**2Corinthians**

**Expository sermons**



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**Developments in the church at Corinth** 2Corinthians 1:1-2

*(Scripture quotes from New King James version unless otherwise stated)*

Some years ago, no long after being called into the ministry, I went along to a seminar at Macquarie University. The topic was the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians. I went along because the speaker was Paul Barnett, my minister during my days at university; he went on to become a respected NT scholar. I had not really studied 2Corinthians so struggled to follow the discussion, but it was clear a couple of other scholars did not agree with the speaker. The notes I took have been lost but I recall that the discussion was about the unity of this letter. I have since read Barnett’s writings on this subject, along with the writings of other scholars.

Many readers have noticed a change in tone in the last four chapters of this letter, and some postulate that 2Corinthians is actually two letters joined together. Paul becomes defensive and sarcastic in tone because some in the church at Corinth, spurred on by ‘false apostles’, were denouncing him as an untrained speaker, as being bold in his writing but weak in person, and as being dishonest (11:6, 7, 13). His character, conduct, and calling as an apostle were all under attack. So we find the apostle excusing his boasting, boasting about his sufferings for Christ, by way of authenticating his apostolic authority. These are the chapters in which learn about Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’.

This letter, more than any other, gives us insight into the pastoral heart of the apostle Paul, the servant of God who brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. In his first letter we learned of the many problems that arose in this church at Corinth after his departure. Divisions over personalities were first reported to him. This led to personal criticism directed at Paul; Apollos was a better orator and some liked a powerful speaker. Paul rejected this personality cult within the church saying that both he and Apollos were but ministers of the gospel. Other matters reported to Paul while he was in Ephesus related to gross sexual immorality, as well as a failure to love one another, leading to selfish conduct within the church. The main doctrinal matter of concern was the place of spiritual gifts in the church and teaching on the resurrection of the dead.

Paul had previously written a letter to this church telling them to discipline the man openly living a sexually immoral life, but they misunderstood what he wrote and failed to take the necessary action against this man (1Cor 5:9f). In the letter called 1Corinthians he tells them in no uncertain terms to discipline this man no matter who he is; it seem he had supporters among the libertine faction, people whom Paul labels as ‘puffed- up’. Undermining Paul’s authority as an apostle served the purpose of this party of ‘puffed up’ rebels. They convinced themselves and others that Paul was weak and would not show his face again- but Paul assured them he would return soon (1Cor 4:18).

**1. Circumstances of 2Corinthians**

What happened after the church at Corinth received Paul’s letter answering their concerns and demanding church discipline towards the incestuous man? The only record we have of what happened is found in this second letter written by Paul to this church; there is no question that Paul is the author of this letter (1:1). It is evident that the apostle’s relationship with this church some five years after his departure had become very strained.

Paul was in Ephesus where the Lord was blessing his ministry, but as the church grew so did opposition. This come to a head in a city-wide riot, and Paul had to leave Ephesus in a hurry (1Cor 16:9). In the meantime Timothy, whom Paul sent to Corinth with his letter or around the same time, reported back to Paul, and his report was not encouraging. Paul was rather fearful about sending his young helper (1Cor 16:11), and it seems his worst fears were realised.

Here in 2Corinthians Paul refers to a ‘painful visit’ that he made following Timothy’s return (2:1). The visit was short and sharp. They were not ready to support Paul in acting to expel the sexual offender. It seems they sided with this man when he insulted the apostle to his face; some were visiting prostitutes anyway. Paul returned to Ephesus and wrote a stern letter, often referred to as the ‘tearful letter’ (2:3, 4). This letter has been lost, although some think it has survived in the last four chapters of second Corinthians. Paul says he wrote this letter with ‘many tears’, but later seems to have regretted at least some of what he wrote (7:8).

It seems Titus took this ‘tearful letter’ to Corinth, and Paul was very anxious to hear back from him (2:13); he could not risk sending Timothy again. Titus was a Gentile convert who proved to be a good peacemaker. Paul in the meantime, had been forced to leave Ephesus and was on his way to Macedonia. Eventually Titus made his way to Macedonia with some good news from Corinth; the church, the majority at least, had acted to discipline the offender. Their discipline led to repentance such that the apostle now urges them to forgive and comfort this man (2:6,7). Accepting or tolerating immoral conduct in the church means leaving the door open for Satan to attack; failure to forgive and restore a sinner who repents gives the same opportunity to Satan (2:11).

This letter called 2Corinthians was written by the apostle Paul in response to news brought by Titus while he was in Macedonia; there was good news, and bad news as we will see. Paul may have been in Philippi, Thessalonica, or Berea. Was it during this time that he went across to preach in Illyricum (Rom 15:19)?

Putting all these events on a time line is not easy, but it is generally agreed that he wrote 2Corinthians in the summer of AD56. Some say he wrote 1Corinthians earlier in the same year, but to account for all that happened in Paul’s contact with this troublesome church since writing 1Corinthains, namely Timothy’s report, a ‘painful visit’, a ‘tearful letter’ and a crisis in Ephesus that forced Paul to flee, it is best to envisage a period of at least twelve months between these two letters. Paul would go on to visit Corinth a third time at the end of AD56 (13:1). He spent three months there, during which time he wrote the book of Romans (Acts 20:2-4, Rom 16:21-23).

**2. Collection**

When the apostle Paul was given ‘the right hand of fellowship’ to go to the Gentiles by the leaders in the church at Jerusalem, they asked him to ‘remember the poor’, which Paul was eager to do (Gal 2:9, 10). This appears to be the beginning of the church-wide collection for the church in Judea. Paul must have set this collection in place when the church in Corinth was established because one of the concerns they wrote about was ‘the collection’ (1Cor 16:1). With all the immorality, division, and bad feeling towards Paul, this collection took a back seat in this church.

But Paul never lost focus on the broader church, and this collection in particular. He saw it as a material response by the Gentile churches to the spiritual blessings they had received from the ‘mother’ church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:27). Included in this second letter are two chapters urging the troubled, but relatively rich church in Corinth to complete this collection? In fact, Paul expresses joy at the arrival of Titus not just because of repentance and renewal of fellowship in this church but because Titus had been able get this collection back on track. Paul’s planned visit to Corinth was originally about this collection. It was his sudden ‘painful visit’ that made this planned visit a third rather than second visit.

**3. Unity of the letter**

I noted in our introduction the change in tone in the last four chapters of this letter and how this has given rise to theories about these chapters coming from a different letter, namely the apostle’s ‘tearful letter’. Anyone holding to such a theory has a lot of questions to answer: Who joined the letters, and why? What happened to the greetings with which Paul and everyone else began their letters? Such theories were first proposed by a man called Semler in 1776; before this date there was no question about the unity of 2Corinthians.

So how do we explain this change in tone, the sharp and sarcastic language and the uncharacteristic boasting of the apostle Paul? Along with good news about repentance and restoration in the church at Corinth, Titus brought bad news to Paul in Macedonia. There was still a minority who rejected the authority of Paul. Besides this, a new threat had arisen in this church. As Paul himself said, Satan is always ready to take advantage of division in the church, and agents of Satan had infiltrated this divided church.

The bad news brought by Titus was of so called ‘super-apostles’ or ‘false apostles’ who had brought false teaching into this church (11:5, 13). These men were Jews, most likely from the church in Jerusalem; remember James telling Paul of the ‘myriads of Jews who have believed and they are all zealous for the law’ (Acts 21:20). These men were not exactly Judaizers telling Gentile believers they had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses, but they did not like Paul telling the church that the old covenant had given way to the new. They came to Corinth with letters of commendation, possibly from a faction in the church in Jerusalem (3:1) and claimed to be apostles.

These men readily joined those in Corinth who were undermining Paul’s apostolic authority, and according to Paul, undermining the gospel itself (11:4). They were dangerous men masquerading as apostles but in truth were agents of Satan. No wonder Paul rips into them and does all he can to convince the brethren at Corinth of their deceit. At the same time he ‘bares all’ to convince them that he is a genuine apostle. He did not need letters of commendation because his conduct and his suffering for the cause of the gospel, said it all.

**4. Salutation**

When I write a letter in my capacity as minister I usually indicate that capacity, ‘moderator’ or ‘convenor’, when I sign my name at the end of the letter. In Paul’s day they did this at the beginning of the letter. So, as with his other letters, Paul began with his name and then indicated his title with respect to the church, ‘an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God’ (1:1). This declaration had particular significance in this letter because some in the church at Corinth did not recognize his status as an apostle.

‘Apostle’ simply means ‘sent one’ but in the Bible it means the Twelve. Paul claimed this status because of his vision of the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road, and the church leaders accepted this. Paul was an apostle ‘by the will of God’, not by the will of man or even by the authority of the church. As already mentioned, the false apostles came with letters of commendation but Paul needed no such letters to assert his authority; he was called and ‘ordained’ by the Lord himself. The church itself was a letter of commendation (3:3), but more than this, his life of sacrifice and self-giving to the point of suffering were marks of his authority. Such marks will be found in the life of every true Christian.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul includes Sosthenes as his co-writer, but here it is Timothy. Sosthenes was from Corinth and maybe had returned. One wonders if he was the man who helped Paul write that letter, and if Timothy was his amanuensis for this second letter. Timothy was not an apostle but he was involved in the planting of the church at Corinth and was sent there by Paul after writing the first letter. He was obviously with Paul in Macedonia when this second letter as written.

The second part of the greeting tells of the recipients of the letter. What is interesting is the inclusion of ‘all the saints who are in all Achaia’ (1:1). Paul wanted this letter read in other churches, including Athens and Cenchrea; we know very little about these churches (Acts 17:34, Rom 16:1). ‘Saints’, literally ‘holy ones’, refers to all believers; all believers are given the Holy Spirit so are holy! In this letter Paul speaks of believers being given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee (1:22, 5:5). Do you know the presence of the Holy Spirit in your heart? Do you have such a guarantee of your eternal salvation?

**5. Grace and peace**

The apostle’s greeting ends with a prayer or doxology: ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:2 cf. 1Cor 1:3). Grace is the undeserved favour of God. Grace is at the heart of the gospel from beginning to end. We are saved by grace and we are sanctified by grace. Because of God’s grace we have peace, inner peace, peace with God, and peace with one another (Rom 5:1). This is why it is said, ‘no God, no peace’. Do you, ‘know God and know peace?

**God who comforts in suffering** 2Corinthians 1:3-7

‘Health, wealth and happiness’- is this what you expected when you became a Christian? This is what is taught in many churches today, but is it what is taught in the Bible? Jesus told his disciples that the world hated him, and it would hate them also (John 15:18). The world hated Jesus because it is a sinful world, because people love darkness rather than light (John 3:19). Anyone who follows Jesus expects opposition and hatred from the world, not prosperity or praise. The apostle Paul certainly knew about suffering as a Christian, as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Jews chased him out of various towns, and just before writing this letter called 2Corinthians the Gentiles chased him out of Ephesus.

The Bible condemns idolatry and immorality, so individuals and societies engaged in such practices will oppose the gospel by teaching lies or by violence. The gospel of course, is the power of God to change sinful hearts and to gather together a people who love the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ‘In this world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33).

After introducing himself and naming the intended recipients of his letter, the apostle Paul greets them as usual with the words, ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:2). He usually goes on to thank God for the faith or love or prayers of the recipients, but in this his second letter to this church he simply thanks God for his mercies and comfort; he does mention their prayers in verse 11 but more by way of exhortation than thanksgiving (1:3). In his first letter he thanked God for the grace he gave to these people. In the meantime he had seen little grace exercised in their attitude towards him. Remember the ‘painful visit’ and the ‘tearful letter’ (2:1-4).

Paul was accustomed to opposition from Jews and Gentile unbelievers but was deeply hurt and distressed when men and women in the church, in a church he established, turned against him. After waiting anxiously for Titus to bring news from this church, Paul received some good news which made him thankful to God for this comfort and encouragement. Our first point is, ‘Christ’s suffering’, our second, ‘Comfort from God’, and our third, ‘Comfort shared’.

**1. Christ’s suffering**

As believers we are in the world but not of the world. ‘If you were of the world the world would love you’ said Jesus (John 15:19). So if the world loves you, and you love the world, you need to ask if you are truly following Christ. Many in the church at Corinth had become worldly or carnal Christians (1Cor 3:1). Envy, strife and divisions, not to mention sexual immorality and idolatry were evidence of worldliness. If they were following Christ, and imitating Paul as he imitated Christ, they would face opposition from the world like Paul, and indeed like Christ. Christ was Paul’s saviour and Lord, and his example when it came to living in this world. Just as Christ suffered, so he expected to suffer: ‘For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us’ or ‘overflow into our lives’ (1:5).

Believers not only suffer like Christ, they suffer in Christ or Christ suffers in them, in us. If Christ is in us then he will suffer when we suffer. Have you thought about this? The apostle Paul did because of what he heard when confronted by the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. He was persecuting Christians but Jesus said to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ (Acts 9:4). Paul was now a Christian himself so when he faced opposition or persecution he knew Jesus was suffering with him and in him. Peter similarly writes of being reproached for the name of Christ as ‘partaking of Christ’s sufferings’, and, like Paul, says that such suffering is cause for rejoicing, ‘for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you’ (1Peter 4:13, 14).

Paul speaks of the comfort of God being extended to him in his troubles and distress. Paul suffered poverty, poor health and hardships like any human being. Such suffering may be the result of our sin, or as in the case of Paul, the result of preaching the gospel. Moreover, he suffered distress, even mental anguish, again in the cause of the gospel- the word ‘trouble ‘or ‘tribulation’ means ‘pressured’ (1:4). He felt the pressure of ministry because of the church at Corinth. Most ministers who leave their calling do so because of the church not persecution from the world. How would the apostle Paul respond to the pressure being put on him by the church at Corinth?

**2. Comfort from God**

The word ‘comfort ‘occurs ten times in this opening paragraph- sometimes translated ‘consolation’ in our version. In fact, we find the word ‘comfort’ more in this letter than in any other book of the Bible- and this is a book that focusses on Paul’s suffering in the gospel! What other writer uses this word comfort a lot? The prophet Isaiah, the prophet who preached gloom and doom to Israel. His words, ‘Comfort, yes, comfort my people’ are most memorable (Isa 40:1). Isaiah spoke of exile because of sin, but then of restoration and comfort coming from the Lord. We could of course, go back to David and Psalm 23: ‘Your rod and your staff, they comfort me’.

The word ‘comfort’ translates the Greek word ‘*parakale-o*’, which means ‘to call alongside’. It is the word used of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete (John 14:16). Paul does speak of the Holy Spirit in this letter (1:22, 5:5), but here in verse 3 he speaks of ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ as ‘the God of all comfort’. Note that is verse 2 he writes, ‘God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’. Jesus spoke of he and the Father coming to dwell in the heart of those who love him and obey his word (John 14:23).

The ‘God of all comfort comforts us in all our troubles’ (1:4). The ‘us’ is the royal ‘we’ meaning Paul himself. Paul was getting little or no comfort from the brethren in this church but he had another source of comfort in the Lord himself. Do you know the ‘God of all comfort’, ‘*Theos pase-s parakle-sews*’? Here is a message unlike that preached in many churches, the ‘health, wealth, and happiness gospel’. Those who hear and believe that gospel are devastated when ‘things go wrong’. And those who preach that gospel have no answer for them because they failed to preach the truth about suffering, and about the God of all comfort.

Paul was seriously stressed and had few brothers to comfort him. Jesus, of course, had no brothers to comfort him as he faced the curse of the cross. Paul turned to the Lord in the midst of psychological pressure or distress, and he found the comfort of the Lord (1:6, 2:13, 7:5, 6). He knew the presence of the Spirit of Christ in his heart, the Spirit of comfort and consolation. As I just asked, do you know the presence of the Spirit of Christ in your heart, and do you find comfort in Him? Do you know that even though your mother may leave you, Christ will never leave you (Isa 49:15)? Remember that as a child of God you can never be alone; your divine counsellor and comforter is always near. You can call on him at any time, day or night, and he will hear (Ps 1:2, 119:55).

**3. Comfort shared**

We can and should be comforted in the Lord himself but this does not mean there is no place and no need to be sharing this comfort with others. In fact, it is those who know the comfort of the Lord who are best able to share such comfort. Paul writes of being ‘able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God’ (1:4). Paul was comforted by the coming of Titus, who in turn had been comforted by the church in Corinth (7:6, 7). Paul was now writing to comfort those in the church, so the comfort had gone full circle.

We might compare the love of Christ which we are also told to share with others. If you know the love of God in Jesus Christ, you can and you should be sharing this love with those around you. Jesus said, ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (John 13:34). Paul is saying, ‘I can comfort others in their trouble because I have been comforted by God’, and we might say the same thing to ourselves. He is not specifying the kind of trouble. We do not agree that we have to have experienced the exact same trouble before we can comfort others; we do not have to experience a divorce before we can comfort someone in a divorce, for example. We are called to share the comfort of God, not a specific experience.

This is what Christian fellowship is all about, sharing the love of God and the comfort of God? The church is the body of Christ, so if one member suffers all the members suffer with it (1Cor 12:26, Rom 12:15). Let there be no gloating or pride in giving or receiving comfort within the fellowship. Let us be as ready to comfort others as we are to condemn them. If there is sin then discipline may be necessary, as with the case of the sinner at Corinth. But following repentance there should be comfort.

Actually, the Christians at Corinth needed comfort because the whole church was troubled by the sin of this one man. Some supported him and while others refused to do so. Division entered the church, even families in the church. Division in the church often ends up with division in families, just like division in a marriage affects the wider family. Some churches divide over minor issues but in Corinth the issue was serious- a man was living in incest. But Paul had just received news that he had been disciplined by the majority. He wrote that it was now time to forgive and comfort this man (2:6, 7).

‘If we are afflicted it is for your consolation and salvation’ (1:6). The apostle’s ultimate concern was for the salvation of souls. His affliction could not save a soul of course, but he was ready to suffer that others might be comforted, and indeed might persevere in and through their suffering. To see their leader persevering in the face of suffering and finding comfort in the Lord would have encouraged the believers at Corinth to press on in their salvation. Being saved means being reconciled with God in Christ (5:18), and those in Christ are reconciled to one another in Him. Any breaking of relationships within the body of Christ affects our relationship with the Lord.

Being without God means being without hope (Eph 2:12). The great hope we have in Christ is the hope of the resurrection. Paul never lost hope for these rebels at Corinth (1:7). He understood that suffering produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope (Rom 5:4). God comforts us by coming alongside, by lifting us up and giving us hope. Did you see the Olympic runner yelling at his friend, telling him to keep on and cross the finish line? This is the picture of Christian comfort. The race of course, is the race of life. The apostle knew the comfort and encouragement of the Lord and he stood with the brethren in Corinth to comfort and encourage them in the Lord.

The Christian life is one of power in weakness. ‘When I am weak then I am strong’ is a major lesson of this letter, a lesson learned by the once proud Pharisee who became the apostle Paul, the man who knew what it was to suffer for the cause of the gospel. I hope this is a lesson that you and I have learned, or will learn soon.

**Divine deliverance from a deadly peril** 2Corinthians 1:8-11

Can you remember a time when you thought you were going to die? Have you ever been saved from drowning, from a fire, or maybe from a car accident? Maybe there was a time when you were so sick you thought you were going to die. At one time in India I was told that someone had threatened to run me off the road when I was riding my bike. If you have had such an experience I am sure you remember it.

A traumatic experience has been the trigger for some to become a Christian. John Newton was such a man; he cried to the Lord while fearing shipwreck and when he survived he gave thanks to the Lord and even gave himself to the Lord. King Hezekiah ‘wept bitterly’ and ‘prayed to the Lord’ when he was dying. The Lord heard his prayer and granted him another fifteen years of life (Isa 38:1-5). However, like so many, Hezekiah sinned after this great deliverance. I can tell you of many who, not necessarily in fear death but in great anguish, prayed to the Lord but after their prayer was answered no longer bother with prayer; they might pray again next time they are overcome with fear.

The apostle Paul trembled in fear when struck by a bolt of light that blinded him. He never forgot that experience on the road to Damascus, especially not the words the risen Jesus spoke to him at that time (Acts 9). He was not a person to forget the grace of God that he received that day. It was many years later when in Asia that Paul was again in fear of death and experienced the saving power of God, as in a physical deliverance. He shares this experience and what he learned from it with brethren in the church at Corinth and with us here in this passage. We know that some in that church were critical of Paul but he opens his heart to them in this his second letter, sharing even his deepest fears. While most preachers hide their vulnerabilities from the people, Paul exposed his weaknesses and fears. He did not minister in his own strength but in the strength of the Lord.

As Paul continues reflecting on the ‘God of all comfort’, and sharing this comfort with the church in Corinth, he informs them of a particular danger he faced and how God delivered him from death. Our subheadings are: ‘Trouble in Asia’, ‘Trust in God who raises the dead’, ‘Together in prayer’, and ‘Thanks to God by many’.

**1. Trouble in Asia**

In the opening paragraph of this letter Paul used the word ‘trouble’ three times. There he used it in a general sense but now it is a specific ‘trouble’; we noted that the Greek means ‘pressure’. In the province of Asia, the western part of what today is Turkey, we know of the cities of Ephesus and Troas, as well as the seven churches listed in Revelation 2 and 3. Paul spent over two years ministering in Ephesus after he established the church in Corinth. He wrote his first letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus, but this second letter from somewhere in Macedonia.

In the meantime, Paul became the cause of a riot in Ephesus. Actually, Demetrius the silversmith, who crafted idols of the goddess Diana, instigated the riot. He did so because people were believing the gospel preached by Paul and no longer buying his idols. Riots are dangerous because you never know what a volatile crowd will do - just look at the football riots of recent years. This crowd at Ephesus grabbed two of Paul’s friends as they rushed towards the arena, but other friends stopped Paul from going (Acts 19:30). The city clerk stepped in and dismissed the rioting mob. After this scare Paul left Ephesus for Macedonia. Luke, the writer of Acts, does not say that Paul himself faced mortal danger but he was certainly the target of the murderous mob.

In this letter Paul refers to, ‘trouble which came to us in Asia’, but gives no further details, apart from saying he feared he would die (1:8). The Corinthians probably knew more of the details than we are told. Paul did not want his brethren to be uninformed of this dangerous situation he faced in Asia (1:8). A number of other suggestions have been made as to the details of what made the apostle ‘despair even of life’. Some think he was so sick he thought he would die, a not uncommon fear. Paul had his ‘thorn in the flesh’ but this was not life-threatening. Besides, this trouble came from outside, a ‘sentence of death’ (1:9).

Paul faced so many life-threatening situations that he could write, ‘in deaths often’ (11:23). Once the Jews stoned him and left him for dead, but this was years before, and not in Asia (11:25, Acts 14:19). While we cannot be certain as to the details, as to who or what threatened the apostle’s life, being the target of a murderous mob may have put him in greater danger than indicated by Luke in the book of Acts.

**2. Trust in God who raises the dead**

The verses we are looking at are linked to the preceding paragraph by the word ‘for’ (1:8), and the subject of sharing the comfort of God with the brethren in Corinth. Paul was troubled by the opposition he faced in the Corinthian church but he had faced other troubles, life- threatening troubles in the recent past. He wants the church to know about this trouble, not by way of boasting but by way of sharing how God delivered him; it is in later chapters that he resorts to reluctant boasting about the troubles he had faced during his ministry.

Whatever the trouble Paul faced, he was ‘burdened beyond measure’ and ‘despaired even of life’ (1:8). He thought he was going to die. But the key word in verse 8 is, ‘above strength’. He was crushed and unable to do anything to save himself- apart from pray, we presume. Even when he and Silas were in prison in Philippi they prayed and sang psalms.

No one, not even the apostle Paul, likes being completely helpless, unable to do a thing to help themselves. We are talking about physical danger and physical help, but such dangers have psychological effects of course. We know about the stresses of life and about depression, but despair is something different; it is something I think Christians should avoid because it means ‘to lose all hope’. Yet this is the word Paul uses, ‘despair’, utmost despair.

But as Paul looked back on this terrible time he saw that God was teaching him something, teaching him not to trust in himself but in ‘God who raises the dead’ (1:9). We included the last phrase in our subheading and for good reason but will come back to it shortly. Let us stay with Paul for a moment as all his means of saving himself were peeled away, leaving him vulnerable and helpless, exposed and naked- not literally naked but he certainly felt naked. He was utterly without strength or power, as helpless as a newborn baby.

What do you do when you feel completely helpless, when all your strength is exhausted, when all your wit is drained and no one is listening to your excuse or pleas for mercy? We usually look to other people for help. We call a lawyer or appeal to the king. We call the doctor or the politician. But sometimes no human being can help. I think the current pandemic is teaching us a lesson not unlike that which Paul is sharing. No, we are not despairing of life, but we do feel helpless as we endure another week of lockdown. We are losing hope in our politicians, who themselves are feeling helpless to stop the spread of the deadly virus. We are not even sure that the scientists are on top of things. But in all of this, is any lesson being learnt?

The psalmist learnt the lesson, ‘Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal man who cannot save’ (Ps 146:3 NIV). And Paul learnt not to trust in himself, and presumably in any other man, but to trust in God alone. God had obviously delivered him from the deadly peril. Having experienced God’s grace and power to deliver him once, he trusted He would do it again (1:10). In the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death the Lord came to deliver his servant Paul, and he never forgot the grace and power of God.

