God.

Human reason, however, is not the only form of rebellion against God; there are other things we use to hide ourselves. In our present age, knowledge is, probably, considered less important than it was in the nineteenth century. Paul differentiated between Jews and Greek. Every age has its own defense systems. The Holy Spirit is able to break through all of them.

Paul states: "We will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete." Much of the possibility for the Spirit of God to use His influence in this world will depend upon the obedience of the church. From Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians we conclude that one of the manifestations of the disobedience of the church in Corinth was the fact that they failed to recognize one another as members of the body of Christ. Disobedience in the church and in the lives of individual believers diminishes the ability of the church to fight the battle against the Evil One.

Paul states in his Epistle to the Romans: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."¹⁷⁶ But that does not seem to be his point in this situation, at least not directly. Paul wrote to them before: "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body."¹⁷⁷

Paul knows his own position in the body of Christ and of the authority that is part of that position. The fact that this authority seems incongruent with his personal appearance, he considers to be an asset. The tension between our psychological make-up and the power of the Holy Spirit in us can be a very effective factor in our ministry. In his confrontation with others, Paul chooses the weapons that seem to be weakest, but turn out to be very successful.

b. The First Skirmish II Cor. 10:12-11:6.

12 We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.

13 We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you.

14 We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ.

15 Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand,

16 so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory.

17 But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

18 For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

11:1 I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that.

¹⁷⁵ Gen. 3:9

¹⁷⁶ Rom. 16:20

¹⁷⁷ See I Cor. 12:15,16.

2 I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.

3 But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

4 For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

5 But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles."

6 I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.

In this section, Paul adopts a tone of irony, at least in the beginning. Paul says he does not dare to compare himself with those who commend themselves. It is difficult to determine what Paul means by the limits of boasting. Those limits may be geographic or moral. Paul's playful mind, probably, makes him use the word alternately with both meanings.

In his Epistle to the Romans, the apostle identifies the geographical boundaries he had set for himself. We read: "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written: 'Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.' This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while."¹⁷⁸ God had clearly assigned Macedonia and Achaia to the apostle Paul. We conclude from Luke's travelogue that Paul, correctly, stated that Christ was not known in the area where he went to preach.¹⁷⁹ Corinth was in the geographical area God had consigned to Paul.

But there were also spiritual and moral limits within which Paul had to minister. Going only to areas where the Name of Christ had not yet been made known indicates respect for the work of others, as well as an important measure of self-respect. Paul knew his own gifts and for the reason for which the Lord had given those to him. The vision God had given him, which he described in his public testimony,¹⁸⁰ must have played an important role in all of this. Paul could see Apollos as complementary to his ministry, as he states in his first epistle: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow."¹⁸¹ Apollos respected the foundation Paul had laid. The immoral aspect of ministry asserts itself when muddle heads come in to destroy the foundation that is laid in order to build their own.

The geographical limitations were specifically Paul's. God would call others to other areas. It is also possible that we determine subjectively what the boundaries of our ministry are. In some cases, in our time, areas may overlap. But the moral limitations are absolute. There are rules in the Lord's work we all must obey. One of the questions we have to ask ourselves in Christian work is whether the Lord really called us or whether we have called ourselves. For Paul, that determined the content of the message. For instance, the presence of Judaists in certain areas did not prevent him from preaching the Gospel. He, actually, often used Judaism as the starting point for his preaching. There is no instance mentioned in the New Testament where the Gospel had been preached and where Paul entered to go over the work of others. In his Epistle to the Philippians, the apostle writes: "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice."¹⁸² This proves that Paul did not consider it his task to correct the work that others were doing. He must have felt that there was enough virgin territory to be covered that he could not afford taking the time to solve other problems.

¹⁷⁸ Rom. 15:19-24

¹⁷⁹ See Acts 16:6-10.

¹⁸⁰ See Acts 22:17-21.

¹⁸¹ I Cor. 3:6

¹⁸² Phil. 1:15-18

The matter may have been more complicated than meets the eye. Sometimes it is easier to start from scratch and build one's own structure than to build upon a foundation already laid by others. Some people are led by carnality in always wanting to do their own thing. There are also instances in which building upon a foundation that was laid by others is an act of obedience, as was the case with Apollos. The criterion is not whether the work is old or new, but whether the building is being done in the power of man or in the power of the Holy Spirit. What is the boasting all about? Who does the recommending?

In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul stated some interesting things about self-evaluation and the evaluation of others. We read: "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."¹⁸³ If we evaluate ourselves, we must use the measurements of Christ. We cannot be our own measuring rods. Only existentialists preach such ludicrous doctrines! Only God can compare Himself with Himself. If we try to do this, we actually say: "I am who I am!" which is sacrilegious. Paul does not judge himself, and if he does, he does it in the light of Christ. It is never helpful to concentrate our attention upon ourselves and upon our shortcomings. If we place the members of our body at the Lord's disposal, we do not have to pay too much attention to what we are doing. Great and important acts are the responsibility of God, the Holy Spirit. We may simply praise and thank Him for what He does with and through us.

The conflicts Paul describes in this epistle would not have existed if every laborer in God's kingdom had offered the parts of his body to God as instruments of righteousness.¹⁸⁴ All interpersonal clashes are the work of "the old man," our sinful nature. It takes two sinful natures to start a conflict. The limitations God put upon Paul are the limitations of "the new man," the new creation in Jesus Christ. This means that we cannot boast about that which we did not accomplish ourselves but what is the work of the Holy Spirit through us.

As Paul hopes to be able to reach the Corinthians within the limits set by God, he pays them the compliment of believing that they will acquire so much spiritual insight that they will understand what it is all about. This insight is related to their growing in faith. And growth in spiritual maturity among the Corinthians is important because Paul expects that the Lord will allow him to extend the scope of his ministry to other areas. It is not enough to plant churches. The members of churches must become functioning members of the body of Christ. Paul not only uses the one church as a basis to plant another church, he also expects the church to support the next young church. This process of building churches must be done according to the rules God put down and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the next chapter, Paul addresses the church in Corinth in the same manner as he addressed the church in Galatia. There is, however, no indication that there were any Judaist influences in Corinth and that the issue was circumcision of non-Jewish believers. But Paul does speak about "a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached," and "a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted." This suggests that Gnosticism may have been a factor, or some doctrine similar to that. As in his Epistle to the Galatians, so here, Paul connects the message of the Gospel to the person who preaches it.

The antidote to false doctrines is a personal, intimate surrender of the life of the believer to Christ, in the same manner as a bride gives herself to her husband. Paul borrows here the beautiful language that was first used by John the Baptist to describe Christ's work of salvation and the fellowship of the church with her Lord. John said: "The bride belongs to the bridegroom."¹⁸⁵ This picture culminates in the glorious vision the apostle John gives us in the Book of Revelation, where the wedding supper of the Lamb is described.¹⁸⁶

In the context of Paul's letter, the image has a sexual connotation. It is important that, on the wedding night, the bride is found to be a virgin. In the Jewish culture, it was the responsibility of the father to see that other men had not used the girl, or that she would not give herself except the one to whom she was betrothed. In the spiritual application, it means that the church does not have the right to open herself

¹⁸³ I Cor. 4:1-5

¹⁸⁴ See Rom. 6:13.

¹⁸⁵ John 3:29

¹⁸⁶ See Rev. 19:6-9.

to something or someone other, than to the Spirit of Christ. Paul plays the role of the father in this. Incidentally, this is the only place in Scripture where the image of the bride is used for a local church.

The mention of Eve's temptation, in this context, shows the far-reaching consequences of man's fall into sin. Adam and Eve had surrendered to evil spirits instead of to the love of their Creator. The fall is not merely an important article of our confession of faith to which we, as Christians, ought to ascribe; it shows us the urgent need to surrender ourselves, body and soul, to the Lord of glory, as a wife surrenders to her husband. It is serious business. Paul is not joking, although he introduces this section with remarks about his foolishness. He insinuates that the church in Corinth seemed to be receptive to foolish people. What Paul means to say is not that they ought to accept Paul's lack of intelligence but that they, unquestioningly, accept the foolishness of others. Thus Paul introduces a section in which he reveals some of his most intimate experiences with the Lord. He starts out by stating that the purpose of it all is the preparation of the church as a bride for her husband.

It is obvious that Paul is not serious in comparing himself with other "super-apostles." The question is whether these "super-apostles" are working to prepare the church of Christ for an intimate relationship with her Lord.

c. Taking Measurements of Each Other's Strength

11:7-29

7 Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?

8 I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you.

9 And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so.

10 As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine.

11 Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

12 And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.

13 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ.

14 And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.

15 It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

16 I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting.

17 In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool.

18 Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.

19 You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!

20 In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face.

21 To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! What anyone else dares to boast about-I am speaking as a fool-I also dare to boast about.

22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.

23 Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.

24 five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

25 three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,

26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.

27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

29 Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly I

There were, probably, two reasons for which Paul never made known his personal needs to the Corinthians, and even may have refused money they offered him. The first reason was that Corinth was an affluent city. Effluence and spiritual generosity seldom mix well. Paul did not hesitate to accept support from poor churches in Macedonia, especially, from Philippi, but he flatly refused to accept tips from the richer ones. In his first epistle, he had already defended his stand on this point.¹⁸⁷ The second reason was that there were so-called apostles who sponged off the church in Corinth. They were the ones who criticized Paul sharply.

In First Corinthians, Paul also explains that he had not volunteered for the preaching of the Gospel but had been forced into it against his will. We read: "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me."¹⁸⁸ Luke confirms the fact that Paul worked toward his own support by tent making, while he was in Corinth. He worked together with Aquila.¹⁸⁹ Paul now asks the question whether he was wrong in not accepting any money from them.

When Jesus gave His disciples a mandate to preach the Gospel, He also gave them the warning: "Freely you have received, freely give."¹⁹⁰ Paul kept himself to this ground rule, but he did not do this blindly. He considered every situation separately. Paul's statements here seemed to have been applied particularly when he was in Asia and Achaia. In the Book of Acts, Paul explains that the reason for this policy was to "help the weak." In his speech to the elders of Ephesus he said: "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"¹⁹¹ "The weak," in this context, are, probably, those who easily fall under the spell of money.

In his Epistle to the Philippians we find the following moving testimony: "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen."¹⁹²

Paul had, at certain times in his life, been poor and he had learned to accept every kind of circumstance. "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."¹⁹³ However welcome the financial support, he valued the outcome more than the gift. He considered the help the Philippians and Thessalonians gave as investments from which they, themselves, would benefit. God's interest payments are eternal. What we give to the Lord is like an incense offering to Him.

In the next chapter of this epistle, Paul tells the Corinthians: "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."¹⁹⁴ Paul was proud of the fact that he never held out his hand while in Corinth. He proudly adhered to this principle

¹⁸⁷ See I Corinthians, Chapter Nine.

¹⁸⁸ I Cor. 9:16,17

¹⁸⁹ See Acts 18:1-3.

¹⁹⁰ Matt. 10:8

¹⁹¹ Acts 20:33-35

¹⁹² Phil. 4:10-20

¹⁹³ Phil. 4:13

¹⁹⁴ II Cor. 12:14

and he states: "As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine."¹⁹⁵

Paul never considered himself to be a volunteer. God had drafted him into His service. That meant that he had no right to expect remuneration for his preaching of the Gospel. He spells out this cheerful paradox in his First Corinthian Epistle: "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it."¹⁹⁶ We find the same contradiction-in-terms in the first epistle of Peter, who writes: "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God."¹⁹⁷ The Greek literally reads: "This is *grace* with God." Paul considered himself to be favored by being allowed to preach without payment! His motivation for applying this principle to the church in Corinth was his love for them. He calls God as his witness to confirm this love.