Do you believe God is powerful to save you from whatever troubles you face in life? Do you believe in a God who raises the dead (1:9)? Why does Paul mention the raising of the dead? Like Martha, he believed in the resurrection of course (John 11:24). But did she believe Jesus could raise her brother right before her eyes? Did Paul believe God could raise him from the dead if he did die? Did he have the faith of Abraham, who believed that God was able to raise his son Isaac ‘even from the dead’, as he obeyed God and placed his son on the altar (Heb 11:19). This is the power that Paul came to believe as he faced death, the greatest power on earth, the power of the resurrection. For Abraham and Paul, this was not just a pleasant thought; it was a ‘here and now’ reality, it was something they experienced. Too many Christians fail to live the reality of the resurrection.

**3. Together in prayer**

Paul shared about his trouble in Asia, and God’s great deliverance with the brethren in Corinth that they might learn the lesson he learnt, namely, ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’ (12:9). He was also encouraging them to pray for him because it is prayer, personal prayer and intercessory prayer that God loves to hear, and to which he responds. It is not clear if they were praying for him before this but he urges them to ‘help us by your prayers’ (1:11 NIV).

The more we pray, and the more people there are praying, the more the Lord is pleased. Prayer is not a mechanical or mathematical activity of course. We always pray, ‘Your will be done’, knowing that God’s will is perfect. We also pray, knowing that in all things God ‘works together for good to those who love Him’ (Rom 8:28). As God’s people pray together, God works together for our good and for his glory. We pray with this knowledge; we pray believing that with God nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). Such knowledge should stir us to prayer, to be more earnest in prayer when we or others face troubles in this life. Every day we know someone who needs prayer do we not?

**4. Thanks to God by many**

Prayer and thanksgiving go together- unless prayer is merely a ritual. Paul urges the Romans to ‘continue steadfastly in prayer’ just as he urges them to ‘rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep’ (Rom 12:12, 15). It is part of the fellowship of a church, part of the functioning of the body of Christ, that troubles are shared, and that we pray together and praise together.

Is this what we see in our church? Without troubles shared we will not be together in prayer. Without prayer we will not be together in thanking God for answered prayer- right. Without prayer we may start attributing our deliverance to ourselves or some human intervention rather than divine intervention. If we are set free by a judge when we had no hope of freedom, do we thank God for answering prayer or do we just walk away saying we were lucky?

Paul speaks of a sea of uplifted faces giving thanks to God for his past deliverance and for any future deliverance. He did not expect this to be the last deadly peril he would face as a servant of the Lord. Remember, we live in a fallen world, a world that is hostile to the gospel. But remember most of all that God is great. He is powerful to pull down and to raise up. Powerful to heal and powerful to save from death, not just physical death but everlasting death. If you have received the gift of eternal life you should be thanking God every day, and we your brethren should be joining you and thanking God for his indescribable gift.

**Paul’s conscience is clear** 2Corinthians 1:12-22

When someone gets upset at something you said or did, and decide they don’t like you, they usually find other reasons to support this decision not to like you. Often they dig up little things that were not important until they made this decision. We refer to this as ‘digging up dirt’ on someone. Some people in the church at Corinth did not like Paul condemning the man guilty of incest; he told them to discipline the man by refusing fellowship (1Cor 5:5, 9). A group got together to discredit the apostle Paul in whatever way they could. The apostle was deeply hurt but never thought to walk away from this church. God gave him the grace and the strength to deal with the personal accusations and false teachings.

There were some serious doctrinal issues to deal with but the apostle first deals with a personal attack upon his integrity. They accused him of being fickle and untrustworthy because of a change of plans regarding a visit to Corinth. Paul was not above making mistakes in his ministry, but as he begins this second letter he wants to make perfectly clear why he changed his plans. Paul knew, as every minister of the gospel knows, that any mistake, real or perceived, can carry a heavy price. The accusation that Paul was fickle and could not be trusted was more perceived than real. With a clear conscience before God, he explains his dependence on the grace of God in all things. He also teaches profound truths about God’s faithfulness towards us in Jesus Christ. Our three subheadings are: ‘clear conscience’, ‘change of plans’, and ‘Christ is Yes, and Amen’.

**1. Clear conscience**

Some in the church at Corinth were calling Paul a ‘Yes, Yes and No, No’ man (1:17), a man who kept changing his mind to suit himself. This name-calling started because Paul changed his plan about visiting Corinth. He does not deny that he did so, but declares that he did not do so lightly (1:17), and certainly not for selfish reasons. He can ‘boast’ of having a clear conscience before the Lord (1:12). God of course, is the ultimate judge of the heart or conscience. Blessed is the person whose conscience does not accuse them (Rom 2:15). Paul was not looking for the approval or praise of men but of God, and we should be doing the same (1Cor:4:3-5).

The word ‘conscience’ is interesting. Every human being has a conscience which tells them right from wrong. Every human being makes judgments on the behaviour of other people which makes them inexcusable before God (Rom 2:1-3). A conscience distinguishes human beings from other creatures, despite evolutionists trying to tell us that these other creatures have a conscience- or indeed, that some people do not have a conscience. Sin of course, affected the operation of our conscience; sin cut us off from the light of God. But the Spirit of God, given to all who believe in Jesus, illuminates the conscience (1:22).

Paul has a Spirit-illuminated conscience, and the testimony or witness of his conscience was that he had acted with godly sincerity and simplicity towards the Corinthians (1:12). ‘Simplicity’ means ‘without duplicity’, which matches the word ‘sincerity’; some adopt a very similar Greek word and translate ‘holiness’. ‘Sincere’ translates a Greek word meaning ‘judged by the light of the sun’. ‘Sincere’ is a Latin word meaning ‘without wax’. Stone carvings were sometimes patched with wax but heat would reveal such cover-ups. Paul had nothing to hide with regard to his dealings with the Corinthians.

Paul could ‘boast’ or proudly testify that his conscience was clear of any duplicity or insincerity. He was not a double-minded or two-faced man (James 1:8). What he said and what he wrote was not meant to confuse; no one had to read between the lines. Worldly people, especially those in public office, often use language that is vague, language designed to ‘muddy the waters’ as we say. False teachers do the same thing. When church leaders come together in ecumenical synods, some try to twist the clear meaning of words they have agreed to.

Paul did not speak with ‘fleshly’ or worldly wisdom, or with church politics in mind. He spoke and wrote ‘by the grace of God’ (1:12). He did this at all times, even when defending himself against unfair and false accusations. He did not resort to the tactics of his opponents. He did not ‘fight fire with fire’ but in all his battles fought with the truth and with the grace of God (10:4). Moreover, he fought for the truth and glory of God, not for his own reputation or glory- although he defended his own integrity as ‘an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God’ (1:1).

Some preachers like to use big words to impress their listeners. I remember a Bible teacher answering a question with some exasperation, ‘Do I have to use words with less than three syllables!’ Sometimes we have to use big words, but the object of preaching and teaching is to make the truth clear. Paul’s preaching was a clear presentation of Jesus Christ and him crucified. The Corinthians listened to him and believed. He later wrote a letter about sexual immorality which they misunderstood, maybe deliberately (1Cor 5:10). He wrote in language they could read and understand. His words were clear and understandable, with no hidden agenda in mind. He wanted them to understand completely, or to the full, what he wrote (1:13).

One thing Paul wanted them to understand was that he was proud of them as his dear children, and they should be proud of him as their father in the faith. He wanted this relationship to continue until the end, until ‘the day of the Lord Jesus’ (1:14). Paul kept this day in focus because on this day God will judge everyone for everything they have done in the body (5:10), even the thoughts and intents of the heart (1Cor 4:5, Heb 4:12).

**2. Change of plans**

The apostle comes to the matter which led to their attack upon his personal integrity, namely his change of travel plans. Did they feel hurt by the change that meant he would not be visiting them on his way to Macedonia? This is doubtful given the animosity expressed in his last ‘painful visit’. More likely they were looking for ‘dirt to throw at him’.

Paul’s original plan was to travel from Ephesus to Macedonia, and on to Corinth on his way back to Judea (1Cor 16:5). After sending the letter called 1Corinthians, matters in this church did not improve so he made a ‘painful visit’; during this visit he must have told them he would change his plans and visit them on his way to Macedonia and again on his way back (1:15,16). He was anxious to help this troubled church. But upon returning to Ephesus he wrote the ‘tearful letter’ and thought it best to delay any further visit. As it happened, Paul had to leave Ephesus in a hurry so reverted to his original plan to go direct to Macedonia. If the Corinthians knew this they should not have been criticizing Paul, but even if they did not know they should have gathered the facts before making any judgment. ‘We do well to avoid such ill-formed and unkind opinions as shown by the Corinthians’ writes Barnett.

It is often said that journalists do not let the truth get in the way of a good story. The same can be said of opinions and accusations we make about others. Paul knew the truth, and he knew his own heart. He assured them that he had intended to make a double visit that they ‘might have a second benefit’, and that they might help him on his way to Judea (1:15,16). But all his plans were made with the condition, ‘If God wills’ (James 4:15). And as he later says, it was to spare them that he ‘came no more to Corinth’ (1:23). He has already mentioned the trouble that came to him in Asia (1:8).

The apostle was not so much concerned with the details of his travel plans as with the accusation that he was fickle and could not be trusted. Again he asserts that he did not make plans lightly or simply to please himself. He rejected their calling him a ‘Yes, Yes, and No, No’ man; he was not a worldly man who thought only of himself.

**3. Christ is Yes and Amen**

The thought of being a ‘Yes, No’ man appalled the apostle Paul. He realised that such a characterisation would undermine his whole presentation of the gospel. When he and Silas and Timothy preached the gospel in Corinth their message was not a ‘yes and no’, not a ‘maybe’ message. They preached the historical person of Jesus Christ; they preached Jesus, the Son of God, Jesus Christ and him crucified (1:19, 1Cor 2:2). The gospel he preached was Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life. He preached Jesus as the ‘Yes and Amen’ of all the promises of God.

God by definition is faithful (1:18). God does not change. ‘God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it, or has he spoken and it not come to pass’ (Numb 23:19). So when Paul preached the word given him by God, that word was true and unchanging. Let no one say or even think that he was a ‘Yes and No’ man when he preached to the gospel.

When Paul, an apostle ordained by the risen Jesus, and when faithful servants of the Lord like Silas and Timothy preached the gospel, they preached the fulfilment of the promises of the prophets in Jesus Christ our Lord. All the promises contained in the word of God, as in the OT, are ‘Yes in Him’, in Jesus, the Son of God, ‘to the glory of God through us’ (1:20).

Paul was not preaching a new religion, as some in Athens and in Corinth thought. He was preaching the fulfilment of all God’s promises of old, promises set forth under the old covenant and fulfilled in the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. We will later hear Paul’s argument against the teaching of two ways of salvation, the way of the old covenant and the way of the new covenant. There is only one way because the old has given way to the new. The Old Testament cannot be fully understood without the new; it is veiled, and that veil is only taken away in Christ (3:14). It is also true that the New Testament cannot be fully understood without the old.

The God who ‘spoke in time past to the fathers and by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things’ (Heb 1:1,2). God has spoken and revealed all his plans and purposes for his creation in his Son, Jesus Christ. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that God is the one who ‘anointed us’ or set them apart to serve him. He is the one who ‘established us with you in Christ’ (1:21). They were not saved by Paul- or Apollos or Cephas! (1Cor 1:12). They might remember that when the people in the desert grumbled against Moses they were grumbling against the Lord (Exod 17:2, 1Cor 10:9). Paul was but a humble servant of the Lord, but an anointed servant none the less.

Paul did not take God’s anointing lightly, and neither should they. This anointing was more than water baptism- it was baptism in the Holy Spirit. Paul and others sowed the seed but it is God who makes that seed germinate and grow in the heart- to use the picture Paul used in 1Corinthians 3. God put his seal of ownership on, and gives his Spirit to, all who believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. We have the Spirit now as a deposit or guarantee (1:22, 5:5, Eph 1:14).

When you put a deposit on a house you are promising to pay the full amount when required. The house is yours but not fully. When you give an engagement ring you are promising the fullness of marriage in due time. When God gives his Spirit he is promising the fullness of a relationship with him in Jesus Christ in heaven and into eternity, even our transformation into the likeness of Christ (3:18, 1John 3:2). Let the critical Corinthians, and let us, not lose sight of the blessings that are ours in Christ here and now, but especially of the blessings promised when Jesus Christ returns in all his glory. Let us remember that all the promises of God are ‘Yes and Amen’ in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Offender eventually disciplined** 2Corinthians 1:23-2:13

The period between the writing of 1Corinthians and 2Corinthians is reckoned at about one year. It was an ‘*Anna horribilis*’ for the apostle Paul, a year in which his relationship with the church at Corinth was tested to breaking point- not that the apostle ever considered cutting off all ties. He did however, tell them to cut their relationship with a member living in sin and refusing to repent. This ‘excommunication’ was not meant to be permanent but for the purpose of bringing this sinner to repentance, and then to restoration to the fellowship.

Paul, who founded this church, was no longer present but he still maintained his God-given position as apostle, ‘apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God’ (1:1), and as such could not tolerate conduct contrary to the clear command of Scripture within the body of Christ. The apostle called upon the church to exercise discipline with regard to the man living a sexually immoral life. This offender was like a festering sore in this church. His conduct contributed to divisions in the church, not to mention the adoption of libertine attitudes and conduct by other members. Power-play was going on in this church and the apostle Paul was caught in the middle of it- not that he was not up to the task, but it would require a display of many fruits of the Spirit, such as love, longsuffering, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22).

In this passage he continues explaining why he changed his plan to visit Corinth; some in the church were critical of his ‘vacillating’ ways. Our first subheading is, ‘Painful visit and tearful letter’, our second, ‘Forgive the offender’ and our third, ‘Restless in Troas’.

**1. Painful visit and tearful letter**

The time between the two letters that we have in our Bibles was marked by two significant events, namely a ‘painful visit’ and a ‘tearful letter’ (2:1, 4). The visit was unscheduled and was largely responsible for Paul’s change of travel plans, although up till now in this letter he has defended this change on the basis of personal integrity and submission to the will of God. He now writes, again calling God as his witness, that it was out of consideration for them and not out of self-interest that he changed his plan to visit on his way to Macedonia- he was writing this letter from Macedonia. To call God as a witness is a most solemn declaration; it is even more serious than putting your hand on the Bible and declaring you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Paul knew the God of the Bible, unlike many who take this oath in a court of law today.

Why was Paul ‘sparing’ them? What was he ‘sparing’ them from? (1:23). Before answering this question, the apostle assures them that he is not lording it over them as some might have imagined. Yes, he had to take a firm hand and demanded discipline, but he did this out of love. He was their ‘father in the faith’, and as such wanted to see them growing up in the faith and taking responsibility for their own conduct, and the conduct of the church. Their conduct to this point in time showed they were still ‘babes in Christ’ (1Cor 2:3). Paul wanted to deal with them as brothers and sisters in Christ, as ‘fellow workers’ (1:24). He wanted them to stand firm in Christ, not on an apostle or some other leader in the church. This is the way of joy, working together in the harvest field of the Lord. While the apostle’s relationship with this church was currently marked by grief and sorrow, Paul knew it could be, and should be, marked by gladness and joy. Sorrow is not a fruit of the Spirit, but joy is!

Paul’s unscheduled visit to Corinth after sending the letter called 1Corinthians, and his young assistant Timothy, was a painful visit. He writes, ‘So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you’ (2:1 NIV). After hearing of a church member living in incest, Paul wrote to the church telling them not to associate with sexually immoral people- a letter now lost (1Cor 5:1, 9). They apparently misunderstood that letter, so he renews the call for discipline in 1Corinthians. Still no action was taken, so Paul decided to go himself, on what turned out to be a painful visit.

We do not know exactly what happened during this visit but most think it was the same incestuous man still giving trouble. Some think it was another man who spoke very rudely to the apostle (10:10) - remember there were divisions over leadership in this church. But if this man was a well-to-do fellow, he may well have spoken for himself, with his own cheer squad backing him up. His backers were sufficiently influential to stop any disciplinary action being taken against him, so it would seem. How shameful it is when a church leader runs around the meeting hall garnishing votes for his cause.

Returning to Ephesus after this painful visit, Paul decided to write a letter to the church. He realised that a follow up visit would most likely have the same negative outcome, and he did not want the majority becoming even more dejected and sorrowful, living with open sin and bitterness in their church. He did not want them seeing their ‘father in the faith’ again subjected to false accusations and ridicule. Paul would not be able to offer them much comfort or joy if this happened again, nor they him (2:2).

So Paul decided to write a letter instead of visiting. The letter was harsh but was written with tears (7:8, 2:4). He was reticent about sending such a letter, knowing that it would cause them sorrow and might damage his relationship with this church even further, but the situation with this member continuing to live in sin could not go on. It was a great relief to Paul when Titus finally returned to report that this harsh letter had brought about a change of heart, such that the majority acted to discipline the offender, who in turn repented of his sin (2:5,6, 7:8,9).

Paul did not write in the heat of the moment but he did write with a heart torn by anguish and distress, and with many tears- and no doubt with much prayer (2:4). It was not his intention to case grief or sorrow, but if this is what it took for them to act in a godly manner then it was a good outcome. While it was a harsh letter, it was written in love for ‘fellow workers’ in the hope of restoring joy to their relationship. Paul was like a father punishing his child but feeling just as much pain as his child. ‘No discipline seems joyful for the present but painful; nevertheless, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness’ (Heb 12:11). After writing that letter Paul was not able to rest, which is why he was so relieved and full of joy when Titus finally arrived in Macedonia with good news (7:6).

**2. Forgive the offender**

Our sin affects other people either directly or indirectly, despite what secular humanists try to tell us. They have a ‘moral’ law about doing what you like as long as no one else is hurt, but this rule is not working- just look at the confusion about the giving of consent. The sexually immoral man at Corinth was obviously ‘hurting’ his father and his father’s wife (1Cor 5:1), but more than this, he was hurting the whole church. Paul probably spoke to this man when he visited Corinth, but it was the role of the church as a body to discipline him.

Paul’s letter was not so much aimed at the offender as at the church, urging them to take disciplinary action. He wrote, as he says, to put them to the test (2:9). Paul knew the ongoing sin of this man threatened the unity and witness of the church. Indeed, it was giving Satan the opportunity to try and destroy this local church (2:11). Satan loves a divided church because it will be focussed on itself and not on God’s command to take the gospel into all the world.

Paul heard from Titus that the church had responded positively to his harsh letter, and responded positively to the ministry of Titus no doubt. The majority had acted to discipline this offender; in his first letter Paul had told them to cut him off from the fellowship. It had taken a long time for the church to act but they finally took responsibility for discipline within their church. Paul refers to ‘the majority’ so it was not a unanimous decision (2:6). The church was still divided but the silent majority was no longer silent. In too many churches the majority remains silent while an individual, with a few backers, leads the way down to destruction.

The apostle was pleased that the church passed his test and took disciplinary action. He was pleased that the offender responded to their loving discipline and repented of his sin. This does not always happen, but if the discipline is done with love and is accepted by grace it will be restorative. Most children respond positively to loving discipline. Paul tells them to ‘forgive and comfort’ this offender now that he has repented, lest he be ‘swallowed up with too much sorrow’ (2:7). He tells them to reaffirm their love for him (2:8).

This is the power of God’s grace. Without such grace people can be on non-speaking terms for years. ‘Church discipline, important as it is, must not be allowed to develop into a form of graceless rigor in which there is no room for pardon or restoration’. When Jesus told us to pray, ‘Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us’ he meant what he said. An unforgiving Christian is a hypocrite. Paul never forgot how much Jesus had forgiven him, ‘the chief of sinner’ (1Cor 15:9, 1Tim 1:15).

The offender in the church at Corinth was guilty of moral sin, as well as offensive behaviour towards the apostle and the whole church, but Paul asked that he be forgiven and restored to the fellowship now that he had repented. Paul had been deeply hurt by this man but was ready to forgive him if the congregation had done so. In light of the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:19-20 about two or three agreeing on earth, and he being present in their midst, Paul would forgive ‘in the presence of Christ’ (2:10). Referring again to the Lord’s Prayer, it is no accident that the words about forgiving those who sin against us are followed by, ‘but deliver us from the evil one’, the evil one being Satan or the devil (2:11, Luke 11:4).

**3. Restless in Troas**

Paul concludes his explanation of his change of travel plans, which began in verse 12, by sharing with the church in Corinth the anxiety and restlessness which he felt in the time between sending his harsh or tearful letter and the return of Titus. It was during this time that he was forced to leave Ephesus (1:8), travelling north to Troas, the city from which he launched his mission into Macedonia and Achaia on his second missionary journey.

Paul tells of a door being opened by the Lord for him to preach the gospel in Troas, but he remained restless in spirit because Titus had not returned from Corinth (2:12, 13). Maybe they had arranged to meet in Troas, but Paul knew he would be travelling up through Macedonia anyway. Keeping a balance between evangelism and pastoral ministry is not always easy. So his restless spirit took him across to Macedonia where he met Titus (7:6).

Titus was a loyal Christian co-worker, the likes of which are hard to find found. Paul calls him, ‘my true son in our common faith’ (Titus 1:4). Paul was greatly comforted as he listened to the report brought by this loyal co-worker. His report was most comforting and encouraging to the apostle, who was so deeply concerned for the church in Corinth.

**Sharing in Christ’s triumph** 2Corinthians 2:14-17

Being in lockdown because of coronavirus has been difficult for school children, and for us not being able to physically gather for worship. But it has been a good time for extra reading and the occasional TV show. I watched a show called ‘Mr Jones’ which told the background of George Orwell’s famous allegory about communism called ‘Animal farm’. I also watched a documentary on the life of Julius Caesar and other Roman emperors, extending my knowledge of the Romans in Europe beyond what I learnt from Shakespeare’s plays, and Asterix and Obelix comics!

Caesar was the first emperor of Rome; it was previously a republic ruled by a senate. He was a general who led an army in conquering the barbarians in Gaul and into Britain. He returned to Rome in such triumph that he was able to assume power as the first dictator or emperor of the empire. This documentary portrayed other would -be emperors leading an army into battle for the purpose of returning to Rome in a victory procession. With overwhelming popular support they were able to claim the seat of emperor. The Titus Arch in Rome depicts the victory procession of Emperor Vespasian and his son Titus after they destroyed Jerusalem in AD70.

The apostle Paul had not been to Rome when he wrote this letter to the Corinthians but he knew of the Roman victory procession. He knew how the general rode his horse ahead of his soldiers, with captives being led along at the end of this procession into Rome. As pagans, these Romans made sacrifices to their gods as part of victory celebrations. They also had priests burning sweet smelling spices along the way. It was a grand occasion. Paul uses this picture in the passage before us, and also in Colossians 2:15.

We are only in the second chapter of this letter but have come to a major change of direction, what most call a digression, and what some call an insertion from another letter by an editor. Paul has been writing about his change of travel plan because some at Corinth were criticising him for this. He tells of a restless spirit while in Troas because Titus had not returned from Corinth, and of moving over to Macedonia to look for him (2:13). Paul picks up on this theme again in chapter 7 to tell of his relief when Titus finally came (7:6).

This digression begins, ‘Now thanks be to God’ (2:14). He is suddenly overtaken by gratitude towards God, probably from seeing Titus. Titus brought good news and bad news from Corinth. The good news related to the decision of the majority to discipline the immoral man (2:6), and the bad news related to newcomers teaching heresy in their church. So, although we call it a digression, the theme of these four chapters fits with the main tenor of the letter; it is ‘an immensely rich outpouring of triumphant faith in praise of the unfailing adequacy of the grace of God for every conceivable situation, no matter how threatening and destructive it may seem to be’. In this passage we will note firstly, ‘Triumph in Christ’ secondly, ‘Fragrance of Christ’ and thirdly, ‘Speak in Christ’.

**1. Triumph in Christ**

When Paul cries out with thankfulness to God, he does so with sincerity and exuberance. He is so overcome with thankfulness that he breaks into metaphorical language without specifying the reason for his thankfulness, although we have suggested it related to reunion with his fellow worker Titus. In looking to God with deep thankfulness, he pictures God as ‘leading us in triumph in Christ’ (2:14). This was not the first time he had cause to adopt this picture in giving thanks and praise to God because He ‘always’ leads us in triumph in Christ. We noted his use of this picture in relation to Christ’s victory over the ‘principalities and powers’ opposed to him; legalism being one of these principles (Col 2:15). These opponents of Christ are pictured as captives being paraded by a victorious Roman general.

Some commentators think that being ‘led in triumph in Christ’ means being made a public spectacle for the sake of the gospel. Paul was no stranger to ridicule and suffering for preaching the gospel, but is this really what he feels triumphant about as his writes this verse about God leading us in triumph in Christ? Is it not more of a reference to the victory of Christ on the cross and in his resurrection, the victory he refers to in 1Corinthians 15:57? God is the general who has conquered and Paul is one of his soldiers. Calvin writes, ‘Paul means that he had a share in the triumph that God was celebrating’.

It was Jesus who said, ‘I will build my church, and gates of Hades shall not prevail against it’ (Matt 16:18). Paul ministered with this confidence, confidence in the words of Christ, not in his own words or own strength. In this way he was different to those peddling God’s word, as referred to in verse 17. The church cannot be likened to a football team depending on its own strength to bring them victory, or to a business out to get the most clients and the greatest profit. Too often churches and Christian ministers operate on this basis- the biggest and the best. In the Middle Ages it was magnificent cathedrals that signalled greatness. In the last century we have seen glass cathedrals and mega churches as pictures of triumphant Christianity.