But love is not the only incentive. The other, which is the main motive in this argument, is that he does not want to leave his accusers any ground to stand on. They thought they could catch Paul in preaching for the financial benefits attached to it.

Paul's words: "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," have been variously construed to mean that his opponents pretended to preach free of charge, or that they accused Paul of taking money for his services. The intent is, probably, that Paul exposes the fact that they were wrong in assuming that Paul fleeced the churches by charging heavily for his services, and that their supposed equality with him proves that they are the ones who did the fleecing. The Good News Bible translates Verse Twelve clearest: "I will go on doing what I am doing now, in order to keep those other 'apostles' from having any reason for boasting and saying that the work in the same way that we do." Paul emphasized the difference of method, not the similarity. His opponents enriched themselves with "love offerings," that were taken for them. This was not a case of Judaists who preached the necessity of circumcision for salvation, but of people who worked under the direct influence of evil spirits. It would be difficult to imagine that Paul would fall out so sharply against those who merely erred without evil intentions. He calls them "deceitful workmen" and servants of Satan. Jesus warned against "false prophets," who come "in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."¹⁹⁸ In his farewell speech to the elders of the church in Ephesus, Paul had said: "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock."¹⁹⁹ The deceit of those people was intentional. They were enemy spies, faked apostles, like the weeds in Jesus' parable.²⁰⁰ One wonders if Satan's activities in the churches of our day have decreased, or whether the churches have lost the spiritual discernment of the early church!

Verses 16-29 describe a complicated maneuver by which Paul, deliberately, acts foolish and makes himself ridiculous in order to embarrass both the church in Corinth and his challengers. At the same time, however, Paul speaks the truth. If Paul acts foolish, it does not mean that he is a fool. His "boasting in the way the world does," or boasting "according to the flesh," as the NKJV states, demonstrates that the church in Corinth itself was still in a state of carnality. He pokes fun at their supposed cleverness and tolerance. He had always treated the church in Corinth civilly and with respect, as one human being who owes politeness to fellow humans.

In doing so, he insinuates that those "so called apostles" are not observing the most elementary forms of courtesy. They use the church as an object instead of serving the church. These were the shepherds of whom Ezekiel prophesied: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?"²⁰¹ Paul, still maintaining a tone of irony, calls the respect he had shown to the church "weakness." In saying this, he, probably, borrowed from the vocabulary of his opponents who had made him out to be fearful and weak. A modern equivalent of the mentality of Paul's

¹⁹⁵ II Cor. 11:10

¹⁹⁶ I Cor. 9:16-18

¹⁹⁷ I Peter 2:20

¹⁹⁸ Matt. 7:15

¹⁹⁹ Acts 20:29

²⁰⁰ See Matt. 13:24-29.

²⁰¹ Ezek. 34:2

adversaries is the slogan that states that children of the King ought to live lives of power and affluence. "Only the best is good enough for the servants of Christ. As one tele-evangelist stated: "God hates junk!"

In the following section, Paul demonstrates what is contained in "the best." He makes a list, similar to the one he composed in his Epistle to the Philippians, where he concluded: "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ."²⁰² Paul evinces the same attitude here. The apostle does not boast of his pedigree and his diplomas because he was proud of them. For the people of his time, it was important to be able to demonstrate that they descended from father Abraham. If someone is indeed a new creation in Jesus Christ, descending from the father of all believers is, in fact, the completion of God's revelation! But physical descent has no longer any spiritual value for those who are in Christ. A born again Israelite is not more saved than a born again pagan; neither is a non-regenerated Jew less lost! National pride has always been an important factor for most people. It is a general phenomenon that one race exalts itself above another one. A Dutchman considers himself more "levelheaded" than other Europeans. An Indonesian from the island of Java thinks himself superior to the other races in his archipelago. And Americans are more liberated than anyone else, aren't they? A primitive tribe in Papua, Indonesia, called themselves "Lords of the earth."

Paul had preached the Gospel in Corinth not as a Jew to pagans, but as a servant of Christ to fellow human beings. That was what the other "super apostle" reproached him.

The sensational aspect of Paul's defense to them is his description of what it means to be a servant of Christ. Paul highlights not the glorious aspects of the service but the other side of the coin. Here, his irony becomes serious, but it does not completely fade away. In reference to the last of Christ's beatitudes, the apostle cites his prison record. Pseudo servants of Christ will do all they can to avoid persecution and harassment. Actually, opposition will cause those who are not fully committed to give up. But Paul's inventory of torture and life-threatening circumstances is impressive. Paul equates service with suffering, as the Lord had revealed to him when He called Paul. Jesus had said to Ananias: "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."²⁰³ No wonder, therefore, that the two were closely connected in Paul's mind!

Logically considered, persecution and proclamation of the truth are not identical. Yet, people who suffer for what they believe, usually have a good platform for the proclamation of their message. I remember seeing a Jehovah Witness who was returning home from several years spent in a Nazi concentration camp. As he stepped off the train, he began immediately to testify of his faith. I was deeply impressed, and for a while I began to investigate whether his claim on the truth was true. I found out it was not. Yet, Paul seems to link persecution to discipleship. To Timothy, he wrote: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."²⁰⁴

Leaving all irony behind, the apostle proceeds: "Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more."²⁰⁵ This is followed by a list of experiences of suffering and harassment. In an earlier chapter, Paul had highlighted the same kind of incidents differently. He stated, in Chapter Six: "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger..."²⁰⁶ Paul's inventory of hardship is very impressive. Most of these incidents are not mentioned in the Book of Acts. When Paul wrote this epistle, he had already been in prison in Philippi, but his imprisonment in Caesarea had not yet taken place.

Receiving five times a flogging with forty-minus-one lashes would be enough to permanently ruin one's health. That does not even include the beating with rods and the stoning. We read in Acts about Paul's stoning in Lystra.²⁰⁷ The only shipwreck recorded in Acts took place after the writing of this letter.²⁰⁸ Spending a night and a day in the open sea is no longer a danger in our time. But in Paul's day, before the

²⁰² See Phil. 3:4-8

²⁰³ Acts 9:15,16

²⁰⁴ II Tim. 3:12

²⁰⁵ II Cor. 11:23

²⁰⁶ II Cor. 6:4,5

²⁰⁷ See Acts 14:19.

²⁰⁸ See Acts 27:14-44.

invention of the compass, this was considered dangerous. All navigation was done, keeping the coastline in view. In the words: "I have been constantly on the move" we could read a hidden very human desire to have a place somewhere that could be called "home."

Paul mentions eight dangers to which he was, constantly, exposed. Three of those were natural disasters, two were caused by enemies (bandits and Gentiles). The "false brothers" ought to have been allies in the cause of the Gospel. It turned out that they were after his life also.

Pressure and concern are next. The suggestion that a Christian, who is filled with the Holy Spirit, ought always to be without a care and relaxed belongs to the realm of fables. It seems that Paul was spared no form of human suffering. He ought to have been physically and emotionally exhausted, but he was not. To the contrary, Paul was on fire, but he was burned out. The Lord used all these experiences, in an effective manner, to teach him that he was weak. The worst that could happen to a person would be to pass through all those experiences and to conclude that they served no purpose at all. That was what Paul's adversaries suggested to him and that was what made him catch fire. A human being can endure almost everything as long as he knows why. If the "why" is taken away, the house of human dignity collapses. The cross of Christ has meaning. Actually, nothing has more meaning than that! No one can live a life that makes no sense.

Although Paul reacts to the accusation by his enemies, he does not take them too seriously either. Taking them seriously would mean defeat for the apostle.

e. The Death Blow

11:30-12:10

30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying.

32 In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me.

33 But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

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

2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-God knows.

3 And I know that this man-whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-

4 was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

5 I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.

6 Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

8 three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

In this section, Paul mentions three things: 1. His escape from Damascus, 2. The supernatural visions, 3. His thorn in the flesh.

The story of Paul's escape from Damascus is also recorded in The Book of Acts.²⁰⁹ Luke states that the Jews in Damascus conspired to kill Paul. Paul's statement here does not contradict this. Evidently, the Jews had managed to get the governor over to their side. Paul depicts his escape in a basket as a heroic feat, something to be proud of: as if supernatural courage was needed to be let down in a basket over a city wall and run away! Here again, Paul pokes fun at the church's sense of importance of themselves and their "apostles." This incident must have taken place after Paul had spent three years in Arabia; a fact he mentions in his Epistle to the Galatians.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ See Acts 9:19^b-25.

²¹⁰ See Gal. 1:17.

By obeying God's call, Paul had put himself under God's protection. This protection does not always come in the form we expect. God protected David when he found himself in danger at the court of Achish, king of Achish.²¹¹ Subsequently, David wrote Psalm Thirty-Four to commemorate his escape. David felt he had to help God in helping him out, so he acted as if he had become insane. David's escape from Achish was not more dignified than Paul's. Another perplexing example is the flight from Bethlehem to Egypt of Joseph and Mary with baby Jesus, which resulted in the massacre of infants.²¹² The examples could give rise to the question whether God really protects.

The irony of Paul's situation appealed to Paul's sense of humor. Paul had arrived in Damascus with letters of recommendation of the high priest; he left the city in a basket, and he was proud of it! Paul still had a sense of deep gratitude towards God because of that incident. He introduces his account with the doxology: "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever."

The most serious and fatal thrust to his opponents is administered in the first five verses of Chapter Twelve. That is a knockout! One minute of heavenly glory is enough to make all things on earth look pallid. What people use as material for boasting disintegrates into dust when heavenly light shines upon it. With lots of hesitation and in sober terms Paul describes an experience about which he did not really want to speak. It sounds as if this was the first time he ever mentioned his vision to anybody. It took him fourteen years before he could even open his mouth.

Paul gives the impression of being, in every respect, a well-balanced, levelheaded individual. Yet, the experience he describes would better fit a person given to exaltation. Paul gives no details. It is possible, as some Bible scholars assume, that Paul had the experience while being stoned to death in Lystra.²¹³ The time of fourteen years would confirm that. Paul may have felt some psychological associations with the sight of Stephen's death. He had collaborated in the execution and had witnessed, "that his face was like the face of an angel."²¹⁴ That memory may have haunted him throughout his life.

Paul had received a revelation of heavenly glory, as had some of the Old Testament prophets. We read about similar experiences in the lives of Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Afterwards, the apostle John would see the same kind of vision, as we read in the Book of Revelation. All these experiences were lived on a supernatural realm, in a reality that far surpasses our everyday awareness. Paul speaks about this with lots of hesitation, as if he were still in the process of digesting it. John did not share Paul's reservations; he spoke about what he saw and heard without any inhibition. After fourteen years, Paul still finds it difficult to talk about it. He displays the typical characteristics of an intellectual who is afraid of the depths of his own emotions. Yet, we get the impression of Paul that he had himself quite well in hand. For such a person, to lose control of oneself is frightening; and that was, obviously, what had happened to Paul. He states about his experience: "whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know." He could not say whether his spirit had left the body or not; whether he had been clinically dead or not. Paul may have had a "life after life experience." Twice, he mentions that he does not know whether it was in the body, or outside, as if the thought bothered him.

It is interesting to observe that Paul recounts the incident as if it happened to someone else. At the end, he identifies himself with the person, but even before, it is clear that Paul could not have known the intimate details if they had not occurred to him personally. Nobody else could have known them. He does not say anything about the content of the mystical ecstasy.