The triumph of God that Paul reflected upon was not about bigness in buildings or number. It was about God’s strength being made perfect in weakness (12:10). God was triumphant in Christ, in the cross and the empty tomb. He is pleased with faithful and sacrificial servants spreading the message of the gospel. Paul was such a follower, a servant who could say, ‘Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ’ (1Cor 11:1).

**2. Fragrance of Christ**

The documentary I saw did not refer to the burning of incense during the victory procession but this was apparently the practice. They had trumpets playing also. The procession was designed to stimulate all the senses. Continuing with the metaphor, the apostle Paul refers to the fragrance or aroma of the knowledge of God in every place, ‘the fragrance of Christ’ (2:14, 15). Any converted Jew like himself, would have smelt the incense that was burned on the altar of incense in the temple, constructed according to the pattern given to Moses on the mountain. That incense would have covered the smell of the burnt offerings being made in the temple. It probably served the same purpose in the Roman victory procession where the smell of burning flesh may have been that of prisoners being killed in the arena.

When I was in Kenya teaching in a Bible college I attended a funeral every Saturday; they conducted all their funerals on Saturday. I went to the village to find the coffin at the front of the house and the people gathered around. The person must have died on the Monday because there was a smell coming from the coffin, even though a man was spraying perfume around it. Remember Lazarus who had been in the tomb four days: ‘Lord by this time there will be a stench’ they said to Jesus (John 11:39).

What about the tomb of Jesus? Mary and other women went to his tomb as soon as possible after the Sabbath to anoint the dead body of Jesus with spices and fragrant oils, but when they got there the tomb was empty. Their fragrances were not needed because Jesus was no longer dead; the angel told them, ‘He is risen’. As Mary stood outside the tomb weeping Jesus appeared and spoke to her. We do not read of her trying to wrap his body in the fragrances she had brought, because he was no longer dead but alive!

Paul pictures the risen Jesus as the fragrance of divine knowledge being spread in every place ‘through us’, through preachers like Paul (2:14). This fragrance of the gospel is spread into every place by the preaching of the word, the preaching of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. This was the calling Paul received from God, the calling to spread the fragrance of Christ in all the world. God wants all people to smell this fragrance, not just those who are being saved (2:15). He wants us to be like the baker sending out the smell of fresh bread into the street. I have been told that bakers actually pipe the smell from their ovens into the street to attract customers. God wants you to be like the baker spreading the fragrance of Christ into the world through everything you say and do. This world of death and decay certainly needs the sweet smell of the gospel.

Tragically, the gospel will not smell sweet to everyone. To some it will be ‘the aroma/smell of death leading to death’ (2:16). The gospel is often spoken of in terms of light banishing the darkness, but as Jesus said, some love the darkness (John 3:19, 20). So it is that some love the stench of death; these are those who are perishing. Light is very pervasive, and so is the fragrance of Christ, the sweet smell of life in Christ.

Outside the tomb of Jesus on the first day of the week, Mary was smelling the resurrection life, not the stench of death that she expected. Not long afterward, Pharisees and Roman rulers came to the same tomb hoping to smell death, and in a sense they continued to smell death as they searched desperately for the dead body of the One they crucified. Only the smell of death would make them happy.

Sadly, there are still people today who love the smell of death. They desperately want to smell the death of the one who is the fragrance of knowledge and love sent by God into this world. To the one Jesus is the fragrance of life, to the other the stench of death. You have heard the gospel, so what will it be for you- life or death? And if you have smelled the fragrance of Christ, are you diffusing this fragrance among those you love as family or neighbours?

**3. Speak in Christ**

The apostle goes on to ask, ‘Who is sufficient for these things?’ (2:16)- who indeed! Paul then says, ‘for we are not’, but the answer to this question comes in verse 5 of the next chapter: ‘Our sufficiency is from God, who has made us ministers of the new covenant’. Paul was not sufficient, and we are not sufficient in and of ourselves, but God has made us sufficient. What a tremendous promise! ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:13). Are you ‘testing’ Christ to see how much he will strengthen you? Are you allowing His fullness to dwell in you, such that you spread the fragrance of life in this dead and decaying world? As Barnett writes, ‘The message incarnated in the messenger is a fragrance of life to those who obey it, but to others it has the odour of death’.

Paul was a sincere and faithful preacher of the word of God. He preached with care, care that he spoke to truth as given him by the Lord, and with prayer, prayer that the message would be received and believed. But the newcomers in the church at Corinth were neither careful nor prayerful in their preaching. They were ‘peddling the word of God’ as Paul says (2:17). These men, these false teachers, might be eloquent and persuasive but they were also insincere, arrogant and self-sufficient- in contrast to Paul’s sufficiency which was from God. Their interest in the gospel was what they could get out of it as peddlers or sellers of cheap, adulterated merchandise- in contrast to Paul who asked for no money from the Corinthians.

Too many are hearing a watered-down version of the gospel in our day. Preachers are asking for less than the gospel demands; namely recognition of sin and repentance from it- remember the man living an immoral life in Corinth. Preachers are promising what the gospel does not promise, namely health, wealth, and happiness in this fallen world. Do be careful and discerning when hearing, or when preaching the gospel, which is ‘the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes’ (Rom 1:16). Speak and listen in the sight of God in Christ.

**Commendation and confidence in Christ** 2Corinthians 3:1-6

Jesus of Nazareth was rejected by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, especially the Pharisees. The Pharisees were teachers of the law- Paul was a Pharisee before his dramatic conversion. They revered Moses as the giver of the law but they did not understand the limitations of the law, and the promises of fulfilment in the new covenant. The prophets, and Moses himself, spoke of a new covenant. So when Jesus came along preaching the fulfilment of ‘the law and the prophets’ in himself, the Pharisees rejected him. They accused Jesus of bearing witness of himself or of self- commendation.

The Law of Moses required two witnesses to establish the truth, so who was bearing witness to Jesus (John 8:13, 17). What man, or two men, would give Jesus a letter of commendation. The Pharisees gave Saul (Paul) letters to hunt down Christians in Damascus but Jesus had no such letter (Acts 9:2). Jesus answered that he did have two witnesses but they were not men. Jesus appealed to his works as bearing witness that God the Father sent him, and his own witness as also being valid (John 8:18).

The apostle Paul faced similar scepticism, and indeed rejection, from some in the church at Corinth because he did not have letters of commendation. He had spent over eighteen months preaching the gospel, and establishing this church, and no one questioned his credentials during that time. It was only after other teachers came to Corinth, including false teachers from the church in Jerusalem, that they began asking Paul for his credentials. These men, these ‘peddlers of the word of God’ (2:17), brought letters written by supposed leaders in the church at Jerusalem.

How would Paul defend his apostolic authority, and the ministry of himself and his associates, in the face of questioning from his detractors in Corinth? His detractors had sided with the man living in incest to undermine the authority of Paul, and the newcomers were quick to support this group. Our subheadings are: ‘Commendation letters’, ‘Christ’s letter’, ‘Competence is from God’ and ‘New Covenant ministers’.

**1. Commendation letters**

In the realm of science, truth was once established by repeatable experiments. One hundred and fifty year ago the theory of evolution was proposed by Charles Darwin; it was and is a theory because it was not based on true science. Nowadays this theory is accepted as truth by the majority, truth established by majority opinion. The theory of man-made climate change is following the same trajectory, truth established by majority vote. There are people who think that theological truth is also established by popular opinion. Some scholars support their opinions, not by referring to Scripture, but to the writings of other scholars.

Jesus criticised the Pharisees for receiving honour from one another and not seeking honour that comes from the only God (John 5:44). Paul was critical of those peddling the word of God in Corinth, men who were ‘measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves’ (10:12). They came with letters of commendation written on paper or papyrus by other men. Paul was disappointed that the church received these men on the basis of their letters alone, letters that may well have been phony. Their teaching and their lives were certainly phony.

Paul was not condemning the practice of carrying letters of commendation when people went from one church to another: Apollos was given such a letter, and Phoebe also it seems (Acts 18:27, Rom 16:1). But this practice was being abused by these newcomers to Corinth. Just who these newcomers were and who was giving them letters of commendation, is not clear. We know they were Hebrews (11:22), meaning they were probably from the Jerusalem church. We read of a group of converted Pharisees in this church demanding that believers get circumcised and keep the law of Moses; other converted Jews were joining this group (Acts 15:5, 21:20). While circumcision is not mentioned, Moses and the law get mentioned later in this chapter.

The apostles had fled Jerusalem by this time, leaving James as leader of the Jerusalem church. He had to deal with this group that was zealous for the law. It is hard to imagine him giving a letter of recommendation to these false teachers that had come to Corinth, men working to destroy the ministry of the apostle Paul. Since these ‘peddlers of the word of God’ wanted letters of commendation from the Corinthians also (3:1), their letters might have been a list of anyone they could persuade to sign; were they akin to the product reviews you get with online shopping- do you really believe these reviews?

**2. Christ’s letter**

Paul came to Corinth with no written letter of recommendation, but he had such a letter now! ‘You are our letter written in our hearts and read by all men’ (3:2 -some translations have, ‘written on your hearts’). What was the apostle talking about? Letters of commendation were to assure the church of the newcomer’s faith and ability to preach the gospel. Paul needed no such letters because, in the first place, he was not a newcomer. He had lived with them for a year and a half. They heard him preach and saw how he lived. Do you ask for a letter of commendation from a person you have known for such a length of time?

The apostle counters this criticism about having no letter of commendation by saying the people themselves were such a letter (3:2).They had heard the gospel preached by Paul and believed in Jesus Christ as saviour and Lord. The Holy Spirit had come upon them and changed their hearts and their lives. Recall that some of them were idolaters, thieves, adulterers, drunkards, or homosexuals. The change in their hearts was obvious to everyone. They were, in effect, Paul’s letter of commendation (3:2).

Paul quickly qualifies what he just said by declaring that he took no credit for their change of heart. He calls them an ‘epistle of Christ, ministered by us’ (3:3). Christ, by the Spirit, was in effect the author of the letter. They were a letter ‘come from Christ, for apart from Christ and his gospel they would not exist’. Paul was but a ‘minister’ or servant of God, used by God in conveying the gospel to the ears of these people. The picture of a letter written on the heart continues, with the Holy Spirit being pictured as the ink by which the letter is written (3:3). The Holy Spirit was active in their new birth or justification, and also in their sanctification, the new life they were living in Christ.

Paul concludes the picture with reference to the material on which this letter was written. All letters have a writer, who needs ink and paper to write on, and then someone to convey the letter, and in this case open the letter and read it. The apostle Paul conveyed the ‘letter of Christ’ written by the Holy Spirit on the hearts of these believers, such that they became living letters of Christ.

Paul was contrasting letters written with ink on papyrus, which he now compares with tablets of stone (3:3). ‘Tablets of flesh’ and ‘tablets of stone’ reminds us, and most probably reminded the apostle, of what the prophets wrote (Jer 31:33, Ezek 36:26). It also takes us back to the time of Moses and the law being written on tablets of stone. He will make further use of this contrast, the contrast between the law written on tablets of stone and the Spirit given to believers in the new covenant.

**3. Competence is from God**

I have met preachers or evangelists who boast about the number of people they have baptised. Paul never used such a measure for boasting; he hated all personal boasting. Paul was focused on the ongoing ministry of the church, to the glory of God. The church that demonstrates the love of God will attract people to the gospel; ‘By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ said Jesus (John 13:35).

Paul spoke in the previous chapter about the triumph of Christ and the aroma of the gospel, which is life to some and death to others. Paul handled the word of God very carefully, knowing its power to give life to one or bring death to another. He declared, ‘Who is sufficient for these things’ (2:16). He now answers this otherwise rhetorical question saying, we are not sufficient in and of ourselves, but ‘our sufficiency is from God’ (3:5- the Greek for ‘sufficiency’ or ‘competence’ refers to attaining a certain amount or measure or qualification). Some translations have competence rather than sufficiency, which reminds us of trade certificates which often refer to the competency of the student.

Whatever competency Paul had, as judged by whatever letter people want to use, this competency was from God, not himself. He was confident in his ministry but that confidence came ‘through Christ toward God’ (3:4). Apart from Christ he was nothing and his ministry one of self-commendation and self-glorification. But in Christ and through Christ they ministered in the presence of God, and to the glory of God the Father. Paul would not be measuring himself against his opponents to declare he was superior. ‘Total inability in ourselves, total ability in Christ- it is doubtful whether anything more important than this can ever be said about our life and work as Christians’ write Geoffrey Grogan.

**4. New Covenant ministers**

It was God who made Paul and his companions sufficient or competent as ministers of the new covenant. Paul usually introduced himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, but in Romans he adds the qualification, ‘bondservant of Jesus Christ’. He was not peddling the word of God for profit but was compelled to preach Christ and him crucified (1Cor 9:6).

The apostle moves on from defending his personal integrity to explaining what he actually preaches. Reference to the new covenant in verse 6 indicates an understanding of the old covenant, which the false teachers were apparently reviving. Jesus spoke of a new covenant in his blood. He declared he had come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, to fulfil all that was written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning him (Mat 5:17, Luke 24:44). Jesus did not see himself in opposition to Moses or as an alternative to Moses. He declared a new covenant that superseded an old covenant that was passing away (Heb 8:13). He declared a new covenant that, unlike the old covenant, had power to save; ‘For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin’ (Heb 10:4).

The false teachers came to Corinth with letters of commendation, with words on paper written by men. Paul defended himself by letters written by the Spirit on the hearts of men and women. This led him to refer to the old covenant in terms of tablets of stone and the letter that kills. The law is good because it is written by God, but we have no power to keep the law. Moreover, the law carries a curse upon the person who fails to keep all of it, and ‘by the works of the law no flesh will be justified’ (Gal 3:10, 2:16). Paul says ‘letter’ not ‘law’ but the meaning is the same: ‘The letter kills’ (3:6). In Romans 8 he writes of the ‘law of sin and death’ from which we are set free by ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 8:2). Here he writes of the new covenant that it is ‘of the Spirit; for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life’ (3:6).

The new covenant is in the ‘blood of Jesus Christ shed for you’ (Luke 22:20). In the new covenant Christ shed his blood for the forgiveness of our sin, and the Holy Spirit is poured out to effect that forgiveness, to change our hearts from stone to hearts of flesh. Dead, stony hearts are made alive through the word of God and the power of the Spirit (Eph 2:1). Such work of the Spirit was prophesied over four hundred years before Jesus came (Jer 31:31-34, Ezek 36:26), and even earlier in history by Moses (Deut 18:15).

The new covenant was not something invented by Paul or even by Jesus. It is written in the Scriptures of the OT. Paul’s language reflects that of the prophets even if he does not quote them directly. Anyone depending on Moses or the old covenant for salvation, whether Jew or Christian, must consider these words. Anyone thinking that their good works will help save them must consider these words. Legalism of any kind brings death not freedom. It is the Holy Spirit, and him alone, who brings life to hearts of stone. Let us be sure that we are serving ‘in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter’ (Rom 7:6), for ‘the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’.

**The glory of Christ and the new covenant**  2Corinthians 3:7-18

At the front of my house is a solar powered light. After a sunny day it shines brightly in the night, although it begins to dim by morning. As dawn breaks, the dim light of these solar lights becomes useless. I can see my way around without the help of these lights. And then the sun comes up with such powerful light that I cannot look into it. The sun fills every dark place with light.

If we think of light being glory, the solar powered lights represent Moses and the old covenant, and a glory that is passing away; some commentators refer to the moon as this dimming light. The light of the dawn represents Jesus and the new covenant, and the light of the full sun represents Christ in heavenly glory, glory which we have not yet seen, but will do so when Christ returns. Three apostles were given a glimpse of Christ in his heavenly glory on the mount of transfiguration (Luke 9:29-31).

The apostle Paul does not draw upon a natural analogy, at least not in this passage. Rather, he draws upon the story of the shining face of Moses as an analogy of the passing glory of the old covenant. He has already started comparing Moses and the old covenant, to Christ and the new covenant, declaring himself to be a minister of the new covenant, and by implication, his opponents in Corinth as ministers of the old covenant.

This analogy stemmed from him defending himself against the written letters of commendation that these newcomers brought, most likely from the church in Jerusalem. They were letters written on papyrus, effectively on tablets of stone (3:3). Tablets of stone were at the heart of the old covenant; God gave these to Moses on the mountain. When Moses came down from the mountain carrying these tablets (for the second time), his face shone such that he had to put a veil over his face when talking to the people (Exod 34:29f). From this story Paul teaches about the surpassing and continuing glory of the new covenant, as well as the taking away of the veil in Christ. Our subheadings are: ‘A greater glory’, ‘A veiled glory’, and ‘An increasing glory’.

**1. A greater glory**

The old covenant mediated by Moses, ‘written and engraved on stones’, was a ‘ministry of death’ (3:7). Paul had just written that ‘the letter kills but the Spirit gives life’ (3:6). The covenant written on stones was not a failure- it was never meant to save. The old covenant was meant to reveal sin: ‘the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith’ (Gal 3:24).

By revealing sin, the law condemns sin and effectively kills. It was and is necessary to reveal sin, and God’s wrath upon sin and sinners, as a prerequisite to salvation, salvation by faith. There is no salvation in the law (Gal 2:16). God knew that no human being was able to keep the whole law. So Paul calls the ministry of the old covenant the ‘ministry of condemnation’, in contrast to the ministry of the new covenant which is the ‘ministry of righteousness’ or acquittal (3:9).

The law delivered by Moses is important in that it reflects the character of God and his purposes. God is holy, and the ‘law is holy, and the commandment holy, just and good’ (Rom 7:12). To this extent the law is glorious. Remember the power and glory of God revealed on Mt Sinai. The people trembled and pleaded with Moses that God not speak to them directly, ‘lest we die’ (Exod 20:20). Paul takes us to a later incident when Moses came down from the mountain after spending a second period of forty days in the presence of the Lord. ‘The Lord spoke to Moses face to face’ (Exod 33:11). The effect of Moses being in the presence of the Lord was that when he came down, the skin on his face was shining (Exod 34:29); no further description is given, but the effect was to fill Aaron and others with fear, such that Moses had to put a veil on his face.

Paul uses the shining face of Moses to picture the glory of the old covenant. There was no doubting the glory of the old covenant- Paul makes no attempt to dismiss this glory. What he does is declare that the glory of the new covenant is greater, much greater. He refers to the new covenant as the ministry of the Spirit rather than the letter, the ministry that gives life and is therefore more glorious.

Not only is the glory of the new covenant greater, it is enduring; it is not a glory that fades away. The fundamental weakness of the old covenant was that it was passing or fading away (3:7, 11, and 13). Paul makes this point by again referring to the shining face of Moses. Moses writes that whenever he went in to speak with the Lord he took the veil off his face and that he came out with his face shining again- this is what the apostle Paul understands anyway when he writes of the ‘glory of his [Moses] countenance which is passing away’ (3:7). The Greek term translated ‘passing away’ or ‘fading away’ (NIV), or ‘brought to an end’ (ESV) refers to ‘non-physical destruction by a superior force replacing it, e.g. light destroys darkness’. So my analogy of a small solar-powered light becoming useless as dawn breaks is appropriate. In the night those lights are great, but with the dawn of a new day they become useless. ‘The glory of the sun does not deny the glory of the moon but certainly surpasses it’.

Under the old covenant man was left a convicted sinner, but under the new covenant he is put right with God, the demands of the law having been satisfied in Jesus who inaugurated it. The glory of the new covenant is greater or more excellent. Moreover, this glory remains and is not passing away like the glory of the old covenant.

**2. A veiled glory**

As Paul starts talking about the hope, the freedom, and the joy that he boldly proclaims in the gospel of Jesus Christ, he is drawn back to the picture of Moses with a veil over his face. This veil was not just hiding the glory of his shining face but the fading nature of this glory: ‘Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away’ (3:13). The veil hid the fact that the glory of the old covenant was coming to an end.

Paul then pictures this veil being transferred to the hearts and minds of many reading the OT. The veil stopped them seeing that the old covenant was coming to an end; indeed the law itself, and especially the prophets, pointed to this end, to fulfilment in the person of Messiah or Christ (e.g. Jer 31)

‘The veil is taken away in Christ’ (3:14). Christ is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, as Jesus himself declared (Mat 5:17, Luke 24:44). The apostle Paul knew all about the blindness with which the Jews read the OT, especially the Pharisees. As a Pharisee, a man zealous for the law, he went all the way to Damascus to catch and condemn Jews who were not following the Law of Moses as the way of salvation. His ministry as a Jew was a ministry of condemnation and death. Contrast the new man Paul, the preacher of the gospel. He was still travelling to distant places to preach in synagogues but to preach a message of hope, the message of righteousness or justification in Jesus Christ.

The change from Saul to Paul demonstrates the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. Paul does not point to his conversion at this point in his letter, but on the Damascus Road he saw the dazzling glory of the risen Christ, and felt the power of the Holy Spirit changing his heart and his life. He experienced the veil that blinded him being taken away in Christ (3:14-16). As Paul preached in synagogues he rejoiced in seeing the veil lifted from the hearts of elect Jews, but disappointed it remained ‘unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament’ with others (3:14).

Disappointment turned to disgust and anger when he heard of men coming to the church at Corinth with a teaching that effectively reimposed the veil. We must be alert to men and women in the church today who still want to revive the glory of the old covenant, a glory that not only passed away, as Paul declares numerous times in this passage, but has passed away because it is eclipsed by the more excellent glory of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

The veil that was on the face of Moses is taken away in Jesus Christ (3:14). There is no veil on the face of Jesus because, by the Spirit of God promised by the prophets (Ezek 36:27), those who turn to Jesus can comprehend his glory. Three apostles saw his ‘unveiled’ glory on the mountain, and the apostle Paul saw him on the Damascus Road. We see his unveiled glory in reading his word and praying in the spirit. We will not see the fullness of his glory however, until he returns and we are changed. Then the twilight will give way to the full and dazzling light of the sun/Son.

**3. An increasing glory**

In the closing two verses of this chapter, Paul writes about the Spirit and the Lord. Is ‘the Lord’ Yahweh, the Lord to whom Moses turned? Yes and No! He is the same Lord but now revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. When one ‘turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away’ (3:16), and the ‘veil is taken away in Christ’ (3:14).

The new covenant is spoken of in terms of the ‘Spirit giving life’, back in verse 6, while here in verse 17, the Spirit gives liberty or freedom. In the new covenant there is no deadness of the letter but life and liberty in the Spirit. The veil has been lifted in Christ so that in the new covenant we see with unveiled faces, yet the glory of the Lord is such that we see in a mirror dimly (1Cor 13:12). The glory of the Lord is such that, as we cannot look at the midday sun directly, we cannot see the fullness of his glory. For the present we see his glory as reflected in a mirror; this ‘reflection’ may also refer to us reflecting the glory of the Lord in our person and our life (3:18 NIV).

While we cannot gaze upon the glory of the Lord in this life, we will when he is fully revealed and our transformation is completed (1John 3:2). For the present, we are ‘being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord’, or ‘from the Lord, who is Spirit’ (3:18). In Romans 12:2 Paul writes of believers being ‘transformed by the renewing of your minds’. Having been justified in Christ by the Spirit, we are now being sanctified by the same indwelling Spirit of Christ. This process of sanctification includes the process of glorification (Rom 8:30), the ever increasing glory of a gentle and quiet spirit (1Peter 3:4), the process of growing in knowledge and grace revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is our inner beauty and glory that is changing, that is increasing as we draw closer and closer to our Lord. Our outward appearance will not change till Jesus returns in heavenly glory. This inner beauty, this ever increasing glory, is a reflection of the glory of the Lord, as mentioned. The closer we draw to Him, the more we will radiate his glory among those who are being saved.

We may find it difficult to grasp these glorious truths, but we must at least turn away from the written letter that kills and towards the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit who gives life. Moses would have endorsed the words of John, the last of the prophets, when he said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). The picture of the veil and the shining face of Moses is summed up in the words of John the Baptist, ‘He [Jesus] must increase, I must decrease’ (John 3:30). To God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and praise forever and ever, amen.

**Gospel ministry** 2Corinthians 4:1-6

The leaders of our country are trying to get everyone to step forward and get ‘the jab’, get vaccinated against coronavirus. One suggestion was to give people $300 if they got ‘the jab’. I heard that somewhere they were giving people $30 and a lottery ticket. Such incentives may work with vaccination, and saving people from dying of a virus, but would such an incentive work with getting people to come to church or to believe in Jesus? Some years ago a neighbour, a businessman, offered to help me get more people into our church. Not many churches offer cash incentives for people to come, although some do preach the promise of prosperity, and many have adapted the gospel message so as not to offend people. Some years ago someone set up a cafe church.

The apostle Paul used no such ‘sweeteners’ or ‘techniques’ in his preaching. He preached Jesus Christ and him crucified. He preached that all must repent of sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. He renounced all deceitful and underhanded ways of getting people through the door of the church. Moreover, he refused to accept any personal accolades or praise. He ministered as a servant of Christ and gave all praise to his Master and Lord. Preachers must not look to businessmen or politicians for help in their ministry; we have Christ and the Holy Spirit as our example and our help.