The place where this happened is called "the third heaven," or "paradise." What is meant is, probably, heaven as the place of God's presence. It is a place above earth's atmosphere. The Jews divided heaven into seven compartments; Paul chooses the third in this division. Paul is the only one of the Biblical prophets who did not want to speak about what he heard. He does not specifically state that he was told not to, but he infers that a human being, who knows the pollution of sin, ought not to talk about these things. This does not mean that, objectively, such taboos exist. Paul's experience probably was like Isaiah's vision, who when hearing the hymn of praise of the Seraphs, became aware of the impurity of his own lips.²¹⁵ Paul's interdiction to speak was self-imposed and subjective.

²¹¹ I Sam. 21:10-15

²¹² Matt. 2:13-16

²¹³ See Acts 14:19,20.

²¹⁴ See Acts 6:15.

²¹⁵ See Isa. 6:5.

So what did Paul see and hear? Paul does not speak at all about the visual part of the experience. What he heard must have made such an overwhelming impression on him that what he saw was completely blocked out of his memory. As we said, after fourteen years Paul had not yet gotten over it.

It is clear from this that those things on earth, which seem so important to us, completely pale in the light of heavenly reality. If only we would be able to look at ourselves in that light! Our Lord Jesus Christ had the ability to draw a line to heaven from every situation on earth, which enabled Him to immediately see everything in its right perspective.

Paul also recognized the deceitfulness of his own heart that would want to boast about the experience that had befallen him. He was in danger of thinking that the experience was given to him because he was such an outstanding person. That must have been the reason why Paul distanced himself from the event. Whether he is completely successful in this is open to discussion.

Paul had to pay a very high price for these moments of ecstasy. As Jacob, who came out of his struggle with the angel with a dislocated hip and a limp,²¹⁶ so Paul began to suffer physically after he had the vision. The miracle of Paul's testimony is not his being caught up to paradise and hearing inexpressible things, but his boasting in his weakness. This sublimation of that which is negative in itself is a lasting marvel of grace. Paul did not accept this without putting up a fight, but he is proud of his weakness as someone who is proud of the scars of the wounds that were inflicted during a war.

Yet, Paul was rightfully afraid of the romantic veil people tend to weave around persons who have had extraordinary spiritual experiences. This halo people tend to place above a person's head can be more of a trap than the ecstasy itself. When people hear often enough how wonderful they are, they end up believing it themselves.

The expression "a thorn in my flesh" is the rendering of the Greek word *skolops*. Some Bible scholars interpret this as being "a stake driven through the flesh," but others give a less dramatic meaning to the words. It is obvious, though, that Paul does not merely speak of a pinprick. He must have, constantly, suffered severe pain. Contrary to Job, Paul knew the source of his suffering and thus he was able to bear it. He did not blame God for it.

Much has been written about Paul's "thorn in the flesh." We can only speculate about its meaning. Some people believe that Paul suffered emotionally and mentally, but others think it was physical suffering. Otherwise, what would be the meaning of "in the flesh?" Sometimes we see that people who are instrumental in the healing of others become physically afflicted themselves.

Paul received, at least, a partial answer to his question as to why he had to suffer. He understood that God allowed it, although He did not personally inflict it on Paul. The agent is "a messenger of Satan." The source of his suffering was in the kingdom of darkness. But it was God who gave this to him!

Obviously, Paul never received an answer to the burning question as to how a holy God could allow and use what is intrinsically evil. Jesus gave some answers to that question, but some He left purposely unanswered. In the Parable about the wheat and the weeds, Jesus makes clear that removal of evil could cause harm to the sons of the kingdom.²¹⁷ In the case of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices and of the collapse of the tower of Siloam,²¹⁸ Jesus avoids an answer in order to make an immediate and practical application. The same principle is evinced in the story of the healing of the man who was born blind. We read that the disciples asked: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."²¹⁹ We seldom receive an answer to the question as to how it is possible that God does something bad to us, but God always answers when we ask Him what we are supposed to do with it.

Paul was, evidently, in the habit of praying precisely. He prayed three times, which means that his prayer about this matter was not incessant. Obviously, Paul felt that his prayer had not been according to God's will. The Lord soon made clear to Paul that he ought to stop praying about the issue. We read that George Mueller was in the habit, before beginning to pray for certain things, to first find out whether those items were in the will of God. Once he received certainty about that, he began to pray and, usually, the answer to his prayer came soon afterward. Paul received a clear "No!" in answer to his prayer. But God also showed him the reason for the refusal. That was probably the most miraculous part of the answer. God

²¹⁶ Gen. 32:31

²¹⁷ See Matt. 13:29.

²¹⁸ See Luke 13:1-5.

²¹⁹ John 9:2,3

showed Paul the general principle that weakness is the best setting for the manifestation of His power. When we arrive at the end of this epistle, we discover that this principle had been the main theme of the whole epistle.

The bridge between our weakness and God's power is called grace. The word "grace" obtains new meaning in this context. It is interesting to study how New Testament writers give different contents to the concept of grace. Paul, generally, sees in it God's free gift of forgiveness and renewal to sinful human beings. James presents it as God's gift to those who humble themselves before Him, as God's means of elevating and honoring His children. Peter interprets it as a paradox in unjust suffering. The text: "But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God,"²²⁰ reads literally in Greek "this is grace with God." It is the gift that enables us to glorify God in suffering and adversity. It puts our negative experiences in the correct light of eternity. Paul expresses this in his Epistle to the Romans: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."²²¹

That is the sense in which Paul uses the word "grace" here. The Lord does not take away the pain, but He gives His beloved servant the strength to bear it. Paul's insight in the reason for his suffering provides the joy of identification with his Lord and His suffering. The latter is, probably, the most important factor in the victory. If Satan begins to pay attention to us, it means that we are worth something before God. When the apostles were beating up by the Sanhedrin, they "left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."²²² Jesus says: "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."²²³

Paul's weakness was both physical and emotional. It was the weakness of "the jars of clay." The Lord has to tell him what is sufficient. We usually have little idea what is good for us and what we need or do not need. Paul thought that his affliction was too much and God's grace too little. The Lord corrects him on this point. God's grace was sufficient for Paul, but he did not know that yet.

This is one of the few places in the Bible where God tells a human being why He does something. God rarely gives us an account of His acts. But here, the Lord showed Paul what He was doing with his body and why He did it. As Christians, we are under obligation to present our bodies to God as living sacrifices,²²⁴ and as instruments of righteousness.²²⁵ It is not easy to say this; it is harder to do it and live with the consequences. Paul had, undoubtedly, consecrated his body to the Lord. But he only understood what was involved in it when he became ill. I have told God that He could use my body, and that I would not rebel when He put me sick in bed, but so far, He has never done this to me. But Paul began to experience the power of Christ when God made him weak. He began to realize that his own vitality was a hindrance for God's energy to stream through him.

In verses 9 and 10, Paul does not speak as a natural human being. Nobody in his right mind delights in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, or boasts in those. The difference is in the fact that it was for Christ's sake. That places that which is intrinsically evil and harmful in a different light. God's "why" adds a new dimension to it. Paul knew why certain things were happening to him. It is the outcome that makes the difference. In the same way as the fragrance of Christ permeated his life at its lowest point,²²⁶ so it does here in this recurring crisis, which he calls his "thorn in the flesh." Christ's power comes over him. Satan's messenger tormented Paul and tried to crush him. Paul does, in fact, become weak in the experience, but it is Satan who is defeated in the process, not Paul. How can the devil ever win if the death of the one he wants to murder becomes the gateway to resurrection? The Lord always comes to us at our deepest point.

f. The End of the Duel

12:11-13:13

11 I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing.

²²⁰ I Peter 2:20

²²¹ Rom. 8:18

²²² Acts 5:41

²²³ John 15:2

²²⁴ Rom. 12:1

²²⁵ Rom. 6:13

²²⁶ See II Cor. 2:14-17.

12 The things that mark an apostle-signs, wonders and miracles-were done among you with great perseverance.

13 How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

14 Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.

15 So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?

I caught you by trickery! 17 Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you?

18 I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not act in the same spirit and follow the same course?

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

20 For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.

21 I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.

13:1 This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

2 I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others,

3 since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.

4 For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.

5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you-unless, of course, you fail the test?

6 And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.

7 Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed.

8 For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.

9 We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection.

10 This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority-the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

11 Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

12 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

13 All the saints send their greetings.

This last part of Paul's epistle is difficult to divide in sections. Verse 11 is the last verse in which Paul mentions the "super apostles." That verse belongs, in one way, to the preceding ones and in another way to the following. But there is also a transition to the next topic of Paul's financial independence. That subject is continued through verse 19 and it forms the basis for Paul's concluding admonition. It is always difficult to point out sin to the people who pay your wages! We find the reprimand in 12:20-13:10. Verses 11-13 form the actual conclusion of this epistle.

Paul admits that he has made a fool of himself in the last chapters by challenging his opponents to a duel. In the Chapter Twelve, Verse One, he admits: "there is nothing to be gained." He had put himself purposely on the same level as his adversaries in order to prove how low that level was. This does not mean that Paul revokes what he has said. He merely emphasizes that the skirmish was a carnal one and that, consequently, it had no spiritual value. If we realize how incomparable the Lord is whom we serve, there will be little left of the "incomparable character" of us all. It is obvious that Paul does not believe the

“super apostles” to be super at all. They are not incomparable because, on the Day of Judgment, they will be “comparable,” that is, they will be compared to Jesus Christ and they will fail the comparison. But Paul will be “incomparable,” because he judges himself to be nothing.

As we said above, in making a fool of himself, Paul exposed the foolishness of the Corinthians. They ought to have been proud of him and they ought to have recommended him. Verse 12, “The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance” is interesting from a theological viewpoint. *Vincent’s Word Study* quotes a certain Stanley who states that this verse is a direct declaration by the person to whom those miracles were ascribed, proving that he possessed, in fact, the spiritual gift of performing miracles. Generally speaking, the requirement of apostleship was to have known the person of Jesus personally before and after His resurrection. Paul seems to say here that the gifts Jesus promised to those who believed were also included in the apostleship. The Lord Jesus Christ had said: “And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”²²⁷ Luke records some of the supernatural manifestations that accompanied Paul’s ministry. We read in Acts: “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.”²²⁸ If those demonstrations only pertained to the ministry of the apostles, it means that they would not be meant for the believer in general. Another implication of Paul’s words is that the “super apostles” did not seem to possess those gifts.

The church in Corinth had received its share in those miracles, as did the other churches Paul had planted. The only thing in which they had been left behind was in that Paul had never accepted any financial support from them. According to First Corinthians, Chapter Nine, however, this was Paul’s general way of conduct. Paul’s words, “How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!” drip with irony.

We find another of Paul’s pearls in the following words: “What I want is not your possessions but you.” Paul could never forget the attitude of the Macedonians who “gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.”²²⁹ Paul hopes that the church in Corinth would follow this Macedonian example by giving themselves first to God and then to their fellowmen. That would unnerve the shrewd temptation of money. In a way, Paul thus reverses Jesus’ interpretation of the commandment: “Honor your father and your mother.” Jesus had said: “Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.”²³⁰ Jesus had placed the responsibility of support for parents on the shoulders of the children. Paul seems to say that this ought not to be the case. The explanation is, of course, to be found in the age of both children and parents. Jesus spoke about elderly parents and adult children. Paul had parents with young children in mind.