In the city of Corinth, the apostle Paul preached the gospel of Christ crucified and raised again on the third day. He preached to Jews, who had the OT, and to Gentiles who worshipped man-made gods in man-made ways. The Lord, by his Spirit, touched the hearts of many who heard this preaching, and they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, after he moved on from Corinth other preachers came to this city, men preaching another gospel. A case of sexual immorality had, in the meantime, divided this church and led to other corrupt conduct. The newcomers exploited this division and joined in undermining the authority of the apostle Paul and indeed, undermining the gospel he preached. False teaching inevitably leads to corrupt or immoral behaviour, and vice versa- corrupt conduct is fertile ground for false teaching.

How is the faithful preacher of the gospel to respond to accusations regarding his integrity and the truth of the gospel he preaches? Let us see how the apostle Paul responds to accusations aimed at him by a group within the church at Corinth. We will focus on three points: ‘gospel ministry’, ‘god of this age’, and, ‘glory of Christ’.

**1. Gospel ministry**

When Paul heard about sexual immorality in the church at Corinth, about the incestuous man in particular, he called upon the church to discipline this man, to put him out of the church if necessary. He wrote a letter to his effect, and then another letter that we call 1Corinthians. Finally, he went to Corinth on what was a ‘painful visit’, and afterwards wrote a ‘tearful letter’. His pastoral persistence finally paid off and the majority disciplined this man, but not before a torrent of accusations were thrown at the apostle.

Paul was accused of vacillating with regard to a proposed visit; some thought he had given up on them or lost heart for this church (4:1). Paul was frustrated and exhausted in his ministry to the Corinthians, but he did not lose heart because the mercy of God sustained him. He ministered to the glory of God, not for his own glory. The Jews or Jewish converts who came from Jerusalem with letters of commendation were, however, looking for further commendation. Paul had no such letters from men, so they began undermining Paul’s authority, and even the gospel that he preached.

This chapter begins, ‘Therefore, since we have this ministry’ (4:1), so it is connected to the previous chapter, where Paul contrasted the ministry of condemnation and death with the ministry of the Spirit and righteousness, to which he was called. This ministry was given to him by God in his mercy, or more specifically, by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He was called by Christ and was answerable to Christ, not to the people at Corinth, for his conduct, as well as the gospel he preached. He did not ride roughshod over their feelings of course, but in the end, whatever he did was ‘in the sight of God’ (4:2).

Paul declares that he had renounced all secret and shameful ways (4:2). He was neither dishonest nor devious in his ministry of the word. Paul never accepted financial support from this infant church, even though he was entitled to it. This, and the fact that he promoted a collection for the poor churches in Judea, led to his opponents accusing him being devious (12:16, 17). Moreover, his opponents seem to have accused him of adulterating the word of God (4:2). They accused him of denigrating Moses and not upholding the demands of the law. They of course, failed to give Jesus his proper place as meditator of the new covenant, and as the fulfilment of the law. Paul was preaching the truth as revealed to him by the risen Jesus. He was not watering down the demands of the law for the sake of the Gentiles; he was preaching the fulfilment of the law in Jesus Christ for both Jew and Gentile. For Paul, the word of God included the OT as well as the gospel he preached- what is our NT.

In a book titled ‘Reformed preaching’, Joel Beeke emphasises that preaching is not just from head to head, but from heart to heart- he calls this experiential preaching. A teacher simply conveys knowledge, maybe with a certain passion, but a preachers conveys knowledge that he has experienced. There can be no doubt that Paul ‘lived’ the gospel that he preached. The word that he preached affected his own heart and hence his preaching. The preacher wants to see people listening to the word of God, but he receives blessings even as he prepares his message. Beeke writes of Paul preaching ‘in the sight of God’ as if ‘he spoke while standing before the very throne of heaven’.

Paul had a deep conviction that God sees all his motives and actions (1:23), and that everything he has done will become apparent on the Day of Judgment (5:10). He appeals to ‘every man’s conscience’ not just to emotions. He had a Spirit-illuminated conscience, and he prayed that the conscience of his hearer would be similarly illuminated by the Holy Spirit. As Paul defends himself and his ministry against these accusations he is, in fact, describing the ministry of the newcomers at Corinth, men ‘peddling the word of God’ (2:17), men looking for the praise of men (3:1). They were displaying the characteristics of Satan in their craftiness. They were the ones seeking to hide the truth from their hearers. They were the ones keeping the veil over the eyes of their hearers, the veil that is taken away in Christ (3:14). Paul was endeavouring to lift that veil as he preached the truth of the gospel, knowing that ultimately only the Holy Spirit can do this.

Paul also knew that the hearts of some would remain veiled. All are born in sin and as such are blind to the truth. God in his grace opens the eyes of many who hear the gospel, but some remain blind. Some prefer darkness to light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). We, like the apostle, sadly acknowledge that there are ‘those who are perishing’ (4:3), but we do not know who they are so we must press on, like the apostle, urging each one to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have not yet repented and believed then I urge you to do so now, before it is too late. I urge you in the name of Jesus Christ, get off the broad road that leads to destruction and onto the narrow road that leads to life (Mat 7:13, 14).

**2. God of this age**

When Jesus told the Jews who believed in him, ‘If the Son sets you free you shall be free indeed’, they objected saying, ‘Abraham is our father’ (John 8:36, 39). They also clung to Moses and the law. Paul was facing the same ‘blindness’ in the false teachers at Corinth. Jesus told the ‘blind’ Jews that they were of their ‘father the devil’. Paul similarly refers to the devil, or the ’god of this age’, as blinding the minds of those who do not believe, and hence are perishing (4:3, 4).

The battle going on in the church at Corinth was a battle for the minds and hearts of the people- a spiritual battle. Jesus won this battle through the cross and resurrection- which is why Paul preached Christ crucified and risen. But on earth in Paul’s day, and still in our day, this battle is still playing out. Christ has won the victory and we preach his victory in the gospel, which is why the devil hates such preaching. Preach Moses, preach the law, preach rituals, preach a social gospel, preach a prosperity gospel, and Satan is happy, but preach Christ and him crucified and he hates it and stirs up his agents to oppose you.

Satan does all he can, as allowed by God, to stop the light of the gospel shining into your heart (4:4). He does not want you to hear the truth; he does not want you to see the light of Christ’s glory. On the Damascus road Paul saw that light in a physical way, but it was the spiritual reality that he preached. He didn’t conduct tours to a monument set up on the road when he had this vision! His eyes were blinded but his heart was illuminated by this encounter with the risen Jesus, ‘who is the image of God’ (4:4). Satan hated this truth of Jesus being the Son and the image of God, and so did his agents who had come to Corinth with another gospel. The ministry of condemnation and death did not worry ‘the god of this age’, but the ministry of righteousness and the glory of Jesus Christ was literally the death of Satan and his followers.

**3. Glory of Christ**

On the Damascus road Paul saw something more glorious than the radiant face of Moses- he saw the face of the risen Jesus, ‘the radiance of God’s glory and exact representation of his being’ (Heb 1:3)- or, as he writes here, ‘who is the image of God’. Paul did not see the incarnate Christ as the other apostles did, but he did see the risen Christ in his heavenly glory. That light, and especially the voice that he heard, penetrated to the depths of his veiled heart. The veil was lifted and he saw Christ as the fulfilment and end of the law. He was a changed man, a new creation in Christ Jesus (5:17). After being filled with the Holy Spirit he went forth to preach the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Lord of glory.

With the false teachers in mind, Paul again assures the Corinthians that he did not preach himself but Jesus Christ as Lord (4:5). Too many preachers think of themselves as lord, or preach the ideas of men rather than the truth of the Bible. How many took on the theory of evolution in their preaching? How many are taking on a similar teaching, namely man-made climate change? Paul preached Jesus and Him crucified; he preached Christ as Lord, and so must we! Yet, like Jesus himself, Paul had a servant heart. He was first and foremost a bondservant of Christ, but was also servant to the church for the sake of Jesus. Let there be no Peter or Paul party in the church, and certainly no party of heretics preaching themselves and /or another gospel.

In words that read like a doxology, Paul concludes, ‘For it is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness’ (4:6). The gospel Paul preached was from God, and for the glory of God. ‘For of Him, through Him, and to him are all things, to whom be glory forever, Amen’ (Rom 11:36). This gospel focussed on Christ, not on Paul or any other man or woman. In Christ the light of the glory of God came into this world, a glory that outshone the glory of Moses. Paul takes us back to the very beginning, to the creation of this world when God said, ‘let there be light and there was light’ (Gen 1:3). Just as God sent light into the physical world to dispel the darkness and the chaos on the face of the deep, so he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, the Light to dispel the darkness and chaos present in sinful human hearts; the darkness of ignorance, guilt and fear is dispelled. He himself has shone into our hearts to give ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’- what Paul later calls ‘a new creation’ (5:17).

Even as Paul preached the knowledge of Christ as the wisdom and power of God, Paul never forgot the glory of the risen Christ. The knowledge given to him included the promise of Christ’s return, to him again seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That promise was not only for Paul; it is God’s promise to you who believe. If God has shone the light of the glorious gospel into your heart, you can be assured of seeing the risen Jesus in all his glory. ‘Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is’ (1John 3:2). Is this what you believe?

**Power in weakness** 2Corinthians 4:7-15

When we first went to India, cups of tea were given in clay cups. In nearby villages we saw potters sitting at a wheel making these cheap, sun-dried, throw-away cups. After drinking our tea we just threw these clay cups on the ground. At least they did not pollute like the plastic cups which they now use. Villagers also made and used large clay jars to store their grain, and often hid their gold jewellery in such jars.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is full of paradoxes, glorious paradoxes. The cross itself is a paradox that many fail to grasp; that in dying on the cross Jesus gives life to all who believe. This treasure in jars of clay is another paradox. How strange that something so precious is found in such an ordinary vessel! I guess it is like Jesus being born in a stable. Yet this is the truth; the power of God is witnessed by the world in the most humble of human beings; his power is made manifest in our weakness (12:9). Paul learnt that, ‘When I am weak then I am strong’. How many of us have learnt this lesson?

The apostle began this letter by telling the Corinthians of the trouble he faced in Asia, probably Ephesus; he feared that he would die. This threat was probably associated with the riot led by the silversmiths. Opponents in the church at Corinth were critical of Paul for changing his plans to visit them. This criticism came in the context of a case of ongoing sexual immorality in the church. Critics of Paul were being whipped up by this man, so it seems. And then outsiders came along with a different message to that which Paul preached; they readily joined this party that opposed Paul.

So Paul was being attacked from all sides. He was particularly concerned about these false teachers - the majority had dealt with the incestuous man. The false teachers were like Judaizers; they were Jewish converts clinging to the old covenant. Paul describes their ministry as one of condemnation and death. Paul was not in Corinth to defend himself at this time; he was getting reports through Titus and others. It was a difficult situation for the apostle but he did not give up on this church. He did not lose heart (4:1,16). Why? Because he had ‘received mercy’, because he had been called by Christ and was being sustained by Christ and his resurrection, and ultimately because of the glory of God.

**1. Disciples in clay jars**

The prophet Isaiah spoke of God being like the potter and his people being like jars of clay, so Paul’s picture of a disciple of Christ being like a clay jar is not original (Isa 64:8); although he has a different take on this analogy. He is not so much pointing to God’s sovereignty as his power, his ‘surpassing power’ compared to the weakness of human beings (4:7). Paul was a man like us but he achieved great things for God because of the Spirit of the living God working in and through him, through the word that he preached. Paul was but a vessel, a weak earthen vessel, being used by God for his life-changing purposes. The treasure is the word of God, and specially the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is more precious than gold, yea than much fine gold (Ps 19:10).

In this letter Paul reveals the struggles that he had in his ministry, both physical and mental. But he never lost heart and never gave up. He knew the weakness of the flesh, but he also knew the power of God that was at work in him. He was in Christ and Christ was in him. He never forgot the day the risen Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus. In the preceding verse he refers to the light that God had shone into his heart, and the hearts of other believers. In this light was the precious knowledge of the gospel, just referred to, and also the power of the Spirit of God that he refers to here in verse 7. As a servant of the Lord and preacher of the gospel, Paul was simply the messenger of this powerful, life-saving message of the gospel. He rejoiced at seeing new life appear in the hearts of lives of his hearers, but he never took credit or glory to himself. More often than not his preaching met with ridicule and opposition, sometimes violent opposition; this was the cost of shining the light of the glory of God into this dark world. This is what Jesus experienced and it is what true disciples of Jesus will also experience.

**2. Deliverance**

When Paul says ‘we’ he is primarily referring to himself, but what is true for him is true for his fellow missionaries and indeed for every faithful believer. He goes on to speak very personally of the pressure and even persecution he suffered as a minister of life and hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ. His opponents would not have faced such attacks because their gospel did not offend anyone. They preached their own ideas in their own strength and to their own glory. They were impressive and convincing speakers, never admitting to personal weakness. They would not have described themselves as a ‘clay jar’- but then again, they had no treasure to offer beyond the things of this world.

Paul describes his suffering for Christ’s sake in four ways, but counters each with a ‘but’. Never were his enemies allowed to do their worst. Maybe he recalled how the Jews tried to grab Jesus at various times but were not able to do so until his ‘hour had come’. Paul was hard pressed on every side, including inside and outside, but not crushed (4:8). He was perplexed, seeing no way out of the predicament he was in, but he did not despair. You have probably been in situations from which you saw no way out, but here you are, the Lord has brought you through- I hope you acknowledge Him. When describing his trouble in Asia, Paul admitted to ‘despair even of life’ but here says that when perplexed he did not despair. This was because of the comfort and strength given by the Lord (1:4).

Paul faced persecution, as in physical attack, numerous times (11:24, 25). In Lystra he was stoned and left for dead. He was beaten and thrown into prison at Philippi and other places. Paul tells about his suffering and persecution to declare the power of God to deliver him. He writes ‘being persecuted, we endure’ (1Cor 4:12), and here ‘persecuted but not forsaken’ (4:9). He took hold of the promise God made to Joshua, and repeated to other faithful servants right down to the NT; ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’ (Heb 13:5).

Paul’s final ‘suffering-word’ is ‘struck down but not destroyed (4:9). Moffatt describes this as being like a boxer, ‘knocked down but not knocked out’. Paul is not saying he will never suffer to the point of death, but saying that God is powerful to deliver him. In the words of Daniel’s friends, ‘Our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us… but if not, know that we will not serve your gods or worship the image you have set up’ (Dan 3:17, 18). Up to this point in time God had delivered Paul from all his persecutions. Jesus of course, suffered unto death, death on the cross. Paul wanted to know more of the power of the resurrection (Phil 3:10).

**3. Dying of Jesus**

Isaiah referred to Messiah as the suffering servant of God. From the moment Jesus came into this world he began to die. At his birth there was rejoicing in heaven but not on earth. Jesus went about doing good, doing miracles, but what was the response? The religious leaders hated him. They followed him around, trying to trap him in his words, or in body, which they finally did. Paul speaks of the dying of the Lord Jesus, rather than his death, here in verse 10. Four times in these two verses he refers to Jesus.

The Jewish leaders hated Jesus, and they hated anyone who spoke of Jesus; Paul was preaching Jesus, Jesus crucified and risen from the dead. The Gentiles thought the gospel was foolishness- they did not believe in the resurrection. Jesus himself said, ‘If the world hates you, know that it hated me first’ (John 15:18). Paul was not naive about these things, unlike many in the church today. He expected opposition and knew the dangers of being a missionary, but he was compelled to preach the gospel (1Cor 9:16). He was ready to suffer like his Master and Lord. He was ready to carry about in his body the dying of the Lord Jesus. He was not at liberty to change the message of the gospel; doing so would have rendered it powerless anyway. As the earthly life of Jesus was focussed on death, so the life of the believer is focused on death, death to the world and life in Christ.

‘He must increase, I must decrease’ said John the Baptist. Paul saw his life in the same way. He must decrease but Christ must increase. Christ must live in and through Paul and his life; ‘that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body’ - ‘our body’ means the body of all believers (4:10). Paul repeats this insight into the life and death of a believer in the next verse. ‘We who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake’ (4:11). We live not to ourselves but for Jesus, expending ourselves for Christ and his glory. ‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal 2:20). I hope this is not a radical thought to you as a believer. The gospel we preach is not a philosophy but a person, a person who is the way, the truth, and the life for us and for all who believe. We are called to imitate Christ as Paul did, to suffer like him and even to die for him. We are to ‘present our bodies as a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable service’ (Rom 12:1). In this way, and only in this way, will the life of Christ be ‘manifested in our body’ or ‘our mortal flesh’ (4:10, 11).

Paul’s conclusion is, ‘So then death is working in us, but life in you’ (4:12). We must be dying in order that others, those who hear the gospel, might live in Christ. It was Jesus who said that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it cannot produce fruit (John 12:24). Those who follow Jesus and serve him will ‘hate’ their life in this world but will gain eternal life in Christ. Paul’s focus is on expending himself for the sake of others, but ultimately for the sake of God’s glory. God’s glory is multiplied as the number of believers multiplies. Paul’s picture of ministry is the complete opposite of the newcomers in Corinth, and sadly of some in the ministry today. ‘So then death is at work in us, but life in you’ (4:12). Paul was ready die that the people of Corinth might hear the gospel and live. Jesus had of course, died for him that he might live!

**4. Devotion on Psalm 116**

In Psalm 116 the writer is thanking God for delivering him from death: ‘You have delivered my soul from death’ (Ps 116:8). Maybe Paul had been meditating on this Psalm and it spoke to his heart- as often happens when we have serious devotions upon the word of God. He recalled verse 10, ‘I believed and therefore I spoke’. Paul, like the Psalmist, was greatly afflicted, but he believed that Jesus had called him to speak after revealing himself to Paul on the Damascus road. And so Paul was speaking what he had seen and heard, and what he believed. He had received the Spirit of God, by whom he came to faith and by whom he was empowered to speak. He spoke not out of his own strength but out of personal weakness. He understood the limitations of ‘mortal flesh’ but also understood the unlimited power of the Spirit of God by which all believers must confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

Paul did not preach for any personal gain or glory; he preached that his hearers might receive new life in Christ. But he did look forward to a reward; he looked forward to being raised up with Jesus (4:14). Paul had seen the risen Jesus and, as the firstborn from the dead, he believed that all who belong to Jesus will be raised to be with Jesus in heavenly glory. This motivated Paul in his ministry and moved him to declare, ‘For me to live is Christ and to die is gain’ (Phil 1:21). Paul shared this promise with the believers at Corinth saying, ‘and [God] will present us with you’ (4:14). They, like Paul, will be raised from the dead and presented to Christ like a bride is presented to her husband (Eph 5:27). What a glorious thought; what a glorious hope; what a glorious truth for us to take hold of. Knowing this truth, Paul was ready to endure whatever suffering he faced. What about you?

Why seek the things of this world when God supplies all our needs. ‘All things are for your sakes’ writes Paul (4:15). Christ gave himself for us and we, like Paul, should be ready to give ourselves for Christ; a servant is not above his master. Paul preached the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, grace by which our sins are forgiven, grace by which we become the covenant children of God, never to be forsaken by Him. God’s grace is sufficient for all. Paul rejoiced in the grace revealed in the gospel and that had spread into the hearts of many at Corinth. He rejoiced with those rejoicing in this wonderful grace as they joined in worshipping the Lord Jesus. God is glorified when those who are a new creation in Christ Jesus gather to worship. This was the ultimate motive of the apostle, God being glorified on earth as in heaven.

**Seeing life from God’s perspective** 2Corinthians 4:16-18

What is your carbon footprint? Nations, businesses and individuals are all examining their carbon footprint. They want to be treading lightly when it comes to the amount of carbon dioxide they emit. Paradoxically, the feet of such people are firmly planted in this world. Their lives are deeply bound to the things of this world, to things of decay and death. Their vision is so impaired that they are despairing of life itself. I heard that in Portugal euthanasia is being made legal for anyone who wants it; anyone despairing of life can go to their doctor and demand he murder them.

The apostle Paul was ready to die but never contemplated breaking the commandment, ‘Do not murder’. Paul was ready to die for Jesus’ sake because in Jesus he had eternal life. Paul walked very lightly in this world, knowing it was not his home and that it was passing away. It was not passing into nothingness of course, but giving way to the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated through his death and resurrection. ‘He must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death’ (1Cor 15:25, 26). Paul knew that Jesus is risen- he saw the risen Christ- and knew that Jesus is returning again on the clouds of heaven, because Jesus said so (Mat 24:30). True Christians believe the same truths- Jesus is risen and is returning one day soon; but are our lives affected by these truths or are we living just like the ungodly?

If Paul did not believe the truth of the resurrection, and the eternal kingdom God, he would not have pressed on in the ministry as he did. The Corinthian church was causing him a lot of grief. They had not physically attacked him as yet, but the Jews had stoned him in Lystra and the Romans had beaten him and put him in prison in Philippi. Yet the Corinthians had ridiculed the apostle and accused him of being untrustworthy and dishonest. A man whose meaning in life depended upon the number of followers he had on ‘Facebook’ would have given up long ago!

But Paul did not ‘lose heart’, as he said in verse 1, and again here in verse 16 of this chapter. He had this ministry because of the mercy of Jesus Christ; he was called by the risen Christ, and ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit. As he concludes this chapter he comes back to this point with renewed vigour, having been assured that, ‘He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus’ (4:14). Unlike the newcomers at Corinth, eloquently preaching another gospel to their own glory, Paul preached the gospel of Christ crucified and risen again. Because Christ is risen his children will also be raised from the dead to live eternally with Christ. Paul would have known the words of Jesus: ‘Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul’ (Mat 10:28).

The three verses we are looking at today are among the most profound and most comforting in Scripture for anyone determined to live a Christian life and be a witness to this world. In these verses the apostle draws clear contrasts between the outward and the inward man, between light, momentary affliction and weighty eternal glory, and between what is seen and temporary and what is unseen and eternal.

**1. Outward and inward man**

Despite all the criticism from the Corinthians, the apostle Paul did not ‘lose heart’ or give up. Actually, he had suffered much greater opposition in other places but pressed on preaching the gospel wherever the Holy Spirit led him, and empowered him to do so. If they wondered why he did not give up, then he tells them. There were some at Corinth who suffered with Paul, and there have been many down through the ages, until today, who have suffered opposition as ministers of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. These words encouraged me as I read them again today, and I hope they encourage you in your ministry.

Paul first speaks of the outward man or outward nature that is perishing (4:16). He is referring to human mortality, to the flesh that is weak (Mat 26:41). Paul had suffered floggings, imprisonments, and even stoning, not to mention being shipwrecked. He wasn’t superman or even a gym-fit man - not that it mattered. Let no one think that being a fit and healthy person is a prerequisite or an advantage for gospel ministry.

We are all human beings with bodies vulnerable to injury or disease and ultimately death. God made man perfect but sin corrupted the flesh such that it ages and dies. Our ‘outward man is perishing’, and there is nothing we can do about it; despite the valiant efforts of many today. Paul took care of his body, and we must take care of our bodies, but he did so in order to keep preaching the gospel not so he could keep playing golf! (1Tim 4:8). Our bodies grow old and eventually perish in the grave, but we will receive new bodies fit for heaven.

Paul contrasts the ‘outward man that is perishing’ with the ‘inward man that is being renewed day by day’ (4:16). What is our inward man? Although the Bible speaks of the flesh, and the soul or spirit of a man, it does not do so in terms of Greek philosophy. As human beings we are a unity of body and soul, even though our present body will perish. The resurrection which Paul preached was regarded as foolishness by the Greeks, as it is by many today.

The inward man is that part which lives on to be clothed with immortality (5:4). This inward man begins life when we are born again of the Spirit of God, when we become a new creation in Christ Jesus (5:17). It is renewed or grows as we grow in our knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, and as we grow closer to Him. The body of every believer suffers the process of ageing and so did Paul’s; ageing that in his case was accelerated by all the beatings he received. But our inward nature is growing stronger through the renewing power of the Spirit of God. In fact, the renewal or growth is hastened as suffering increases. Paul’s ‘inward man’ was being renewed rapidly.

The renewed inward man will one day be clothed with a new body, but even now in this world our inner self is being transformed into the likeness of Christ (3:18). That transformation is related to, and is proportional to, the weakness of our bodies. ‘The new self is progressively transformed by the principles of spiritual knowledge, true righteousness, and singular holiness (Eph 4:24, Col 3:10)’.

**2. Light and brief troubles and eternal weight of glory**

‘In this world you will have tribulation’ said Jesus (John 16:33). Jesus, who lived a sinless life, experienced unprecedented suffering in this world. The closer we imitate Christ, the more opposition and affliction we will face in this world. Do you understand this truth about the Christian life? Many don’t! Jesus spoke of the cost of discipleship, saying that following him means denying self and turning away from the things of this world, even family, and suffering loss for his sake. Paul, as a disciple of Christ, heard these words and sought to imitate Christ, especially in his suffering, knowing the power and the glory of the resurrection.

Reading of the suffering that Paul endured, the word ‘light’ affliction is not what comes to mind! (11:22-33). How could the apostle refer to his troubles as ‘light’, in the sense of not heavy or weighty? He does so because he looks to the glory of the risen Christ and the kingdom of heaven. This is the ‘eternal weight of glory’. Put on a balance, our afflictions for Christ’s sake are far outweighed by the glory that awaits us. Paul’s choice of the expression, ‘the weight of glory’ may be influenced by the fact that in Hebrew ‘weight’ and ‘glory’ come from the same root, ‘*kabod*’(Bruce).