The key to all relationships is love. Even before Paul utters that word, he defines it by saying that it consists in sacrificing oneself for the other. This qualification makes Paul into a good shepherd of the flock. Jesus had said: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”²³¹ The essence of all good leadership is the willingness to give one’s life for the other. This was the greatest difference between Paul and the “super apostles.” Paul could, of course, not state this without seeming to inflate his own image. In this, Paul proves himself a worthy disciple of his Lord in that he receives less love as he gives more love himself. Some Bible scholars believe that the words, “Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery!” are what Paul’s opponents say about him. Paul may have been accused of enriching himself by skimming off money that he sent other people to collect from the church. There is no proof whatsoever that this ever happened. In his defense, Paul follows, more or less, the pattern of

²²⁷ Mark 16:17,18

²²⁸ Acts 19:11,12

²²⁹ II Cor. 8:5

²³⁰ Mark 7:10-12

²³¹ John 10:11

Samuel's farewell speech.²³² In all of this Paul confirms, in word and attitude, the basic theme of this epistle, which is "work with you for your joy."²³³

In verses 20 and 21, Paul mentions some of the problems that plagued the church and he calls some of them by name. The most obvious ones are "impurity, sexual sin and debauchery." Human passions can easily drag people into sexual sins, and, in a way, those may be among the least on God's list. Quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, and arrogance are less obvious, but God considers them more serious. But sexual sins that are never confessed will form a breeding ground of other more serious ones. Because human beings are more susceptible to sexual temptations, the devil is, probably, most active in that realm. Both the hypocritical secrecy of the Victorian era and the open licentiousness of our present day are fertile fields from which the devil can reap a harvest. As Christians we ought to avoid both.

In connection with the confrontation that would occur at Paul's next visit, he states: "I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you." The Greek word used means "to humiliate." That was the attitude Daniel and Ezra evinced when they interceded for the people of Israel in their wayward condition.²³⁴ This humiliation is part of the identification with the guilt of the others. This kind of humbling seems to have disappeared from our intercession for others in our time. Our prayer for those who have sinned is often more a form of criticism than a humbling. In order to humble ourselves, we must have a sense of unity with the body of Christ. That is characteristic of the prayer of one member of the body for another member. The difference of this kind of humbling and the fashionable kind of confession of shortcomings that blows through our churches in the present is that we say to humble ourselves before God, but we do not do it before one another.

But Paul does not humiliate himself before those who are guilty; to them he comes as an accuser. It sounds almost amusing that when Paul appeals to the law that states that all evidence has to be corroborated by two or three witnesses, he himself plays a double or triple role. The three witnesses are Paul's three visits. This slight of hand has, of course, little or no legal value. In establishing a procedure of church discipline, Jesus speaks of three occasions in which an accused receives an admonition in the company of a growing number of witnesses.²³⁵ We must not forget that Paul was a very influential person in high juristic circles. Among the saints who will judge the world and the angels,²³⁶ Paul occupies a most prominent place. When, on the Day of Judgment, Paul will step forward and accuse the church of Corinth on the ground of his three visits, it will be a very hefty piece of evidence. This was no empty threat.

That is the reason Paul tries to remedy the situation as well as he can while he is still on earth. Unless the church herself takes measures, Paul will have to carry out the discipline. He may be weak, but the power of Christ is in him. Jesus Himself was the acme of helplessness when He died on the cross, but there was never a greater manifestation of divine power than in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. John saw Him in heaven as the ultimate expression of harmlessness: a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain,²³⁷ yet "the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'"²³⁸

We find this same kind of paradox in Paul's acting in Corinth. The weakness of Jesus on the cross was the weakness of sin. By His identification with us He had become totally defenseless. In doing this He gave ample proof of the fact that sin isolates man completely from fellowship with God and from the vitality and energy that is produced by that fellowship. The person who sins, or as in the case of Christ, who takes upon himself sin, wilts and withers away. But the Holy Spirit creates new life out of death, as He did in the resurrection of our Lord. Sin is conquered by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the principle Paul applies to the church in Corinth.

In the context of Chapter Thirteen, Verse 5, the word "faith" acquires a new meaning. Generally speaking, "faith" means trusting the truth of God's promises. Here, the word stands for a relationship with God which is the result of this trust. It has become both a judicial relationship and an intimate fellowship,

²³² See I Sam. 12:1-5.

²³³ II Cor. 1:24

²³⁴ See Dan. 9:4-19 and Ezra 9:3-15.

²³⁵ Compare Deut. 19:15 with Matt. 18:15-17.

²³⁶ See I Cor. 6:2,3.

²³⁷ Rev. 5:6

²³⁸ Rev. 6:15,17

as in a marriage relation. A marriage is based on a legal contract and it is also a bond of intimacy. So it is in the relationship between God and man. There is emotional closeness on the basis of a mutual pledge of fidelity, which has legal value. Without this official lawful contract, intimacy becomes immoral. And without intimacy, the legal contract becomes a dead formality. Paul wants us to examine ourselves to see if both facets are present in our relationship with God. There must be an exchange of vows between God and us, a pledge of mutual surrender, and a promise of submission and obedience. There must be an intellectual and emotional experience of fulfillment, of satisfaction, and an expression of love. As the pilot goes over his checklist during the take-off and landing of his airplane, so we ought to regularly check the points that determine our relationship with God to see if everything is in order and functions properly.

In stating this, Paul goes beyond the assurance of salvation and possession of eternal life. This is more than what the apostle John had in mind when he wrote: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."²³⁹ We can have the assurance of eternal life. Our emotions do not play a role of any importance in that matter. Sometimes we must even go against our feelings and, on the basis of the written Word of God, accept the fact that God has accepted us.

But how can we be sure that Jesus Christ is, in fact, in us? Do subjective factor not play any role in this at all? The ground for this knowledge is the same as the one mentioned above. We must place ourselves, not on a basis of emotions, but on the Word of God. But it is important that we test our motives. Our heart may condemn us and bring up all kinds of guilt feelings that have nothing to do with real guilt. The apostle John advises: "This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."²⁴⁰ We must never lean on subjective emotions and use them as a measuring stick for judging our relationship with God. There is within us the testimony of the Holy Spirit that cannot be misunderstood.²⁴¹

We are not called upon to delve into our subconscious and bring ourselves into a state of confusion. Examining ourselves means that we ask ourselves some fundamental questions, such as: "Am I sure that God has forgiven me?" "Have I placed the reins of my life in the hands of God and has He taken possession of me?" "Do I love Him?" If we can answer those questions positively, we may be assured that Jesus Christ is in us.

When Paul says: "I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test" he means that he hopes that the church is aware of the fact that Christ is in him also. As TLB paraphrases: "I hope you can agree that I have stood that test and truly belong to the Lord." Nobody could have supposed for one moment that Paul would not be a Christian who was filled with the Holy Spirit. That gives him the authority to speak.

It is interesting to observe that Paul also puts in his own motives to the test in his intercession for others. He prays that the Corinthians would not fall into sin. That could serve as a reflection upon his work as church planter. There is a subtle danger that he would pray for them for that very reason. But in his prayer for the church, Paul has his eye, not on his own crown, but on their sanctification.

Paul states: "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth." But we do have the power to resist the truth. Ever since the fall, we are unable to produce anything positive, but we have the option to stand in the way of our own salvation and sanctification. In that sense we can do something against the truth. But, objectively, a human being cannot cause any damage to God's truth. God will not perish because of our sins. His holiness is not stained nor is His omnipotence limited by anything we do. At the end of time, God's truth will be the only thing remaining, regardless of what we think of it.

Paul uses the term "truth" here as an expression of God's absolute character in the same way as Jesus used it before Pilate. We read: " 'You are a king, then!' said Pilate. Jesus answered, 'You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.' 'What is truth?' Pilate asked."²⁴² Truth is not a relative concept, the essence of which cannot be established, as Pilate insinuated. No human being completely understands the whole truth, but also those who are not "on the side of truth" possess enough moral consciousness to react when confronted by it.

²³⁹ I John 5:13

²⁴⁰ I John 3:19,20

²⁴¹ See Rom. 8:16.

²⁴² John 18:37,38

It is also possible that Paul, when speaking about “truth,” refers to the truth of the message he brought the Corinthians. In that sense he uses the concept in his Epistle to the Galatians. We read: “We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.”²⁴³ “Truth” also pertains to the testimony of the church in Corinth; those, who know the truth and accept it, also live it.

When Paul states: “We cannot do anything against the truth,” he uses the “we” inclusively, in the sense of “everyone.” Ultimately, nobody can defeat truth. Even Satan, with his mammoth organization will have to concede defeat against God. At the Day of Judgment, his whole scheme of rebellion will be reduced to nothing. After all, God is Himself the truth. Truth is not something, but Somebody. Jesus says: “I am the way and the truth and the life.”²⁴⁴

It seems that Paul is inconsistent in rejoicing over his own weakness, as he did in the previous chapter, and, at the same time, being glad about the church being strong. We must remind ourselves of the fact that weakness in itself is not a virtue. Objectively seen, strength is better than weakness. The important thing is that God reaches His goal in us. The way He achieves His goal is His business. Paul’s prayer, therefore, is appropriate.

Verse Ten throws an interesting light upon Paul’s ministry. The Lord had given Paul a great deal of authority, which could only be used in a positive way. The power God gives us to bind or loosen²⁴⁵ is meant to be used exclusively for the salvation of souls. We have no right to send people to hell. Rebuke and discipline must be used to build up, not to tear down.

After chastising the church in Corinth, it seems out of place that Paul concludes this epistle with a note of joy. The NIV’s rendering “good-by” is the translation of the Greek *chairo*, which primarily means: “to be cheerful.” But in this, the apostle is also consistent. In the beginning of his letter he had stated: “we work with you for your joy.”²⁴⁶ We consider this to be the main theme of this epistle. It is, therefore, appropriate that Paul concludes with this theme. Joy is not the ultimate goal of our faith but it is an important part of it, as it is the second part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, after love.²⁴⁷ Love and joy are the strongest elements in our testimony. Following is peace.

Of the five admonitions in the conclusion of this epistle, three are active and two passive. There are things we have to do, in which we have to take the initiative, such as joy, being of one mind and living in peace. The others we have to allow, such as listening to Paul’s appeal. Actually, the NIV’s rendering is open to discussion. The Greek word used is *parakaleo*, which has the double meaning of exhortation and consolation. The NKJV reads: “Be of good comfort.” The same can be said about the word *katartizo*, which is translated, “Aim for perfection.” It can also mean, “allow yourself to be repaired.” Paul assures the church: “And the God of love and peace will be with you.” Since God is omnipresent, He is, of course always with us, whether we meet these conditions or not. But our attitude determines whether we will be conscious of His presence or not. Our awareness of His presence will be the source from which we can draw love and peace. If we have fellowship with God, love and peace will never be far away.

The “holy kiss” was, of course, a greeting that was culturally acceptable in Paul’s day. When I grew up in the Netherlands, the emotional climate was as frigid as the weather was most of the time. Kissing one another in church would have been unthinkable. The holy kiss is more than an expression of human sympathy or affection; it expresses the love of our Lord and our fellowship with Him.

Verse Fourteen is the apostolic blessing, which is often used in churches as the benediction at the end of a service. “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

“Be with out all” refers to a practical experience. Paul does not make a theological statement in saying this. He expresses the hope that we will be aware of being accompanied by the triune God as we go our way through life. Grace stands at the beginning and at the end of the journey, love is the road, and fellowship the vehicle in which we move.

Paul has been a co-worker to my joy, for which I am grateful!

²⁴³ Gal. 2:5

²⁴⁴ John 14:6

²⁴⁵ See Matt. 16:19.

²⁴⁶ See II Cor. 1:24.

²⁴⁷ See Gal. 5:22.