Peter, James and John saw the glory of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration (2Peter 16-19). Paul saw the heavenly glory of Jesus on the Damascus road. We have a taste or glimpse of this glory now as we worship the Lord. God is at work in our hearts to show us his glory. In Romans 8:18 Paul writes: ‘For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us’. The ‘weight’ of glory exceeds beyond all limits the weight of the afflictions we suffer in this world; the Greek is literally ‘more and more exceedingly’ (*hypebole eis hyperbole*).

Afflictions can be measured by time, as well as severity. A few days in prison is more bearable than a few years. The apostle called his afflictions ‘momentary’, as well as ‘light’. He looked on his life and ministry from God’s perspective. God is eternal; for him a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day (2Peter 3:8). Calvin writes, ‘When we have once raised our minds heavenwards, a thousand years begin to look to us but a moment’. They say that a day is a long time in politics. We live in a world of instant gratification, with little concept of tomorrow or next year; although we are now talking in terms of decades before catastrophic warming will cause sea levels to rise and drown millions of people. People listen to their computer models (modern gods?) and fear the future. We listen to the word of God and fear him.

Paul did not look at the past or future in terms of millions or billions of years; he looked at it in terms of eternity because God is eternal. The first and most important question of life is, ‘where will you spend eternity?’ The second is, ‘only one life and it will soon pass, only what we do for Christ will last’.

**3. Seen and unseen**

Worldly people live by sight; if they cannot see the thing, it does not exist. They spend their life striving after more and more of the things of this world, trying to satisfy the lust of the eyes and of the flesh. Some believe in spirits and a ‘supreme being’ but do not concern themselves with searching for God. In fact, God has revealed himself to us in the creation, and in these last days in his Son, Jesus Christ. Lots of people will soon be celebrating the birth of Jesus but will they give any thought to his death and resurrection? Very few give any thought to the imminent return of Jesus (Phil 3:20).

The last contrast drawn by Paul as he considers affliction and the glory of God is the contrast between things seen and things unseen (4:18). This hardly needs explanation, but it does require considerable contemplation. Are you ready to give yourself a score with regard to the amount of time you spend focused on unseen things? If you come to worship that is one hour a week. How much time do you spend reading your Bible and in prayer? What about other times when your thoughts are on the Lord, on his grace and his glory? Do you cherish and look forward to such times, or is your main focus on the TV and shopping? It is natural for us to focus on things we see, but if you are in Christ you are no longer a natural man but a new creation in Christ Jesus. You are no longer walking by sight but by faith (5:7); you are walking with your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfector of your faith (Heb 12:2).

Why should we focus on things unseen? The apostle answers this question: ‘For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are unseen are eternal’- notice this word ‘eternal’ being repeated (4:18). This is a truth we must take hold of if we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ‘Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will by no means pass away’ (Mat 24:35). If you really believe this you will not be laying up treasure on earth (Mat 6:19). What you have accumulated in this world will be of no use when you die- it will go to someone else, as the Psalmist says (Ps 49:10, 11).

So is everything going to disappear or burn up so that there is nothing? No. Jesus says, ‘My words will by no means pass away’. The kingdom of God which Jesus inaugurated, and in which he now rules by virtue of his resurrection, is an eternal kingdom. Eternal means without end; without beginning and without end. God made the present heavens and earth at a point in time, and they will burn up at a future time determined by God. But God himself, and his Son, is eternal. Moreover, in Jesus Christ God has given us eternal life (John 3:16). If you know and believe this verse, should you not be focussing more on the things that are eternal rather than things that are transient? If this is not your focus today, it will be in the day of tribulation- just as it was the focus of the apostle Paul, and of many other saints who have gone before us. Today is the day to turn your focus away from the things of the world, from the lust of eyes and of the flesh, and set your focus fully on the Lord Jesus Christ, and eternal glory in Him.

**A new, eternal, heavenly body** 2Corinthians 5:1-5

Deciding on a title for a sermon is always a challenge- as is deciding on sermon subheadings. I read the passage many times asking the Holy Spirit to help me, and also look into commentaries. One commentator gives this passage the title, ‘The Christian Hope’, which is fine as long as we understand the word ‘hope’ in the biblical sense. The Christian hope is a matter of certainty about things not seen, and about the future; not to be confused with a worldly hope, which has no certainty. The apostle Paul could not be certain of people’s response to the gospel, or their response to him as a preacher of the gospel; although he could be almost certain that some Jews would reject the gospel and attack him. But he was certain of what he had seen and heard on the Damascus road, and indeed of all the promises found in the Scriptures.

In the city of Corinth both Jews and Gentiles accepted the gospel, but not all turned away from the immoral and idolatrous lives they had previously practiced. They did not flee sexual immorality or flee idolatry as the apostle taught (1Cor 6:18, 10:14). A small but vocal group in the church set out to discredit the apostle Paul and the gospel he preached. False teachers came from outside and joined this party attacking the apostle. Paul, understandably, was upset by these personal attacks, but what is not so easy to understand is the fact that he did not ‘lose heart’ or give up (4:1, 16). We might say that Paul was ‘marching to the beat of a different drummer’ than the false teachers.

Paul was compelled by the risen Christ to preach the gospel (5:14, 1Cor 9:16). Obedience to his divine calling lead to suffering and persecution wherever he went (cf. 11:22-33). Paul had a ‘thorn in the flesh’ and carried scars on his body from numerous beatings and a stoning. He was physically weak and exhausted. Yet he pressed on in the ministry. But how?

Apart from his divine calling, Paul was assured of the Lord’s presence with him. He was also assured of a new, resurrected body fit for heaven. Paul had seen the risen Jesus and he preached bodily resurrection as the great hope of believers: ‘Knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you’ (4:14).

Paul had faced death more than once in his ministry, but the prospect of death did not deter him. He knew that death was ‘gain’ for the believer (Phil 1:21). He did not dwell upon death but he did dwell upon what comes after death, namely resurrection and being in the presence of the Lord for eternity.

Here in chapter 5 Paul continues his focus upon things unseen that are eternal (4:18). He expresses his desire to put off his ‘earthly tent’ and be ‘clothed with our heavenly dwelling’. He uses two metaphors to help us understand what he is talking about: ‘a heavenly house’ and ‘a heavenly garment’. Our third subheading is, ‘Holy Spirit given by God’.

**1. Heavenly house**

Jesus spoke of his Father’s house and told his disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them (John 14:2). But this does not seem to be what Paul is talking about as he contrasts ‘our earthly house’ with ‘a building from God, a house… eternal in the heavens’ (5:1). He refers to, ‘our earthly house’ as ‘this tent’. Paul, as you know, was a tentmaker who knew about tents, although the apostle Peter uses the same metaphor to refer to his physical body, and to death as ‘putting off my tent’ (2Peter 1:13, 14).

Paul speaks of this tent being destroyed; he earlier spoke of ‘our outward man perishing’ (4:16). Paul, like Peter and the other apostles, often faced death for the sake of Christ; James was martyred soon after Pentecost. But Paul, like the others, was confident that he would receive another ‘tent’, in this case ‘a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens’ (5:1). The story of the three little pigs comes to mind. In this story it is the house made of straw or sticks that gets blown down while the house made of bricks could not be blown down. A tent is similarly flimsy, and lived in for a short time only.

We look after this tent, this earthly body, feeding and clothing it, and getting medical help when necessary, but ultimately it will perish. The Christian hope we spoke of is that God has prepared a new house for us to live in, an eternal house in the heavens. This may sound like the place that Jesus has prepared but the context here is that of a body in which we live. The earthly house Paul refers to is not the temple in Jerusalem or even the church- unless the following metaphor of being clothed is totally unrelated. In 1Corinthians Paul speaks of our body being the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19).

**2. Heavenly garment**

Living in a tent is not only perilous, it is also difficult. Think of a woman longing for a proper kitchen and bathroom, a more comfortable and permanent place to call home. Paul does not continue with this metaphor of a tent and ‘a house made without hands’; he switches to another metaphor, that of being ‘clothed with our dwelling which is from heaven’ (5:2) - he does return to the tent metaphor and link the two in verse 4.

Paul does not explain why we groan because of our earthly tent or clothing, probably because we all know the weakness and limitations, and indeed the temptations of the flesh. The disciples fell asleep even after Jesus told them to watch and pray because, while the spirit was willing, the flesh is weak (Mat 26:41). You may well be groaning even now because of the weakness of the flesh- maybe you are sick or tired, or maybe you are upset about something. Actually, Paul’s groaning is not so much about his present troubles, as about an intense longing to be with Christ (Phil 1:23). In Romans 8 he writes of the whole creation groaning, of us groaning as we wait for ‘the adoption, the redemption of our body’ (Rom 8:23); even the Holy Spirit who helps us is groaning (Rom 8:26).

Paul is not of course, contemplating death as an escape from his troubles in this life; nor is he looking forward to the soul being set free from within the confines of his body- a notion held by Greeks and other pagans. Even while in this body, we are set free from bondage to sin in Jesus Christ. Even while in this body, we have begun a new life; ‘the inward man being renewed day by day’ (4:16). Paul does not want to dispense with this earthly body and end up naked (5:3). He earnestly desires to be ‘further clothed’ with ‘our dwelling which is from heaven’ (5:2, 4). The ‘further clothed’ has the sense of putting on an overcoat.

This process of change he refers to as, ‘mortality being swallowed up by life’ (5:4). These words remind us of 1Corinthians 15:54 where, in referring to the resurrection body, he wrote ‘this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality’. He spoke at that time of the dead being ‘raised incorruptible’ and ‘we shall not all sleep’ (1Cor 15:51, 52). There is nothing to indicate any change in the apostle’s thinking regarding his death being before or after the return of Christ; some suggest he was now thinking he might die before Christ returns.

Do these verses have anything to tell us about an ‘intermediate state’ between death and the resurrection when Christ returns? There is certainly no teaching here, or anywhere else in the Bible, about purgatory. Nor is there anything that points to a ‘soul sleep’. Such words and such teachings are not found in the Bible. Paul’s main thought here in these verses, says one writer, ‘is not about a person’s state but about the wonder of being with Christ’.

Let us remember the words of Jesus to the penitent thief on the cross: ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:43). Moreover, the words of the Shorter Catechism Q37 are in agreement with what Jesus says, and what Paul says here and later in verses 6 and 8 about being absent from the body and present with the Lord; we are either in the body or present with the Lord: ‘The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory, and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till, the resurrection’.

For Paul, the change from physical to spiritual body is instantaneous. F.F. Bruce suggests that ‘in the consciousness of the departed believer there is no interval between dissolution [of the earthly body] and investiture [with the resurrection body], however long the interval may be by the calendar of earth-based human history’. I like this suggestion because it is consistent with, if not literally, what Paul says.

**3. Holy Spirit given by God**

‘God himself has prepared us for this very thing’ (5:5). This ‘very thing’ is endowment with immortal bodies (cf. Phil 3:21). Corruption and death of human beings was not part of God’s creation. Death came because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. When death came to mankind it came to all creation. ‘The whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now’ (Rom 8:22). But God had prepared for the redemption of men and women from sin and death (Gen 3:15). He prepared for his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to be the sacrifice for sin, and in his resurrection obtain victory over death. This is the gospel, the message of the cross and the resurrection. And ‘the whole creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God’ (Rom 8:19).

God prepared, and has fulfilled, his great plan of redemption. His sending of the Holy Spirit is his final gift, a gift to all who believe. The Holy Spirit quickens dead hearts so that they believe the gospel they hear. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the hearts of all who believe. The Holy Spirit empowered the apostle Paul, and empowers us in preaching the gospel and in every ministry. As the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is, in fact, God dwelling in our hearts (John 14:23).

Some Christians focus on the Holy Spirit working signs and wonders, which he does of course, but the apostle Paul sees the Holy Spirit as the seal of God’s ownership of us, and as a guarantee of our heavenly inheritance (1:22, 5:5). In the midst of tribulation, Paul found comfort and strength in the resurrection of Christ, the firstborn from the dead, and also in the Holy Spirit, the comforter promised by Jesus and poured out on the day of Pentecost. We do not see the Holy Spirit, apart from his work in our lives and ministry, and the comfort he gives. The Spirit is among things unseen, which are eternal (4:18).

The word guarantee or pledge means a down payment, with the promise of payment in full in the future. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that our inward man is being renewed day by day, and it by the power of the Holy Spirit that our earthly bodies will be transformed so as to conform to Christ’s glorious body. We have the assurance that the Spirit, who is with us, will lead us safely into God’s presence whenever we die.

**Walk by faith not by sight** 2Corinthians 5:6-10

People are rushing to book flights out of our city after the grounding of most passenger jets during the pandemic. We had become used to getting on a plane and flying to any part of the world, even during stormy weather. It is amazing how aeroplanes can fly, and even land, in thick cloud. The pilot cannot see beyond the nose of his plane but by watching his instruments he can fly with confidence. Not by sight but by faith in his instruments, he flies with confidence.

The apostle Paul did not fly an aeroplane but he navigated life in this world with confidence. In this world he faced opposition on all sides. He faced natural disasters, like everyone, but it was the storms of human opposition that threatened to end his life and ministry. Paul never considered life apart from the ministry, to which the risen Jesus called him. By the word of God, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, Paul navigated life in this world. He walked by faith not by sight, and he urges us to do the same.

The navigator must know where he is going- he must know the destination. We rightly tell people that ‘Jesus is the way’, but some clever fellows answer, ‘the way to where?’ The Bible tells us of the destination for which Jesus is the way, but how often do you hear about this destination? The apostle Paul made certain the people heard this truth, the truth about heaven and hell. Comments like, ‘pie in the sky when you die’ and, ‘too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use’ have put many off preaching this truth, but Paul was not put off. He constantly thought about heaven, and about being present with Christ, so had to speak about it.

Jesus spoke of the difficult way and the narrow gate that leads to life, eternal life (Mat 7:14). He also spoke of coming again that, ‘where I am, there you may be also’ (John 14:3). Jesus is the way and he is life, eternal life (John 17:3). Heaven is where Jesus is; to be present with the Lord is heaven. This is what Paul longed for- nothing more and nothing less than to be with his Lord and Saviour. He desired to depart this life to be with Christ, ‘which is far better’ (Phil 1:23).

Paul did not look upon his physical body as evil, but he knew that while ever he was in this body he could not be present with the Lord. He knew the weakness of the body and the temptations of the flesh, but God had given him this body for life in this world. He was confident that when he died, and his body was buried in the earth, that he would pass into the presence of the Lord with a new body. The verses before us give no indication of any delay in this transition and this transformation.

Let us briefly look at what Paul writes here in these verses under three subheadings: ‘Absent from the body and present with the Lord’, ‘Aim to please the Lord’ and, ‘Appear before the judgment seat of Christ’.

**1. Absent from the body and present with the Lord**

There are many Christians who are uncertain as to where they will end up when they die. Many think the first place they go to will be purgatory, while others think death will be the end of their existence, as in annihilation. Some even think it is presumptuous of anyone to say they are going to heaven, which means the apostle Paul was presumptuous! It is presumptuous if we believe it depends on our works of course, but in the gospel that Paul preached we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone (Eph 2:8). It is when we depart from this gospel of grace that we lose assurance of going to heaven. Works have a place of course, but it is not in deciding between heaven and hell. The place of works is indicated in verse 10 that we will come to shortly.

Paul did not consider it presumption to declare that for him, and for all believers, to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord, and that for eternity. He was most confident of this because, as we just said, salvation is by grace, the grace of God revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ (5:21). Twice in these verses Paul writes, ‘we are confident’ (5:6, 8). This word carries the sense of cheerful assurance. In verse 8 he expresses a desire to be absent from the body and present with the Lord. He had this cheerful confidence and desire when writing this letter, and later still when writing to the Philippians: ‘Having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better’ (Phil 1:23).

Certainty about the future enabled Paul, and enables us as believers, to be courageous in the present in the face of conflict and pain. Paul did not dwell upon death in a morbid way but spoke of death in a hopeful and cheerful way. Worldly people are uncomfortable talking about death. They use lots of euphemisms, and they joke about death, in an effort to avoid thinking about their own death. Many Christians also tend to avoid talking about death, preferring instead to focus on the benefits they receive from Jesus in this life, or on the social implications of Jesus’ teaching.

But the ultimate benefit or blessing we receive from the Lord is eternal life, which comes from knowing Jesus Christ (John 17:3). Eternal life is ours now, as many popular preachers stress, but it is in fact life for eternity. The apostle Paul sees a smooth transition in his life with Christ, from life in this body to life apart from this body. He has just referred to the gift of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of this transition; the Spirit is God’s gift for eternity.

Paul knew without a doubt that, ‘While we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord’ (5:6). I guess most of us know this; although some think they are in heaven now in their earthly body! At the same time, Paul was confident that to be absent from the body meant being present with the Lord (5:8). Is this a confidence you share with the apostle? He is talking in the plural to include all believers.

Verse 7 is sometimes put in parentheses because of Paul’s return to, ‘We are confident’ in verse 8. He does not want us to think that being ‘absent from the Lord’ means we have no contact with him. We are not walking in the dark as it were, but walking in the light that God had shone into our hearts (4:6). We are walking by faith, not by sight. People walking by sight, worldly people, will not understand the way in which we walk, although they will admire the way of faith if we are walking in it. The difference is most evident when we actually face death, but the fact of death and the judgment, as taught by the apostle, should effect everything we do.

**2. Aim to please the Lord**

Being in the body meant weakness for Paul, but in this weakness he did not surrender himself to the flesh, to sin, and to the devil. He did not go around saying, ‘I am only human’, and as so many do today. He knew that God, by his Spirit, dwelt in his body, and with the help of the Spirit he fought to bring the body under control (1Cor 6:19, 9:27). Despite the weakness of the body, he made it his aim to please the Lord; unlike his opponents in Corinth who were focussed on pleasing themselves. ‘Without faith it is impossible to please the Lord’ (Heb 11:6).

The natural man is focussed on pleasing self; the natural man’s chief end is to please himself. But the person who is a new creation in Christ Jesus seeks to please the Lord, who loved him so much that he died on the cross to save him. Paul urges us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, and to approve what is his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom 12:1,2). ‘The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal 2:20).

It is no accident that as people turn away from the church and the Bible, they focus on themselves, which means trouble for other people. We are fast becoming a nation of narcissists, as well as victims. And it is no accident that churches which fail to preach the gospel which Paul preached, focus on self and the things of this world- and end up in bitter division, just like the church at Corinth. Living to please the Lord is not a chore or a burden but is something we delight in doing if we love the Lord, and are truly thankful for his amazing grace (5:14).

**3. Appear before the judgment seat of Christ**

To be present with the Lord not only requires a new, heavenly body, it also requires being cleansed of our sin; it is cleansing from sin that comes first of course. God cannot look upon sin, so let no one think they will sneak into heaven or enter Christ’s presence still bearing their sin. We must avail ourselves of the cleansing blood of Christ and accept his righteousness before entering his presence. This is made clear by Jesus in the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22:11-14. If you have not done this, not confessed your sin and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will face the great white throne judgment and be condemned on the basis of your works (Rev 20:11f). If you have believed, and your name is written in the Lamb’s book of life, you will not face that judgment.

So what is Paul saying about ‘appearing before the judgment seat of Christ’ here in this verse? He is writing to the church, and he is including himself in the ‘we’. This judgment seat of Christ is specific to believers. It is here that hearts, as well as books, are opened. When the Lord comes, he will bring to light hidden things and reveal the motives of our hearts, so that each one’s praise will come from God (1Cor 4:5). John heard Jesus speaking and saying, ‘Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to give to everyone according to his work’ (Rev 22:12). ‘The judgment seat of Christ can be a time of great regret, or it can be an occasion of supreme joy’, as Paul indicates here.

Paul was not concerned with what men said about him, or their judgment of him. He was not even concerned about his own judgment of himself. He was concerned with the Lord’s judgment of his words, his actions, and even his thoughts (1Cor 4:1-5). Walking by faith, he kept his heart and mind focused on the words, ‘Each of us shall give account of himself to God’ (Rom 14:12). Along with love for the Lord, this ‘fear of the Lord’ (5:11) kept him focussed on pleasing the Lord while walking in this world as a child of God.

This appearing before the judgment seat of Christ is not for the purpose of condemnation or acquittal. We are acquitted or ‘justified’ freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:24). The purpose of this appearing before Christ is for rewards, heavenly rewards. Jesus spoke of such rewards in the parable of the minas (Luke 19:11f). The owner gave his servants a mina, expecting them to use this gift profitably until he returned. The servant who failed to do so suffered loss, but not destruction like the enemies of owner.

Paul spoke of God’s servants, like himself and Apollos, building on the foundation ‘which is Jesus Christ’ (1Cor 3:11f). The one whose work does not pass the test of fire will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved. Here in verse 10, Paul speaks of each one receiving what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or bad. We are saved unto good works, so let us be obeying the Lord, and doing what he commands us, in the strength that he gives us (Eph 2:10). Let us be looking to the reward that Christ will give, and to hearing the words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’. Some think that ‘crowns’ are among the rewards given in heaven, but Paul does not go into such details here.

The apostle’s focus was on obeying the Lord, on serving him in the strength that he gave while he was in his earthly body. Knowing that in the future he would stand before Jesus Christ, and face a review of his life, motivated him to live righteously and faithfully in the present. It is here in this world today that we are to be using the gifts and abilities God has given us, whatever they may be, and however great or small the task God has given us.

**Motivation for ministry** 2Corinthians 5:11-15

Why does a child obey their father? Is it out of love or out of fear of being punished? Debate rages! Father’s love their children but do children automatically love their father to the extent that they obey them implicitly? No one can compel anyone to love them, even a father. Modern day ‘experts’ in child rearing reject any form of punishment saying it harms the child, but the Bible tells that, out of love, a father disciplines his child (Heb 12:7-9). Respect, with a healthy dose of fear, should be accorded human fathers, and also the Lord. At the same time, love is at the centre of our relationship with our father, our human father and our heavenly Father.

The apostle Paul was the first to preach the gospel in the city of Corinth. In the eighteen months he stayed there he saw many believe in Jesus Christ, and a church was established, despite opposition from some Jews. After he left, Apollos came, and Peter came also. As members of the church started aligning themselves with different leaders, divisions arose. Sexual immorality entered the church and was tolerated. When Paul told them to deal with a certain offender, some turned against him and started questioning his credentials and his motives as a preacher of the gospel. When false teachers came to this church they joined this party opposing Paul.

While writing this letter, Paul received news that ‘the majority’ had finally dealt with this incestuous man (2:6). But the false teachers were still making trouble in this church, having their focus on the Law of Moses and outward matters of religion. They came with letters of commendation (3:1), so the people started asking Paul where his letters of commendation were. These men were good speakers, able to gather a crowd and impress people with emotional but deceitful preaching (4:2). They went so far as to question Paul’s motives in preaching the gospel; why did he not accept a fee for his preaching and why was he collecting for the poor (11:7).

Discrediting Paul would discredit the message he preached, so Paul had to defend himself against these false accusations. He would not change his message or his ways, but he would appeal to the Christians in Corinth not to turn away from the gospel of grace. He wrote to assure them that what they were being told about their apostle was not true. Paul would defend his integrity and sincerity, as a man called by the risen Christ to preach the gospel.

Paul had suffered greatly as a preacher, unlike his opponents now in Corinth, but he would not ‘lose heart’ or give up (4:1, 16). He loved these Christians in Corinth, and was ready to suffer even more for their sakes. Paul was not focussed on personal popularity or comforts; ‘death is working is us but life in you’ (4:12). He was called by Christ and was answerable to Christ for everything he said and did. ‘We walk by faith not by sight’, ‘making it our aim to please the Lord’ (5:7, 9). ‘For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ’ (5:10).

It is with this truth in mind that Paul writes, ‘Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men’ (5:11). Verse 11 could be taken as the conclusion of the previous verse, as our NKJV indicates, or it could be taken as the beginning of the following passage, as we are doing. Paul shares his motives for preaching the gospel in the verses before us today. They are very different motives to those of the false teachers, and not the motives they were imputing to him. His first motive for preaching the gospel was, ‘the fear of the Lord’ and his second, ‘the compelling love of Christ’.

**1. The fear of the Lord**

Just as children obey their fathers out of respect, and a fear of feeling their father’s displeasure, so Paul obeyed the call of Christ to preach the gospel. He has just explained his desire, ‘to be well pleasing to Him [the Lord]’ (5:9), which was partly based on the prospect of appearing before the judgment seat of Christ on the last day. In his first letter he said, ‘Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!’ (1Cor 9:16).

Paul knew Jesus was risen from the dead and was seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. He was not like many today whose knowledge of Jesus stops with his birth, or many who picture Jesus still on the cross. I sometimes wonder why Christians do not make the empty tomb an icon for their churches or homes. Paul went further and saw Jesus on the throne in heaven, ready to return in judgment. The judgment seat of Christ, as we learned previously, is what awaits us as Christians.

One day ‘each of us shall give account of ourselves to God’ (Rom 14:12). At the end of the day, or end of the week, your human father checked on the list of chores that he gave you to do, and your reward was based upon what you, as his beloved child, had done. If this is the case with our human father, why are we surprised that Jesus, who loves us so much that he died for us, should require a similar accounting from his children?

‘Knowing the fear of the Lord’, Paul set out to ‘persuade men’, to persuade them of the truth about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He told the truth about heaven and hell, and of the wonderful grace of the Lord Jesus Christ by which we must be saved. Gospel preaching is not about stirring emotions but about moving a person’s heart to believe. Paul did not try to hide anything from God because he knew that God knows and judges our hearts (1Sam 16:7, Heb 4:12, 13).

Paul wrote to assure the Christians in Corinth that he was revealing his heart to them also. He appealed to them to look beyond outward things, to look on their own hearts or consciences, as Paul revealed his heart to them. While his opponents came with letters of commendation and liked to boast in appearances and abilities, Paul came with no letters of commendation and was reluctant to boast about himself. But he did want the believers to ‘boast on our behalf’, or to stick up for him and defend him on the floor of their church. Paul had an answer to all the accusations being thrown at him, and he wanted the believers in Corinth to ‘have an answer for those who boast in appearances and not in heart’ (5:12).

What is the apostle saying in verse 13? Why should anyone think that he was ‘out of his mind’ or mad? Paul probably told about his vision on the Damascus road, and other visions and revelations given him by the Lord, but he did not use these to authenticate the gospel- they were matters between him and God (12:1f). Some think he is referring to speaking in tongues, which he did, but again this was a matter between him and God (1Cor 14:18).

Paul’s ministry was not based on visions and revelations, which was probably a contrast to his opponents in Corinth. Be careful of preachers who claim to have received ‘a word from the Lord’, especially if this word contradicts Scripture. Paul presented the gospel as historical and rational. The resurrection was of course, beyond the normal, but it was the only explanation of the facts. If people saw him to be of sound mind, as he trusted they would, it was for them (5:13). Speaking in tongues or having a vision are not essential to belief in Jesus Christ; often they are a distraction from the gospel. Belief in the resurrection is of course, essential.

**2. The compelling love of Christ**

Ministry based on a fear of the Lord alone will not be a joyous ministry. A ministry based on personal gain, like the ministry of his opponents, or of some preachers today, will not be a joyous ministry either. Paul knew the fear of the Lord but he also knew the love of Christ, and it was the love of Christ that compelled him to preach the gospel. In writing to the Romans, Paul said, ‘I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to the Lord’ (Rom 12:1 NIV). The motivation he urged upon his readers was the motivation that he had as a minister of the gospel, namely, the love of Christ.

Paul called himself the chief of sinners, ‘the least of the apostles and not worthy to be called an apostle’ because he persecuted the church (1Cor 15:9). What he now was, as a man of God, was because of the grace of God. He could never repay the Lord for the grace by which he was saved, and neither can you. I hope that you never think that by good works you can pay, or repay, Jesus for your salvation. Jesus loved you more than you can ever measure (Eph 3:19). All you can do is thank him, worship him, obey him, and serve him with all your heart and all your being. Does the love of Christ compel you in this way?

Mentioning the love of Christ reminded Paul of the central message of the gospel. He asserted or ‘judged’ that if one died for all, then all died. Is this the briefest outline of the gospel in Scripture? The one who died is of course, Jesus, the only begotten Son of God. He died on the cross as a sacrifice for all, for all who believe. He died as our representative and as our substitute. This sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient for all, but efficient or effective only for those who believe in him (John 3:16). There is no universalism, no teaching that everyone will be saved in the end, here or anywhere in the Bible.

Christ’s death in the cross was effectively our death, the death of the old man or the old self to sin. ‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal 2:20). Paul also writes of being raised with Christ to become a new man or new creation in Christ (5:17, Rom 6:5, 6). He writes of putting off the old man and putting on the new man (Eph 4:22-24). This death and new life is symbolised in baptism.

Paul was indebted to Jesus for the life he now lived, a life free of the penalty and the power of sin. I trust you are similarly indebted to Jesus, and feel compelled by the love of Christ to walk in newness of life. Jesus himself said, ‘What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul’ (Mat 16:26). Jesus died and rose again that you may have life, abundant life (John 10:10). The false teachers in Corinth, and false teachers still today, need to pay heed to these words; indeed, we all need to pay heed to these words. Because Christ died for all, and specifically died for me, I should no longer live for myself, ‘but for Him who died for me and rose again’ (5:15).

If your life did not change when you became a Christian, or if your life is no different from the unbelievers among whom you live, you need to reconsider your claim to be a Christian. If you think you can go on living for yourself, living to satisfy the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, you need to think again. Jesus said no one can serve two masters, and he meant what he said. If you call Jesus your Saviour and Lord, make sure he is your Lord.

Remember Paul’s fear of the Lord because he must one day appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Remember the love of Christ, who died for you, and make sure he is Lord of your life- in reality and not just words. Are you at this moment living for Christ - or for yourself?

**A new creation** 2Corinthians 5:16-18a

One of the first verses I learnt from my Hindi Bible was 2Corinthians 5:17. I can still recite it in Hindi. Can anyone recite it in another language? It is somewhat strange to find this ‘gospel verse’ here in 2Corinthians, a letter written by the apostle Paul when he was defending himself against rebels and false teachers in the church at Corinth. Yet this is the beauty of the Bible! Pearls of wisdom, and indeed, the pearl of great price, is found in the context of defending the gospel from attack; the attacks on Paul were personal but were also attacks on the gospel that he preached. The books of other religions and sects are a confused list of the musings of some man claiming to have had a revelation from God. Some of these ‘holy men’ actually claim to be messiah. One sect of Islam claims as its leader, a messiah born in Pakistan.

The Jews were looking for Messiah, the anointed of God, because of the prophecies of the Bible. This expectation was heightened when they suffered under brutal Roman oppression. Despite Isaiah’s description of Messiah as a suffering servant, the Jews would not accept Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah - although there was a brief acceptance when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. A Messiah who allowed himself to be crucified was a complete contradiction to the Jews, among whom Paul was a young leader at the time (Acts 7:58).

This zealous young Jew however, was stopped in his tracks when the risen Jesus appeared to him in a powerful vision on the Damascus road. He refused to believe reports about Jesus being risen from the dead- until that day. A change of name from Saul to Paul symbolised the profound change that took place in the heart of this man. Jesus called this change being ‘born again’ (John 3:7). Paul describes this change as a ‘new creation’.

In this chapter Paul explained his motives as a preacher of the gospel; some in the church were saying his motives were selfish. He was motivated by a fear of the Lord, and by the love of Christ (5:11, 14). Mention of the love of Christ lead Paul to the cross where Jesus died, not for his own sin because he had none, but for our sin, the sin of the elect. Jesus suffered and died because he took our sin. This is what God intended, and what God saw. God showed his acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus by raising him from the dead on the third day.

Jesus died as our representative and our substitute. Because Jesus took our sins when he died, we in effect died with him; we died to sin and were raised to walk in newness of life (5:15, Rom 6:4). As we look at these verses today, we do so under three subheadings: ‘a new perspective’, ‘a new creation’, and ‘reconciled to God by God’.

**1. A new perspective**

God’s perspective on the cross is entirely different to that of Jews and Greeks, and to most people today (1Cor 1:23). Ghandi, the great Hindu teacher and leader, admired the Sermon on the Mount, and other teachings of Jesus, but did not understand the gospel preached by the apostle Paul. We had a Bengali neighbour who liked reading the Bible but did not understand the gospel. We had other neighbours coming to church and calling themselves Christians, who did not understand the gospel either.

Paul no longer regarded Jesus, or as he writes ‘Christ’, ‘according to the flesh’ (5:16). He saw Jesus as the promised Messiah, as the anointed of God, and as such as the One who delivers from sin and death all who believe in Him. Christ is a unique man, and his death is a unique death, being the death of one man for the sins of the world (1John 2:2, Rom 5:16). His death was not simply a tragic miscarriage of justice at the hands of Jews and Romans. It was God reconciling the world to himself (5:19).

Paul began this verse saying, ‘Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the ‘flesh’ (5:16); the ‘now’ refers to the event of the cross. Not only was the huge temple curtain torn in two, not only was the earth shaken and the sun blotted out for three hours, but the world of men and women was completely changed at that time. The world was divided between those who remain in their sin and walk by sight, and those whose sins are forgiven and who walk by faith (5:7).

God sees the world of men and women in this way. He does not see different races, or different languages, or whatever else the world sees as dividing people. God looks upon our hearts to see whether or not we believe in his Son, Jesus Christ; and we should do the same. In the next chapter he writes of not being ‘unequally yoked together with unbelievers’ (6:14). We do not interact with unbelievers in the same way we as do with believers. My wife met a man in the waiting room of a surgery the other day. He told her of his deep thankfulness to God for saving him from being electrocuted. The conversation became warm as she told him of her faith in Christ. I am sure you have had similar experiences- ‘O, you believe in Jesus also!’ Among my closest friends are people of different colour and culture, friends with whom I have little in common apart from being a new creation in Christ Jesus.

**2. A new creation**

Why does Paul use the term ‘new creation’ when referring to a person who is born again of the Spirit of God? Being born again is something radical, and indeed incomprehensible until a person experiences new birth in Christ. A new creation is even more radical! God is the God of creation, having made out of nothing the earth and the heavens and everything that exists, and in the space of six days. This creation is also attributed to Jesus Christ, as the second person of the Trinity (Col 1:15). Jesus’ death on the cross was the beginning of a new creation- ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’, the world that had become separated from God because of sin. He reconciles ‘us’ first, and through us the world, to himself (5:18, 19).

Personal salvation is at the centre of God reconciling the world to himself for his glory. Anyone who believes in Jesus and becomes an ‘in Christ’ person is a new creation. This term ‘in Christ’ is found twenty-five times in Paul’s letters, and refers to the intimate fellowship believers enjoy with their Lord and Saviour. Such fellowship and oneness with Christ requires such a complete transformation that it is called ‘a new creation’.

Through the preached word, and the working of the Holy Spirit, those who believe undergo this transformation of the inner man (4:16). We see and know Christ with eyes of faith. We are the beginning of a cosmic transformation, with the whole creation waiting for the sons of God to be revealed. Isaiah wrote, ‘Behold, I will do a new thing’. ‘Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old’ (Isa 43:18, 19). In this context he speaks about rivers and beasts. Moreover, Paul writes of Christ as the head of the body, the church, and of the church making known to the whole creation the manifold wisdom of God (Col 1:18, Eph 3:10).

‘Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new’ (5:17). Paul is speaking about you, if you have died to sin and self, and been raised in newness of life. You are no longer the same person who was known as Bruce or Betty. You are now, Bruce who is in Christ or, Betty who is in Christ. Moreover, being in Christ you are in the body of Christ or the church, the church through which God is revealing himself to the world, and through which the whole creation will be delivered from bondage, to the glory of God (Rom 8:21). You will agree that this is a very different view of the creation to that which the pagan world is promoting.

I like to contrast the old creation of Genesis 1 with the new creation spoken of here in 2Corinthians 5:17. Do you remember how God created this planet, and all the other planets, and everything that exists on planet earth? I was listening to an astronomer postulating on the origin of water. He realised that this simple molecule is basic to life but did not know where it came from. I was driving in my car so just said, ‘God made the water, so stop wasting your time’.

God made everything out of nothing. He did so by simply speaking a word. This is the old creation. What about the new creation? Again the word is involved, but it is the living Word. And the living Word had to die on the cross and rise again for this new creation to begin. This new creation began with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and continues in us who are ‘a new creation in Christ Jesus’. It will be fully and finally revealed in the new heavens and new earth, the home of righteousness.

**3. Reconciliation with God by God**

Sin had, and has, the effect of separation, separation from other people and above all, separation from God. ‘Your sin has hidden his face from you’ (Isa 59:2). We have offended God, and by rights we should make reparations and seek reconciliation, or at least call upon a mediator. But what can we do when we are dead in our sins, and who qualifies as a mediator. Amazingly, it is God who reached out to us in our sin and provided a mediator. ‘Now all things are of God’ is a very inclusive statement referring not just to the creation but to the new creation (5:18). God is instrumental in both.

Our being born again to become a new creation in Christ is through the initiative and the ordering of the God against whom we have sinned. ‘While we were yet sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8). We had no strength; we could do nothing even if we wanted to be reconciled with God. ‘In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins’ (1John 4:10). It is through God sending his only begotten and beloved Son into this world to die on the cross as our substitute that we are reconciled to God. This realization comes after we have heard the call of Jesus, repented of our sin, and believed in Him.

Many people, and maybe you are one of them, are still trying to save themselves, still trying to get right with God without humbling themselves and confessing their sin. Or maybe you think God has no reason to be angry at you and your sin, and that reconciliation is not necessary. Do you know what reconciliation means? Between human beings, reconciliation means acknowledging fault on both sides, but with God there is no fault on his part. Which is why his move to reconcile us to himself is so amazing. He did not have to reach out to us but he did, because of his love.

And see how much our reconciliation with God cost- cost God. The cost was the precious blood of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ. He no longer ‘imputes’ or reckons your ‘trespasses’ or sins to you but to Christ- which is why he died on the cross of course, and why you now live in Christ (5:19). This was the only way we could be reconciled to God, the only way we can be born again to become a new creation in Christ Jesus. This is why we are here today, to worship God, to thank him and sing praises to his holy name. It is why we go from here to live in Christ and for Christ, seeking to please him in all we do and say.

**Ministry of reconciliation** 2Corinthians 5:18-21

When I fill out my tax form, my occupation is stated as ‘minister of religion’. Our church has traditionally had ‘ministers’, but this title is not so common today- people think we are members of parliament! Some churches have priests but we reject this title because a priest is a person who offers sacrifices. Most Protestant churches prefer the title ‘pastor’, which has the sense of shepherding a flock.

I don’t know of any church that calls their leader an ambassador, but the apostle Paul writes, ‘We are ambassadors for Christ’ (5:20). He was not only referring to leaders of course, but to all followers of Christ. We will look at this interesting title, ‘ambassador’, in our second subheading. Our first subheading is ‘Divine reconciliation’ and out third, ‘Double imputation’.

**1. Divine reconciliation**

The word ‘divine’ refers to God of course, and we use this word in the double sense of being reconciled to God by God, or by God through his Son, Jesus Christ. Our sin, original sin and sin we have committed by breaking God’s commands, makes us enemies of God. God hates sin and our sin separates us from God; unforgiven sin makes us enemies of God (Isa 59:2, Rom 5:10, James 4:4). Not many preach this truth in our day because people do not like be told they are sinners and enemies of God. They like to hear that God loves them, which is true but not the whole truth. In fact, we do not understand the nature and depth of God’s love until we understand his hatred of sin.

God’s hatred of sin means that he is angry with sinners, and that his wrath is upon sinners. Yes, anger and wrath are attributes of our holy God. We are all born in sin, and as such are under the wrath of God. Like it or not, accept it or not, this is your default position before God. We are as helpless as a baby when it comes to reconciliation or getting right with God. Men have devised all manner of ways by which they hope to get right with God, as seen in the various religions. All these efforts and religions involve man taking the initiative in reconciling himself to God- all except one. The one exception is the gospel preached by the apostles. In this gospel it is God who comes down to us in his Son, Jesus Christ, in order to reconcile us to himself.

‘God demonstrates his love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8). The following verse in Romans 5 speaks of being saved from wrath through Him, through Christ. The word propitiation, ‘propitiation by His blood through faith’ (Rom 3:25), includes this truth of wrath being turned away and of enemies becoming friends, and indeed becoming one.

‘In Christ’, in the blood of Christ, God has reconciled us to himself, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (5:18). Clearly, if we were not enemies we would not need to be reconciled. And if we did not need to be reconciled to God there was no need for the cross. The world does not understand what the cross is all about because it does not accept our sin against God. Moreover, some Christians take the cross as a token of their religion without understanding it as the basis for their reconciliation and salvation.

The apostle is writing this letter to the church in Corinth, and especially to those continuing in the true gospel that he preached to them. So when he writes of God reconciling ‘us to himself through Jesus Christ’ he is referring to all believers (5:18). And so when he writes, ‘has given us the ministry of reconciliation’ he is referring to all believers, to all who are a new creation in Christ (5:18). The word ‘ministry’ is related to being ministers of course, as we discussed previously. We are ministers of the gospel rather than ministers of religion, and more to the point, ‘ministers of reconciliation’.

Is there a ‘ministry of reconciliation’ in the federal government? If so, the focus will be on reconciliation with indigenous people not with God. Yet for indigenous people, and for all people, reconciliation with God is of first importance. All human beings, no matter what race or religion, are cut off from God by sin, and by the grace of God people from all races and religions are being reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus Christ. The word ‘minister’ is ‘*diaconia’* in the Greek and means ‘one who serves’, not ‘one who lords it over others’.

The apostle Paul gave his life to ‘the ministry of reconciliation’. He was not elected by men but appointed by God himself. He was compelled by the love of Christ and the fear of the Lord, to preach and persuade people to confess their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose blood God was ‘reconciling the world to himself’ (5:19). The word ‘*kosmon*’ translated ‘world’, in this context means the world of human beings. It means people from all nations, races, tribes and languages will be reconciled to God; not in totality but according to God’s purposes in election. It means there is only one way of being reconciled to the God who created us, and who will judge us. That way is in and through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

‘Not imputing their trespasses to them’ (5:19). What does this mean? Trespasses or sins are offences against God, offences which incur the wrath of God. But in Christ, God’s wrath is turned away; it is turned upon Christ who took our sin upon himself as he hung on the cross. ‘Impute’ means to ‘reckon’ or to charge to someone’s account. God does not reckon our sins to us but reckons them to Christ. This is the great exchange that took place on the cross, as set out in verse 21. And this is the good news or the gospel that you are hearing, the word of reconciliation in and through the blood of God’s only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**2. Duty as ambassadors**

Not so long ago the French withdrew their ambassador to our country in protest against the cancelling of a government contract. The ambassador has since returned. He resides in our country as representative of the nation of France. Most countries have an ambassador in Canberra, and we have ambassadors living in their country. Such men or women have the task of promoting peace between our nation and other nations. If that other nation is very powerful, peace may well be on their terms. In times of war ambassadors are withdrawn; the victor in that war will send an ambassador to the defeated nation to establish terms of peace.

Paul applies the word ‘ambassador’ to himself, and to all who are involved in the ministry of reconciliation. Yet we only find the word twice - here and in Ephesians 6:20. The Greek word is ‘*presbeu*’ which is closely related to the word we translate as ‘elder’. The role or duty of an ambassador is to represent the king or government who sent him, and to convey messages from that king. He is a messenger entrusted with conveying the message in a proper way. The message may have to be translated and presented in a way the people can understand.

As ‘ambassadors for Christ’, we are to present the message of reconciliation entrusted to us by God, and to do so by way of pleading for acceptance. ‘We implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God ‘(5:20). God sent Jonah as an ambassador to the wicked people of Nineveh to tell them, to implore them, to turn from their wicked ways. Jonah ran away, but God grabbed him and took him to Nineveh. Have you ever tried to run away when God sends you to someone or some place to be his ambassador? I hope the story of Jonah encourages you not runaway but to go and tell people of God’s wrath upon their sin, and of God’s love in sending Jesus to take their sin and die on the cross as their substitute.

Let no one be ashamed of the gospel. Let us plead, let us implore and beg on Christ’s behalf, ‘Be reconciled to God’. We do not want the death of Christ to be in vain, nor do we want anyone to continue as enemies of God and suffer eternal punishment in hell- do we?

**3. Double imputation**

We previously noted the richness of this chapter in terms of explaining the gospel. Verse 17 explains the amazing inner transformation of being born again, or as Paul calls it, becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus. His transformation was marked by a change of name, from Saul to Paul. You may not have taken on a new name but you will have taken on a new nature when you confessed your sin and believed in Jesus Christ. We urge you to mark this transformation by becoming a member of the church, but only God and you can know if you are truly a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Here in verse 21 we find another profound explanation of the gospel. The terms ‘double imputation’ and ‘great exchange’ have been used to describe the transactions referred to in this verse. The first of these transactions is, ‘He [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us’ (5:21). Through his unique birth and unique life, Jesus was without sin. He is the Son of God, as well as the Son of Mary or Son of man. ‘In Him there is no sin’ (1John 3:5). Jesus challenged anyone to convict him of sin (John 8:46). Can you make the same challenge? Only a fool would do so, unless that person is Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus had no sin and therefore had no need to make sacrifices for his sin, a necessity for every Jew living under the law. Because every Jew and every human being has sinned, they are not able to a sacrifice for others. ‘None of them can by any means redeem his brother; nor give to God a ransom for him’ (Ps 49:7). You might be able to save your brother from drowning but you cannot save him from his sin: ‘To redeem a life is costly’.

The sin-offering under the old covenant had to be a lamb without blemish. The Bible refers to Jesus as, ‘a lamb without blemish and without spot’ (1Peter 1:19). Jesus ‘offered himself without spot to God’; ‘Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many’ (Heb 9:14, 28). Jesus, in willingly obedience to the Father, took our sin while on the cross; he suffered the wrath of God and paid the penalty due to us for our sin. He really died and was buried, ‘the just for the unjust to bring us to God ‘(1Peter 3:18). Yet death could not hold the Son of God and he rose again, signalling victory over death, a victory in which we who believe in him share.

The ‘double’ part of the imputation is, ‘that we might become the righteousness of God in Him’ (5:21). Jesus took our sin and died as our substitute. The other side of the coin as it were, is that he gave us his righteousness that we might become righteous before God. This righteousness is pictured as putting on new clothes or a wedding dress which allows us to enter in to the presence of God. Without righteousness or holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). Since we have no righteousness of our own, God imputes to us the righteousness of Christ, thereby making us acceptable in his presence.

And so reconciliation with God was obtained by means of the great exchange that took place on the cross. And so we rejoice with great thankfulness to the Lord, and tell the world of the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Now is the day of salvation** 2Corinthians 6:1-2

Two and a half years ago I booked an overseas holiday. Six months before we were to leave international travel was thrown into chaos by a viral pandemic. Even here at home people panicked, clearing supermarket shelves of toilet paper and other products. Still, I thought, it would all be over by the time we planned to leave on our holiday. But as that time approached we realised we would have to postpone our trip till the next year. That year came and we have now rebooked our trip for this year, 2022. Surely after two and a half years things will be back to normal, I thought, but now I am not so sure.

The lives of millions around the world have been thrown into turmoil by this virus. People who felt they were in control of their lives are now in despair. Before the pandemic only cancer made people feel they had lost control of their lives. With this virus we have lost control of what we wear, where we go, how we work, and indeed how we worship. But by the grace of God we have been able to continue worshipping God. In doing so, we remember that our God is sovereign in all things and that he is the one in control of our lives. God is shaking the world that men and women might return to him, that they might repent of their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

God shook Jerusalem so hard that he destroyed it and sent the sinful people into exile. After seventy years, Daniel confessed the sins of the nation, before praying, ‘Now therefore, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant, and his supplications, and for the Lord’s sake cause your face to shine on your sanctuary, which is desolate’ (Dan 9:17). Do we not need to repent and turn to the Lord as he shakes our nation today? We pray that today’s shaking will not go on for seventy years, but we do not know! What we do know is that the Lord is powerful to stop this pandemic, so let us pray to him as Daniel prayed all those years ago. Let repentance and return to the Lord start with you and me, and let it start today, because now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation (6:1).

As we look at the first two verses of 2Corinthians 6 we find the apostle Paul urging us ‘Not to receive the grace of God in vain’ and to understand that, ‘Now is the accepted time’ and ‘Now is the day of salvation’.

**1. Not receive the grace of God in vain**

The apostle Paul had preached the good news of Jesus Christ in the city of Corinth over five years before writing this letter. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city in Greece. He preached in the synagogue but was forced out by the Jews. He continued preaching to Jews and Gentiles, and many repented and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. But after Paul left the city, some started falling away, forgetting the grace of God by which they were saved. The flesh became the downfall of some as they turned back to sexually immoral ways. The devil was the downfall of some as false teachers started preaching another gospel. The world was the downfall of some as they brought politics, lawsuits and division into the church.

Church’s today continue to come under such attacks, attacks from the world, the flesh, and the devil, and our church is not immune. We have seen members fall away from the grace of God. As we begin a new year I wonder if we will not see more, although my daily prayer is that we will see many more coming to know the grace of God. I have particular concern for young people because they are making decisions that will affect the rest of their life. The decision to believe in Jesus Christ is the most important decision anyone can ever make. Many of you will have made that decision in your youth, but are you as committed today as you were then? Are you really seeking to know more of your Saviour and Lord? God is a spirit, infinite and eternal, so you can never know everything about him. God’s love surpasses knowledge, so if you have not received the grace of God in vain you will be seeking a closer relationship with your Lord in the New Year.

Unlike your unbelieving neighbour, you do have something to cling to in this chaotic world; you have the Lord Jesus Christ. Pandemics come and go, but the Lord does not change. If you know the grace of God then show it in the way you live and worship. Reach out to those around you who are drowning in despair. Tell them of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no point telling them about the grace of God if you are not demonstrating such grace in your life, of course. When was the last time you invited someone to come with you to worship? There is no point encouraging anyone or inviting them to church, even your own family, if you are not regular in worship yourself. If you are not regular in prayer and worship, these words of the apostle are directed to your ears: ‘Have you received the grace of God in vain?’

Paul is not just asking; he is pleading with the Corinthians and with you (6:1). He knows that the grace of God is the most precious thing in the whole world. Remember, ‘It is by grace you are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God’ (Eph 2:8). You cannot buy your way into heaven so why do you think money is more important than grace? You cannot get in to heaven by good works so why do you think good works are more important than grace? Good works are important, as the following verse in Ephesians 2 tells us, but they are not works you decide are good but works that ‘God has prepared beforehand that we should walk on them’. As Jesus himself said, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent’ (John 6:29).

As I plead with you today not to forget the grace of God by which you are saved, I do so as an ‘ambassador for Christ, as though God were pleading through us’ (5:20). I plead with you as a servant working together with God (6:1). Our NKJ version has ‘workers together with Him’, but note that the ‘with Him’ or ‘with God’ is not in the original. Ambassadors are not co-workers; they are sent with the authority of the king to be his mouthpiece, just as God sends us to preach his word. I encourage and plead with you to grow in your knowledge and love of the Lord Jesus Christ, and if you do not yet know the grace of God in salvation then pray and open your heart to receive this wonderful gift of grace.

**2. Now is the accepted time**

Some in the church at Corinth had turned away from the grace of God they received when they believed. It is no good saying, as a young man once said to me, ‘I have a baptism certificate’. It is no good saying, ‘I am a member of the church’, even though we urge you to join the church by professing faith in Jesus Christ. If you have received the grace of God, you must press on in that grace- ‘all the more as you see the Day approaching’. It is important that we meet together to encourage one another as we see the day approaching (Heb 10:25).

Our government proclaimed freedom day a few months ago but we are still in the pandemic. I wrote at the time, and I say it again today, true freedom is only found in Jesus Christ. I do not know when the pandemic will end but I know that Jesus is coming again, and it may be before the pandemic ends. It is tragic to see people trusting in their computer predictions, which take no account of the prophetic words of the Bible. Computer modelling fails time and again, but God’s word will never fail.

The apostle Paul, like his Lord and Saviour, knew and believed the Scriptures. Jesus quoted words from Isaiah 61 when he began his ministry, and Paul quotes similar words here in this letter. They are words spoken by God through the prophet about Messiah. In the original context they were about God hearing the cry of his Servant and helping him as reached out to restore the Jews and bring salvation to the Gentiles. For Jesus and for Paul, these words were fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The ‘acceptable time’ is now. Anyone, Jew or Gentile, who is suffering the ravages of sin in this world can cry to the Lord for help. That sin of course, is the sin of men and women, including your own sin. As I just said, if you think you have freedom just because you are vaccinated or are back in control of your Christless life, you are gravely mistaken.

These verses in chapter 6 are actually the conclusion of chapter 5 where we were told that God had reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (5:18). This reconciliation was promised by the prophets- indeed, promised since Genesis 3:15- but has now been made known. ‘Behold, now is the accepted time’ to proclaim Christ and receive Christ. The time referred to is from the cross and resurrection until Christ returns. In effect, it is the time you live in your present body. Do you know how many more days you have to live in this world?

Thousands thought they had more days until they succumbed to coronavirus. Any of us may be cut off at any moment. Dear friend, this is the reality and this is the urgency with which we proclaim the gospel. Thousands are living like the rich man in Luke 16, doing nothing wrong except living for themselves. But living for yourself and ignoring God is the essence of sin. You cannot save yourself so you will die in your sin just like that rich man, unless you repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Some people hear the gospel and say they will consider the claims of Christ at a later time. Most of these people die in their sin. Today is the day of salvation; tomorrow may be too late!

**3. Now is the day of salvation**

If you remember anything of what you have heard today, remember these words: ‘Now is the day of salvation’. Many, even now, are making plans for this coming year, plans which they surely realise are very, very uncertain. Before you make any plans about where you will go this year, consider where you will go when you die. You can have certainty about this - despite what many, even Christians, tell you. Again, the previous chapter tells us that ‘if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation’ (5:17). This new creation refers to a new heart, a new person, who will one day put off this earthly body and put on a heavenly body, a body fit for eternity in heaven.

Salvation is not just a piece of paper, be it a birth certificate saying you were born into a Christian family, a baptism certificate, or a church membership form. Salvation means being saved from sin and death. Being born in sin and committing sin means you are under divine condemnation; you are effectively on death row, counting the days. But the gospel tells us that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin- this is the grace of God (1John 1:9). It cleanses us when we confess and believe.

The moment we confess and believe we are made right in the eyes of God. While Paul speaks of the ‘day of salvation’ it is not a process but a momentary thing. It is like the judge saying, ‘not guilty’, or the prisoner stepping out the prison gate. If you can remember that moment that is great, but the most important thing is not to receive the grace of God in vain.

**Messenger must match the message** 2Corinthians 6:3-10

Do we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes? Do we as a church believe we have a message that the world must hear? Do we know this message and are we demonstrating this message in the way we live? When we look around at empty seats, we must ask ourselves these questions.

Liberal theology has greatly undermined the message of the church today, not to mention other departures from the true gospel. The behaviour of church leaders has also undermined the gospel message. The Church of Rome, and some protestant churches, have been scandalized by paedophile priests in recent decades. Some Anglican dioceses are selling church buildings in order to pay compensation claims. The sexual immorality of a popular preacher and author was revealed after his recent death. What do people think as they read his books on the gospel- if they are still reading them!

The apostle Paul believed in the power of God to save people, and he preached the gospel to that end. He also knew that his hearers would question the truth of his claims by the sincerity with which he not only preached but also lived the gospel. He was not a ‘do as I say not as I do’ teacher, any more than Jesus was. Even so, I do not like being called a ‘religious’ person because religions are man-made. People take on religious beliefs but they have no power to change their behaviour; they do not become a ‘new creation’ as Paul explains in 2Corinthians 5:17. Sadly, some who call themselves Christians do not know about being a new creation in Christ Jesus either. For this reason we use the term ‘Christian’ carefully because for many it is a religious term, having no reference to the power of God unto salvation.

‘If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation’ writes the apostle (5:17). He wrote this in the context of false teachers having infiltrated the church at Corinth- not unlike liberal theologians and paedophiles infiltrating the church in our day. The false teachers exploited divisions that had come into the church. They joined the party that was undermining the gospel preached by Paul, and attacking the apostle himself. Paul was hurt by their personal attacks but was not seeking revenge. Nevertheless, his message was so closely connected to his conduct he was compelled to defend his conduct, as well as the gospel itself.

Paul was writing to the church, especially to those who believed the gospel he preached and who were now confused by the attacks aimed at Paul: ‘That you may have an answer to those who boast in appearance and not in heart’ (5:12). In these verses he writes to commend himself and his colleagues as ministers or servants of God- and that not for the first or last time (4:8-12, 11:22-31, 12:10). He wanted to ‘take the wind out of the sails’ of his opponents by refuting their accusations of deceitful and unworthy conduct. He wanted to make sure that his ministry was in no way a stumbling block to these new and immature believers. So Paul outlines what he had endured as a servant of God in terms of trials in general, and in specific. He goes on to speak of the positive aspects of his life, our second subheading, and the various paradoxes that characterise life in this world for a servant of God.

**1. Patience in abundance**

In commending himself to the church at Corinth, Paul asks them to consider the great patience or endurance he was demonstrating. He had suffered, and was continuing to suffer, for the sake of the gospel, and for their sakes as he ministered to them from a distance. In the early days they appreciated Paul and his ministry among them; they believed in Jesus and worshipped the Lord as he taught them. What had changed? Sexual immorality was being tolerated and even praised by some as a gospel freedom! Personalities and politics brought divisions in the church, and then false teachers came with letters of commendation, with eloquence, and with another gospel.

Paul writes firstly of general troubles, hardships and distress that he faced when he first came to Corinth. He came alone and worked to support himself. He was thrown out of the synagogue but continued preaching in the house next door. He experienced the same opposition from the Jews wherever he went. Paul was arrested and judged in a Gentile court. What minister of the gospel or servant of God today would endure such hardships and opposition?

Paul goes on to mention specific afflictions he suffered, in another trilogy of words: ‘in beatings, imprisonments, and riots’ (6:5 ESV). In chapter 11 he gives more detail of what he suffered at the hands of men, while in the Book of Acts Luke also tells of Paul being stoned and beaten and imprisoned at various places. He was not found guilty of any wrongdoing but suffered as a criminal. Paul was aware that his saviour and Lord did no wrong but suffered and died at the hands of men. If we acknowledge the suffering of our sinless saviour in this world, why should we be surprised when we suffer as followers of Jesus (John 15:18). If we are not suffering as believers, should we not be asking ourselves, why not? ‘If we are treated as totally irrelevant, are we really acting as salt and light as Christ intended we should (Mat 5:13,14)?’ writes Grogan.

As far as troubles and hardships are concerned, some of these were self-imposed for the sake of the ministry. Paul write of labours, sleepless nights, and hunger (6:5). We spoke of Paul supporting himself by making tents; he probably did this during the night if he was preaching in the day. Labours or hard work probably refers to physical work, but preaching the gospel is also labour. Speaking in public is physically taxing, not to mention the necessary preparation. Paul’s ministry also involved a lot of travel which was arduous and dangerous in those days, and even in our recent past.

My childhood minister would travel by horseback to three different centres each Lord’s day- so I am told. Yet I recently heard of a church which gives their pastor a day off preaching each month. In large churches the pastor may only preach once a month. What does Paul’s ‘labours, sleepless nights and hunger’ mean to us today? I recall a fellow servant of the Lord spreading newspaper on the dirty floor of a crowded Indian train as we travelled overnight to an evangelistic camp in Bihar. Maybe more hardships in training and the early years of ministry would make for more effective ministers of the gospel, for men who look out for the interests of Christ rather than their own interests.

**2. Positive aspects of conduct**

The endurance spoken of by the apostle is not one of stoic, stiff-upper-lip patience; it was certainly not a cause for complaint. He rejoiced that he was counted worthy to suffer affliction for the gospel (cf. Acts 5:41). When we preach the truth of the gospel, there will always be those who are critical. We should be concerned if our preaching does not ‘ruffle any feathers’ as they say. The word preached is aimed at hearts, at sinful hearts. By the power of God such hearts will be touched and changed, or by the power of Satan such hearts will rebel and get angry with the preacher, and with God.

Paul ministered ‘by purity’ (6:6), meaning he watched his own life, seeking to live in holiness and with total commitment to the Lord. God is holy and we must be holy; being holy we will obey his commands, especially his so-called love commands. We cannot go around saying we love God but hate people. It is impossible to preach the love of God while hating our hearers. Paul speaks of ‘sincere love’ and ‘kindness’; both are fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), fruits seen in our relationships with other people. Longsuffering or patience is another fruit of the Spirit. We must demonstrate great patience in our ministry. This does not mean overlooking immoral behaviour of course, or backsliding. Through a council of elders, the minister must exercise loving discipline.

There are different views as to what Paul means by ‘knowledge’ here in verse 6. Some think it is knowledge of the truth and others knowledge of his hearers; he needs to understand both. In our ministry we must be faithful to God’s word, and faithful to the people; this is my prayer every time I preach. Ministers are not policemen merely administering the law; they are teachers, wanting to see believers growing up into Christ who is the head (Eph 4:14, 15).

In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul spoke of ‘affectionately longing for you’, noting that he was ‘well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become so dear to us’ (1Thess 2:8). The Lord brought this verse to my mind when, as a missionary, I started hating Indians after being robbed on a train journey. It was my first, but not my last, encounter with thieves and pickpockets. While his opponents relied on their own abilities and eloquence in their ‘ministry’, Paul relied on the power of God. He would not resort to deceptive or corrupt ways, even though accused of doing so (7:2). He always spoke the truth in love (Eph 4:15). It is interesting how often politicians are caught out for things they say ‘off-camera’. Servants of God are never ‘off-camera’- God sees and hears us all the time!

Paul often likens the Christian life to that of a soldier. In Ephesians 6 he writes about the armour of God. In speaking of the power of God in ministry, he refers to ‘the armour of righteousness on the right hand and the left’ (6:7). Is he referring to the shield of faith or the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:16, 17)? We must be ready to defend ourselves, as well as move forward at any time, because Satan attacks us in any way at any time. Maintaining truth and righteousness, as well as prayer, is key to resisting the devil.

**3. Paradoxes in ministry**

Paul goes from listing the troubles and persecutions and hardships he faced, to listing the positive aspects of his life and ministry and his source of power in God. In the closing verses he lists a series of paradoxes that mark the life of a servant of God. Let us never forget that, while the gospel is good news, it is not always seen as such by sinners, and certainly not by Satan. While, tragically, there are paedophile priests, we might wonder what our society would say about Jesus who said, ‘Let the little children come to me’. Our society is so focussed on sexual love, it is blind to the love spoken of by Jesus.

While we need to understand our society and exercise care, we will always face accusations of deceit and dishonesty. Christians in India are accused of such behaviour whenever a Hindu is converted because people cannot comprehend the power of God. While rejoicing in the power of God to bring life to dead hearts, pastors are brought before the courts, accused of manipulating people to convert. Paul writes of honour and dishonour, of evil report and good report, of being accused of deception yet being absolutely honest (6:8). Again, Paul would remember how Jesus our Lord was accused of breaking the law, even as he healed people and raised the dead- the laws of men not the laws of God.

Paul’s opponents at Corinth were saying, ‘Who is this fellow?’ even though he had lived in their community for one and a half years. The world loves to accuse non-conformists of being nobodies. You may be an honest hard worker, as I hope you are, but you may be sidelined or ostracised as being ‘religious’ by fellows workers. Paul knew all about being sidelined and falsely accused. Indeed, he speaks of dying yet being alive as a minster of the gospel. Years ago preachers were respected in our society, but no more. Does this matter? Where the gospel is advancing preachers get no respect from society. They are beaten, thrown into prison and killed, but the church grows and God is glorified. ‘Ministers of God can never be proud or self-serving’.

Paul would have sung in the Psalms of David about enemies setting traps for him and attacking him, but in almost all the psalms David ends by praising God. He recalled the mighty works of God in delivering the righteous. Paul remembered the cross of Christ. He knew what it was to be poor and needy, and what it was to be sorrowful, to be beaten but not killed, but he also knew the power of God to save and to bless. He rejoiced in the Lord always. After all, our Lord and saviour was rich but became poor and died for our sake. He died but rose again, the greatest paradox of all. Do you, as a child of God, lack any good thing? What more can you want than Christ himself! Because he lives you also live; you live to glorify God and enjoy him forever!

**Separation and holiness** 2Corinthians 6:11-7:4

Back on the farm we had an old car that I and my brothers ‘bashed’ around the paddocks. The brakes were weak because brake fluid leaked from the cylinder; once my brother hit a cow and broke its leg! Brake fluid was hard to get, so I thought diesel would do the same job- and that was the end of the brakes! Growing up I was told that oil and water do not mix.

In the Christian life there are things that do not mix. The apostle Paul tells us not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. This is the main lesson here at the end of chapter 6. Paul may have been thinking of a law given by Moses: ‘You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together’ (Deut 22:10). Not only would such a yoking be painful for the animals but their plowing would have been a disaster. Christians who yoke themselves with unbelievers in worship or in marriage will come to grief with regard to their faith.

This passage brings to an end what some call ‘Paul’s digression’ which began back in 2:14; they say this because of the reference to Titus and to Macedonia in 2:13 and again in 7:5, 6. But the teaching of this ‘digression’ has been profound, as well as personal. Paul was facing attacks from some in the church at Corinth who did not like his teaching. They abused the freedoms of the gospel when it came to worship and sexuality. Those from a Jewish background probably thought Paul was being too liberal, while those from a pagan background felt he was being too strict. The newly arrived false teachers sought to discredit Paul to establish their own authority, and another gospel (cf.7:2). Paul desperately tried to prevent such a disaster.

In this section Paul makes a personal plea to the Corinthians to open their hearts to him, and a further plea for them to stop yoking themselves to unbelievers. He supports this teaching from Scripture, before making a further plea to be holy, and to be united with him in the bonds of the gospel.

**1. Plea to be open hearted**

‘O Corinthians!’ This is one of few occasions when the apostle Paul actually refers to those to whom he is writing by name; ‘O foolish Galatians!’ is another (Gal 3:1). He does this when deeply moved by love for his ‘children’. He is like a father expressing frustration with his son- ‘O Johnny, please listen to me!’ I recall a father being frustrated that his son was not working. He did everything he could find his son a job, but the truth is, ‘You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink’.

Paul was bending over backwards, trying to get the Corinthians to understand that he loved them sincerely, and wanted to help them in their spiritual life. He earnestly refuted suggestions that he was cheating them because he was corrupt and selfish. But he could not force them to love and respect him. All he could do was pray and plead, and open his own heart to them, as he does in this letter, especially in the first half of this chapter. He reminds them of the various paradoxes we face in the Christian life. We live in a fallen world so our honest words and sincere actions may be misconstrued and rejected. Paul was distressed that these believers were listening to corrupt, self-serving men and turning against Paul, their father in the faith.

We learn more about the man called Paul in this letter than in any of his other letters. This is because Paul was opening his heart to the Corinthians, trying to renew the relationship he had with them in the beginning. He was not hiding anything from them, and did not use deceptive or underhanded methods in his ‘ministry of reconciliation’ (5:18). He preached reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ, and reconciliation with one another, again in and through Jesus Christ. Satan is clever at destroying these relationships. By attacking the fellowship of believers, he can indirectly attack our relationship with God (2:11). The fellowship of believers at Corinth was under attack and Paul was desperate to restore it. Such fellowship must be based on truth, not lies. It must be open and not secretive.

Paul assures the Corinthians that he had opened his heart wide towards them and spoken openly (6:1). He pleads that they do the same with regard to him: ‘Now in return…you also be open’ (6:13). All he can do is plead and pray, as we just said. He pleads, ‘O Corinthians!’, and then refers to them as his children (6:11, 13). He denies having done anything to bring about the lack of trust on their part. They were the ones being restricted by their own affections/ feelings/emotions (6:12). Maybe they felt guilty for continuing to attend pagan temples. Secrets are inimical to any relationship.

**2.’Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers’**

You may have heard these words being quoted in relation to marriage. If not, then hear them now! Paul does not mention the word ’marriage’ but he does back in 1Corinthians 7, speaking of marriage ‘only in the Lord’ (1Cor 7:39). Moreover, everything he says here fits the marriage relationship. Sure, he tells those who have an unbelieving spouse to stay with them, but this is no excuse for knowingly marrying an unbeliever.

The apostle not only gives the command not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, he explains ‘why’ in a series of rhetorical questions. Before looking at these, we will note that Paul was not just thinking of marriage. He was probably thinking of believers at Corinth who thought they were free to join unbelieving friends in idol worship. This idea may seem remote to us but is a reality for brothers and sisters in India. Many work in places and schools that have idols set up at the entrance for workers and students to ‘worship’ as they enter. We, of course, do face pressure to conform to immoral practices in the work place, if not open worship. Students need to be taught not to bow down to images or participate in corrupt worship in school. ‘Come out from among them and be separate’ says the Lord (6:17).

To be yoked with an unbeliever in worship or marriage is like having light and dark existing together; is this possible? If you say we have twilight, you are setting yourself up for a lot of stumbling? Paul bluntly declares, ‘What do righteousness and wickedness have in common?’ (6:14). We must understand that there are two types of people in the world, believers and unbelievers, children of God and children of Satan. We do not know everyone’s heart, and that does not matter in most circumstances. Paul does not advocate withdrawing from society to live in a Christian commune (1Cor 5:10). But in circumstances where our relationship is close and involves personal commitments, we need to know the beliefs and commitments of the other person. Otherwise we will soon face situations where our faith in Christ will be on the line. We will be asked by the Lord, ‘Do you love me more than these?’ Paul’s command is for the good of our relationship with the Lord.

Rhetorical questions continue: ‘What accord has Christ with Belial?’ (6:15). Remember the words, ‘If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation’ (5:17). When we believe, Christ by his Spirit comes to live in our hearts. We become the children of God. Unbelievers, on the other hand, are children of Satan. We read of Christ’s interaction with Satan in the desert; it was brief and unpleasant. Any heart relationship between believer and unbeliever will be the same, brief and unpleasant, unless of course, there is compromise.

‘What part has a believer have with an unbeliever?’ is the next question put to us by the apostle (6:15). And then, ‘What agreement has the temple of God with idols?’ (6:16). What is the temple of God? The Corinthians were very familiar with pagan temples and idols. While Paul told the Christians it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols without asking questions, he did not permit them to join in feasts associated with idol worship. The Judaizers probably criticised Paul for even allowing believers to eat meat sacrificed to idols (cf. Acts 15:29).

Paul told the Corinthians to ‘flee idolatry’, just as he told them to ‘flee sexual immorality’. In this context, Paul spoke of a believer’s body being the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19), and also of their church being the temple of God (1Cor 3:16). So when he writes, ‘You are the temple of God’ in verse 16 he is referring to the assembly of believers. God is holy and he hates all carved images. Christian worship is as different to pagan worship as light is to darkness. There can be no compromise, no joining with unbelievers in worshipping their gods or idols. We must be discerning about joining hands with unbelievers, even if it is for a good cause.

**3. Defer to Scripture**

Paul believed the Bible to be the inspired word of God (2Tim 3:16). He derived his doctrine from the Bible, and used Scripture to support his teaching. The principle of separation, of not being unequally yoked with unbelievers, is found in the OT. The Lord established his holy nation in the land of Goshen, before bringing them out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan, where he commanded them to maintain separation from surrounding nations in terms of worship and marriage. Paul quotes from Leviticus 26:11, 12 the words with which the Lord declared his covenant with his people: God would be their God and they would be his people, to the exclusion of all others. God would dwell among his people, not as one of many gods but as their one and only God.

In a further selection of OT verses, the apostle supports his teaching on separation, on God’s people being holy and pure in His sight. The first, from Isaiah 52, relates to the Lord bringing his people out of pagan Babylon, where he had sent them for punishment. They were to leave quickly, taking only the holy vessels for the temple in Jerusalem. The second comes from 2Samuel 7:14 where the Lord promises to be a Father to the son of David.

The principle of separation set down for the people of the OT temple remains valid for the people for the NT church. God is still a holy God who will not give his glory to another. Our world pressures us to be inclusive, to accept everyone no matter what their beliefs or behaviour, but this woke policy is obviously failing.

God’s promise to you a believer, and to us his church is, ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’. God is holy, so his people must be holy, as we are when cleansed of our sin by the blood of Christ. Paul refers to the ‘filthiness of the flesh and spirit’, of body and mind, while calling us to be holy in the fear of God (7:1). This is a very high calling but one that is possible, and indeed essential, for one who has been washed in the precious blood of Christ (Rev 1:5).

**4. Plea to be open hearted**

Our fourth and final subheading is the same as the first because Paul repeats his plea as he closes this section of his letter: ‘Open your hearts to us’ (7:2). The majority in the church had been influenced by a vocal, anti-Paul minority. But they were persuaded, probably by Titus, to heed what Paul wrote and discipline the sexual offender in their church (2:6). Paul urges them to go a step further and reject the lies being spread about him by the minority. With a sincere heart, Paul assures them that he has neither wronged them, nor corrupted, nor cheated anyone. Clearly, these were unfounded charges being levelled at him by people who were corrupt and self-serving themselves.

Paul does not condemn those being swayed by the vocal minority; he just urges them to listen to him rather than these rebels. He assures the believers that he has them in his heart. He saw them as being in the same position, the same ‘boat of Christ’ as it were, so that they would either live together or die together (7:3). We are reminded of the marriage vow, ‘Until death do us part’- although death does not part believers in Christ.

Paul closes by praising them, by ‘boasting’ on their behalf, before expressing a sense of personal comfort and joy, in the belief, it seems, that they will open their hearts to him, and join him in whatever suffering they may face at the hands of the rebels and false teachers in their church.

**Godly sorrow** 2Corinthians 7:5-15

When I got my first job there was no such thing as HR departments. Nowadays HR departments are big. Job interviews have been greatly refined and defined. One of the things common in most interviews is the question, ‘Tell us of your strengths and weaknesses’. Someone thought this question would make people think about their weaknesses, but even if they did, people do not like revealing their weaknesses. So they give as a strength, ‘Strong leadership’ and as a weakness, ‘Strong leadership’ or something similar. If we are brave, we might ask someone close to us to identify our weaknesses, and if we are humble we will listen and change our ways. Sometimes, it takes a meeting of the church to tell the pastor or leader of a weakness in his character or his ways. But will this person listen, reflect and repent, or will they reject even loving criticism. Will they react with godly sorrow, or with worldly sorrow which denies any weakness and blames everyone else?

The apostle Paul reminds us that he was in Macedonia writing this letter. He had come to Macedonia, maybe to the Philippian church, looking for Titus. He had waited in Troas, but when Titus did not come, he went further ‘down the track’ to meet him (2:13, 7:5). Because verse 5 mentions Macedonia and Titus, it links back to 2:13. For this reason the intervening chapters have been called ‘a great digression’ or even regarded as coming from another letter. We note this return to the matter of Titus, whom Paul had sent to Corinth with his ‘harsh letter’, but the intervening chapters fit the context of Paul’s relationship with this church. Moreover, we do not always write letters in one sitting, certainly not letters as long as 2Corinthians! Our three subheadings today are: ‘Titus brought good news’, ‘Titus saw godly sorrow’ and, ‘Titus and Paul rejoice’.

**1.Titus brought good news**

You may recall the ‘harsh letter’ that Paul sent to the church in Corinth (2:4) - not that we have a copy of it today. Paul wrote this letter after his ‘painful visit’ to Corinth while stationed in Ephesus. From his first letter, 1Corinthians, we learn of the many troubles that arose in this church after it was planted by Paul around AD50. Apart from division over leadership, some, probably Gentile converts, were slipping back into old ways. Sexual immorality and corruption was widespread in Corinthian society and was accepted as part of pagan worship.

Paul learned that a man in the church was guilty of incest, and that people were back joining in pagan feasts. This man seems to have been influential because the church did nothing by way of discipline, even after he wrote to them- twice in fact. Paul took this matter very seriously; he did not want the church, the body of Christ, becoming a ‘den of iniquity’, indistinguishable from the pagan society. He decided to visit the church in person to deal with this matter, not so much with the offender as with the church that was failing to exercise discipline. It seems this man was abusive towards Paul, and the church did not support Paul as it should have. Paul returned to Ephesus deeply hurt, and penned his ‘harsh letter’. He wrote with ‘many tears’ (2:4), speaking the truth in love, but knowing what he said would impact their hearts and their relationship with the apostle.

Back in Ephesus, Paul was overcome with anxiety about this letter. Had he done the right thing? How would they react? I remember thinking of how I could retrieve a letter I had written from the post box, many years ago. At least we had to walk to the post box in those days! Now we just write and click ‘send’, and off goes a letter we later regret sending!

Paul referred to ‘trouble in Asia’ (1:8), probably the riot in Ephesus which he escaped, but he carried with him the burden of this ‘harsh letter’. He was anxious to hear from Titus, who took this letter to Corinth. By the time Paul got to Macedonia he was desperate to see Titus, and greatly relieved when he did (7:6).

We do not know what ‘outside conflicts’ Paul experienced in Macedonia; he had, of course, faced threats from the Jews when he first came into Macedonia (7:5). We do, however, know the fears he faced on the inside, fears for Titus and the church in Corinth. So downcast and desperate was the apostle that he could not sleep; in body he had no rest. Travel was dangerous in those days, and Paul was also worried at how the Corinthians would treat Titus- physical violence was not out of the question.

‘But God’ is how the NIV translates the opening words of verse 6. Paul, no doubt, was praying earnestly at this time, even though he does not says so. In saying, ‘But God’, he indicates that the coming of Titus was a wonderful answer to prayer. God, who comforts the downcast, had comforted him by the coming of Titus (7:6). Being downcast is something the Psalmist speaks of, something both he and Paul recognized, but with God’s help dealt with (Ps 42).

Paul was overjoyed to see his dear friend Titus safe and well. As mentioned, he feared for his safety in travel, and in the church at Corinth. But his joy increased when he listened to the report brought by Titus; ‘not only in his coming’ (7:7). Titus told Paul of the warm reception he was given in this church. He told of their longing for Paul and concern for him, their sorrow, presumably for the way they had treated their ‘father in the faith’ (7:7). Titus, remember, was carrying Paul’s ‘harsh letter’, which presumably he delivered. Would the people turn on Titus as they had done on Paul? Paul learns from Titus that the people had changed. Was it the letter? Was it Titus and his skill as a peacemaker? Or was it God working in the hearts of his people? It was all these, but ultimately it was God by his Spirit changing the hearts of these believers.

The silent majority saw the few attacking Paul but did nothing to set things right in their church; they failed to exercise the necessary discipline. Paul told them what they had to do more than once, and now they finally acted. The majority punished the offender (2:6). Did they publically rebuke him, as was done at our recent synod, or did they remove him from the fellowship? Actually, Paul wanted them to forgive this man, presumably because he expressed godly sorrow and not just remorse (2:7-11).

**2. Titus saw godly sorrow**

What happened in the church at Corinth can and does happen in churches today. Churches that overlook matters of immorality or corruption or controlling behaviour, suffer until such matters are dealt with. Reformed churches can be so focussed on matters of doctrine that they overlook matters of conduct. But if this letter teaches us anything it is that conduct must be in accord with doctrine. The conduct of this offender was not in accord with his profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Moreover, Paul’s own conduct was being questioned. He had to defend himself because, if the charges being brought against him were true, the gospel that he preached would be brought into question. It is significant that Paul’s own colleagues supported him. If his own colleagues brought accusations against him it would have been a different matter. Sadly, some pastors do not even listen to the church (Mat 18:17).

As mentioned, Paul was worried about what he had written in his harsh letter. He wrote with prayer and tears, seeking godly sorrow from the believers in Corinth. Their reaction upon hearing the letter would be either godly sorrow or worldly sorrow. The first leads to repentance, reconciliation, and salvation, the second to hardening, to lack of reconciliation and to death of relationships (7:10). So how did the believers in Corinth respond when Titus read Paul’s letter to the church? Paul assumed that it shocked and hurt them but only for while (7:8). What Titus saw was godly sorrow, sorrow that leads to repentance. How amazing! How wonderful! God by his Spirit blessed the reading of Paul’s letter such that hearts were changed. Hard hearts were softened unto repentance before the Lord, to sorrow at the way they had accused Paul either directly, or indirectly by their silence.

Repentance and forgiveness are like gold, hard to find but most precious when it comes to our relationships. We hear a lot about love but little about repentance and forgiveness, yet these are fundamental to our faith. It is no good saying, ‘God loves me’ and, ‘I love God’ if you have not repented of your sin and accepted God’s forgiveness in the blood of Jesus Christ. We continue to pray, ‘Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us’.

The apostle Paul had been falsely accused by people in the church and, tragically, the majority did nothing to support him. In the preceding chapters he wrote to defend himself, urging the majority to speak out in his defence (5:12, 7:2). Paul rejoiced that they had acted to discipline the main offender (2:6, 7:12), and were grieved that they had not done so earlier. They felt sorry that they had caused their beloved apostle so much hurt and pain.

Discipline in the church must always be done in love, and in the hope that the offender will repent and reform his or her ways. Paul told them to forgive and comfort the offender after punishing him. The whole church, including Paul, suffered as a result of this man’s sin. Now that discipline had been exercised and received with repentance, relationships could be restored. Although Paul was torn as he wrote the harsh letter, he was now glad to accept their repentance, forgive them and move on, caring for one another and serving the Lord in and through this church (7:12).

Godly sorrow is rare but produces riches beyond measure. Paul delves into the workings of godly sorrow upon their hearts. He writes of their godly sorrow producing ‘earnestness and eagerness to clear themselves’ (7:11). They would have had a guilty conscience, knowing that they were not doing the right thing by Paul; they were now free of that guilt. Worldly sorrow simply adds to the burden of guilt until it crushes us and others. ‘What indignation and what fear’: their indignation may have been directed at the offender in their church, especially if he was the one so vocal in accusing Paul.

The silent majority became the active majority when their fear of man was overcome by a fear of God. In their repentance they realized what pain they had cause Paul. They were eager to set things right, to see justice done with regards to Paul. They were eager, even zealous, to restore fellowship with Paul and his colleagues.

Paul accepted all that Titus reported to him regarding their eagerness to ‘be clear on this matter’, and resume fellowship with Paul. Paul was planning to visit Corinth for a third time. He would have felt much better about this visit now that relationships had been restored, although his opponents, especially, the false teachers, continued to cause trouble in this church.

**3.Titus and Paul rejoice**

Paul acknowledges the role of Titus in bringing about reconciliation with the Corinthians. He had entrusted Titus with a very difficult task and, as we have seen, was anxious for his welfare. But Paul saw that Titus was refreshed and not rejected in his visit. They listened carefully and obeyed his every word because the Lord brought fear and trembling to their hearts (7:15).

Paul’s closing words in this section of his letter are of ‘comfort’, ‘affections’ and ‘rejoicing’, emotions seen in Titus and expressed by Paul in these words. Paul sent Titus with confidence, even boasting; we do not have his letter, but he would have sent a covering note of recommendation regarding Titus. He assured them, and continues to assure, them that he and Titus always spoke the truth and acted out of love towards them. It is disturbing how easily truth is abandoned when godly sorrow is absent. Paul concludes this section of his letter rejoicing with renewed confidence in the membership of the church at Corinth.

**The grace of giving** 2Corinthians 8:1-15

I find it interesting to see various religious groups setting up charities to help people in need. Is it in the nature of men and women to give sacrificially to the poor? Maybe so before the Fall, but not since sin entered the world. Sin brought pride and selfishness to the human heart. Sinners are proud, ‘me-first’ people. Sin lets rich people live next door to poor people and do nothing to relieve their poverty. The picture of poor Lazarus ‘laid at the gate’ of a rich man, is a picture from India and many societies today. While Hindus practice almsgiving, they see poverty as ‘karma’, as a curse of the gods. Their almsgiving, like the giving of many in our society, is seen as a good work, as earning merit, or making one feel good (cf. Matt 6:1-4).

In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus implicitly condemns the rich man for his selfishness and his failure to help poor Lazarus. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus explicitly teaches the importance of helping a neighbour, even when the neighbour is not family or a member of the same social or religious group. Most human beings help their own families, but not many are generous towards people outside their family; some do not even help their own families. By ‘generous’ I mean giving till it hurts, or sacrificial giving, something beyond almsgiving.

Jesus praised the poor widow giving all that she had, even though it was just two copper coins (Mark 12:42). The first Christians were eager to share all they had with poor members of the fellowship of believers. The apostle Paul taught the importance of this fellowship of believers, and of material sharing within this fellowship. He even teaches us to give to needy people outside the church, ‘as we have opportunity’ (Gal 6:10).

In chapters 8 and 9 of 2Corinthians, we find what Tasker calls, ‘a philosophy of Christian giving, which has lessons to teach the church in every age’. You have probably heard the saying, ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (9:7). Colin Buchanan has made the words of 8:9 a children’s song. As with most of Paul’s teaching, this ‘theology of giving’ comes within the context of communication with the churches.

So what was the particular context in which Paul wrote these words about giving? This is his second surviving letter to the church in Corinth. It was some six years after he established this church, and one year after he wrote his first letter. Paul ends that first letter with reference to ‘the collection for the saints’ and with ‘bearing your gifts to Jerusalem’ (1Cor 16:1-3). He also refers to the churches of Galatia being involved in this collection.

This collection, it seems, goes back almost ten years to a commitment Paul gave to James, Peter and John, pillars of the church in Jerusalem, a commitment to remember the poor as he and Barnabas took the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal 2:9-10). He later specifies, ‘the poor among the saints in Jerusalem’ (Rom 15:26). The Christians in Jerusalem were probably suffering from a famine; in the days of Claudius, AD46, there was a huge famine (Acts 11:28). Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted by the majority Jewish population; the famine would have added to their suffering. Gentiles were less targeted by the Jews, so Gentile churches did not suffer as greatly as those in Jerusalem. Yet Gentile churches were not always rich, although the church in Corinth seems to have been more wealthy than most.

Paul was in Macedonia writing this letter. Titus had returned from Corinth with good news about a change of heart among the majority in this church; they were sorry, and wanted to resume fellowship with the apostle. Paul was overjoyed, and writes positively of having confidence in them in everything (7:16). This ‘everything’ apparently included the collection which he set in place, and which Titus reminded them of during his visit; probably after seeing them repent of their accusations against Paul. One accusation was that Paul was pocketing the money from this collection (2:17).

Despite this accusation, Paul pressed on with this collection, urging the Corinthians to press on also. He challenges them to do so by informing them of the ‘grace of God given to the Macedonian churches’, the ‘grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ’, our first two subheadings today. This leads to the ‘grace of God not yet complete with the Corinthians’ and finally, to the exhortation, ‘give according to what you have’.

**1. Grace of God given to the Macedonian churches**

The churches of Macedonia included, Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. In writing to the Philippians, Paul remembers the help they sent him in the beginning, even as he ministered beyond Macedonia (Phil 4:15). Their gracious and generous giving included the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. The Christians in Macedonia were persecuted by both Romans and Jews. Persecution often begins with discrimination in terms of public benefits, education, and jobs. Moreover, the church often consists of poorer people from a society. Despite their poverty, or maybe because of their poverty, the Christians in Macedonia gave willingly, with joy, and with liberality to this collection (8:2).

‘Christian joy arises from a sense of sins forgiven and from the assurance that the sinner now enjoys the favour of God; and Christian liberality springs from a heart conscious of the infinite generosity of God in giving his Son to redeem mankind’.

Paul refers to three aspects of the Macedonian’s giving. Firstly, they gave even beyond their ability, and did so willingly. Their giving was selfless and sacrificial. In a church in India we saw a plaque listing the names of people who gave money for a new building, and the amount they gave. We gently told them that this was not biblical because Jesus says, ‘Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing’ (Mat 6:3). We do not seek the praise of men, but await the reward of God. Paul was noting the giving of the Macedonians as a challenge or stimulus for the Corinthians.

Secondly, the Macedonians saw giving as a privilege because it strengthened their fellowship with other churches, especially the Judean churches. Christian giving is done with prayer, and loving concern for those being helped. It is not a matter of flinging a few coins towards a faceless beggar.

Thirdly, ‘they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God’ (8:5). This is what the ‘grace of giving’ means. This is the unique aspect of Christian giving. We first give ourselves to the Lord, which means looking to Jesus and remembering the abundance of grace which he showed towards us when he gave, not money, but his very life for us; he gave his life that we might live. We have nothing without Christ, but in Christ we have everything. As God’s people we must appreciate his amazing grace, and we must reflect this grace to the world. Sacrificial giving is an essential part of any fellowship focussed on Jesus Christ.

**2. Grace of God in Jesus Christ**

We jump ahead to the second and most solemn challenge the apostle put before the Corinthians with regard to giving. He was not commanding them to give towards the collection because gifts, like love, cannot be commanded. A gift that is commanded is a charge or tax. Paul was testing the sincerity of their love by informing them of the diligence of others, and now by reminding them of ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (8:9). We are talking about giving as a grace given by the Lord. The list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12 includes, ‘he who gives, with liberality’ (Rom 12:8). The various gifts of the Spirit include that of giving. It is the Spirit who moves us to exercise these gifts, and moves us to give ‘as unto the Lord’.

Jesus ‘was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor’ (8:9). What does the apostle mean? Jesus was born in a stable, not a palace. He lived without a place to lay his head, and left no material things when he died, except for the clothes he was wearing. But Paul is not simply calling us to emulate Jesus in a life of poverty. He is speaking about the grace of Jesus, who left the riches of glory in heaven to come into this sinful world (Phil 2:6f). He humbled himself and gave his very life for us. Jesus took on poverty for our sakes, that we might no longer be poor but rich in Him. He gives us eternal life, something money cannot buy. This is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; we are saved by grace through faith.

The Macedonians understood this truth as they ‘gave themselves first to the Lord’. Paul urges the Corinthians to do the same, and he urges us to do this also. Clinging to the things of this world prevents us from clinging to Christ. It is said, if your hands are full of worldly things they cannot receive the blessings of Christ. If our hearts are not full of the love of Christ, our hands will be grasping rather than giving. Do you believe that God in his grace is able to give you abundantly more than you ever give to him, or give to the poor in his name?

**3. Grace of God not yet complete with the Corinthians**

Paul started the collection for the churches in Judea when he started the church in Corinth. When they sent a letter to him in Ephesus he answered a question about this collection (1Cor 16:1). Paul did not accept support for himself from this church, a policy which backfired to some extent (11:7). Christians should be taught the grace of giving from the beginning. Some churches in India and Africa struggle because the members do not give to the work. They became too dependent on support from rich foreigners. It is encouraging to see young churches which understand the grace of giving.

Churches should be self-supporting, and more than that, should be ready to help sister churches in times of need, and give to missionaries (Eph 4:28). I know someone who took a job specifically so she could support a missionary. Support of the local church is through tithing, a principle established in the OT. The collection being made by Paul does not mention tithing because it is an offering additional to the tithe.

After Paul left the church in Corinth it was troubled by divisions, by poor leadership, and lack of discipline. A church focused on itself loses focus on the greater work of the Lord. It is no wonder the church at Corinth forgot about the needs of the ‘mother’ church in Judea, despite reminders from Titus when he visited. Now that they had repented of their attacks upon Paul, he at least was hopeful they would re-focus on the collection.

Paul acknowledges the various graces the Lord had given to this church (8:7). They were aware of these, even if they became obsessed with the spectacular gifts. Paul refers to the gifts of faith, speech, knowledge and diligence, which interestingly are included in 1Corinthians 13. Paul concluded that such gifts must be exercised in love, which is his message here in verse 7. ‘See that you abound in this grace also’ he writes, referring to the grace of giving. Love for Christ, and love for your neighbour, are the two greatest commands, commands which lead to the grace of giving.

The command is love, and the grace is giving out of love. Paul is not commanding them to give to this collection but testing the sincerity of their love. Paul is giving advice as their ‘father in the faith’. They were eager to give before trouble erupted in their church- they wrote to him about this collection (9:2,1Cor 16:1). He urges them to remember those earlier days of love and unity within the fellowship. In those days they gave generously, so let them complete what they began. It is always best, and ‘to your advantage’, to complete whatever task the Lord gives you (8:10).

**4. Give according to what you have**

Jesus made it very clear that God does not look at the size of the gift, but at the size of the giver’s heart, when he spoke of the widows copper coins (Luke 21:1-4). Of first importance is a willing heart, a heart of faith, a heart moved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are to give according to what we have, not what we do not have (8:12). We give according to what God has given us by way of income (1Cor 16:2). We must never say that my small gift is of no benefit- unless your small gift is from an abundance given you by the Lord. God loves a cheerful giver, not a grudging giver (9:7).

Within the church, and across churches, people fall upon hard times. We must pray for brethren in their difficulty, but also help as we are able: ‘Faith without works is dead’ (James 2:14f). Paul was not asking for the church in Judea to be made rich at their expense; he was asking for a sense of equality within the broader fellowship of believers. He found this principle in God’s giving of manna in the desert (8:15). Gather what they may, each ended up with sufficient for their needs. The manna did not keep until the next day anyway.

Unfortunately, gold and silver do not perish like manna- but remember our bodies do! Many of us are like the rich fool, wanting to accumulate much more than we need (Luke 12). But thieves may break in, or there may be a stock-market crash. Paul also wants us to remember that the day may come when the tables are turned, when those we helped will be called upon to help us because we have fallen on hard times. For all these reasons, let us understand the grace of giving. Let us, as we have opportunity, be willing and cheerful givers.

**The importance of administration**  2Corinthians 8:16-9:5

While teaching in a Bible school in Africa, I visited a village church. I was teaching church government, which included a segment on church finances. In this village church I joined the deacons in the counting of the collection. As I recall, there were four men counting the coins and recording the sums. Normally of course, the pastor would not be present. In too many churches the pastor is also the treasurer, the man who counts the collection, and spends the collection. While we expect the pastor to be an honest person, this is not proper practice. It is important to have a church treasurer who is not the pastor, and even then the treasurer, although an honest person, must be accountable to a committee or court of the church.

You are presented with audited annual accounts for this church. We ensure that all collections are counted by two people. We do this because it is important that everything be done honourably in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of mem (8:21). The apostle Paul was accused of pocketing the specific collection he organised, but we see from this passage that he was not the one handling the money that was collected. Moreover, more than one person was involved in the collection.

When Paul left Jerusalem to take the gospel to the Gentiles, he gave a commitment to the leaders of the Jerusalem church, a commitment to remember the poor (Gal 2:10). Paul was pleased to make this commitment, and was committed to fulfilling his commitment. He started a church-wide collection for the church in Jerusalem (1Cor 16). The church in Corinth came on board early in the piece, but with all the infighting, immorality and animosity towards Paul, they lost focus on this collection- among others things of course! But Paul did not lose focus on this collection. After they felt ‘godly sorrow’ for the things they had done, and not done with regard to church discipline, Paul reminded them of this collection (9:5).

Paul always gives reasons for what he teaches, including support from Scripture, which is why these two chapters contain detailed teaching on Christian giving to brethren who have fallen on hard times. In the passage before us today his focus is on the administration of this collection. Our subheadings are: ‘Choosing of representatives’, ‘Careful administration’ and ‘Confidence in the Corinthians completing the collection’.

**1. Choosing representatives**

By the grace of God, Titus, whom Paul sent to Corinth with his harsh letter, had returned with news of reconciliation between this church and the apostle Paul. Titus was a close colleague of Paul, a fellow servant of the Lord. The Lord put into his heart the same concern for the believers in Corinth as He had put into Paul’s heart (8:16). So it was not really necessary for Paul to send Titus; he was eager to go to Corinth again (8:17). Paul was sending Titus ahead to bring to completion this collection within the church at Corinth (8:11).

Titus was a totally trustworthy man, well known to Paul and to the church at Corinth. But still it was important that someone go with him on this sensitive mission- money matters are always sensitive, even in the church. Paul and his colleagues sent a well-known and highly respected brother with Titus, a man who was, in fact, chosen by the churches, presumably the churches of Macedonia (8:19). While Paul started the collection and encouraged all the churches to give towards it, he was careful not to be handling the money, or at least not to be doing so alone. He was careful not to be choosing the men who would do so either. How many churches have the pastor’s son or daughter as church treasurer! Paul had the churches choose such men. Paul was not present when the apostles appointed seven deacons in the Jerusalem church, but he followed the same procedure of having the church choose their representatives and the apostle’s ‘laying hands on them’ (Acts 6:1-6).

Who was the brother the churches chose to go with Titus to Corinth? We are not told. Many think it was Luke because from the Book of Acts we deduce that Luke resided in Philippi. Other names have been suggested but we simply do not know. Reading on, we find that another brother, a man ‘whom we have often proved diligent in many things’ was also being sent with Titus (8:22). We know even less about this brother than the first, although he had great confidence in the Corinthians so may have been known to them.

Paul takes the opportunity in this letter, which Titus probably carried to Corinth, to introduce or recommend these two brothers. Titus was well known by the Corinthians but Paul recommends him also. ‘Titus my partner and fellow worker concerning you’ (8:23). Even during the crisis, Paul maintained confidence in the Corinthians, but that confidence was strengthened now that they had repented of their sins. Paul’s confidence extended to the brothers chosen to accompany Titus. They are messengers, literally apostles, of the churches, and as such are to the glory or honour of Christ (8:23). Paul asks the Corinthians to respect these men and show them love, so that Paul’s boasting about the Corinthians is proved true in all the churches. These men would in time report back to their respective churches and Paul wanted this to be a good report.

**2. Careful administration**

Some years ago, a finance officer in the Salvation Army was caught stealing from this respected Christian charity. The same thing happened in secular charity just recently. Realising the size of this sector of the economy, our government has brought in regulations requiring detailed reporting by charities. Not all charities are Christian of course, but many are, and misuse of funds brings shame rather than glory to the name of Christ.

Too often a Christian organisation says that their finance officer is a Christian and demand no accountability. The apostle Paul was not so foolish. He and the churches chose not just a faithful man but faithful men to administer the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. He made sure that everything was done transparently as we say, not only in the eyes of God but in the eyes of men (8:21). Speaking of foolishness, I remember when I had my group of students elect a representative to whom I would give money for their meal when the student cafeteria was closed. But the students complained that this representative was pocketing some of their meal money so I had to re-assess my ideas. I should have made at least two students responsible for the meal money!

The apostle Paul was extra careful about the administration of the collection because he had already been accused of cheating by his detractors in Corinth. He pointed out that he would hardly be stealing from this fund when he refused legitimate support for preaching the gospel (11:7). The collection had been going on for some years so had become a ‘lavish gift which is administered by us’ (8:20). Paul told them to put aside something each week so he would not have to go about collecting money when he came (1Cor 16:2). He was sending Titus and these two brothers to see that this was done, and that the collection was indeed collected in the church and ready to be taken to Jerusalem.

Paul and other brothers, approved by their respective churches, would take the collection to Jerusalem (1Cor 16:3, 4). Paul wanted to see that this gift reached Jerusalem and was used for the purpose for which it had been collected. In Acts 21:18 we read of Paul going to see James and the elders of the Jerusalem church, possibly handing over this collection for their church.

**3. Confidence in the Corinthians completing the collection**

Paul begins chapter 9 telling the Corinthians that ‘it is superfluous’ for him to write to them about the collection or about ‘ministering to the saints’ (9:1) - but he continues writing another chapter anyway! He had urged them to complete this collection (8:11), and feels confident that they will, but encourages them in various ways anyway. In the previous chapter he challenged them to be liberal in their giving, just like the Macedonian churches, and indeed, to remember the grace of giving displayed by our Lord Jesus Christ when he gave his very life for us.

The apostle goes on to remind them of their willingness and zeal to give to this collection a year ago, before all the infighting, immorality and corruption crippled their church (9:2). Such was their zeal that Paul boasted about them to the Macedonians; the southern part of Greece was the Roman province of Achaia and the city of Corinth was in this province. Now that he was sending brothers from Macedonia to Corinth, Paul did not want to be embarrassed by them finding the Corinthians not ready at all. He did not want his boasting of the Corinthian brethren to be ill-founded or in vain (9:3).

Paul’s hope and prayer was that Titus and the two brothers would facilitate the completion of this collection, so that when Paul came with more envoys they would find everything in order, with the collection completed and ready to be taken to Jerusalem. If it was not complete, everyone would end up embarrassed, the Corinthians, Paul himself, and the envoys from other churches to whom Paul had boasted. It was to avoid such embarrassment that Paul was sending Titus and two brothers ahead of time. The set time for the feast in Jerusalem, and the vagaries of sea travel, were dictating the carrying of this collection to Jerusalem.

Paul again reminds the Corinthians of their promise to give towards this collection, and their generosity in doing so when they began (9:5). They were willing givers at that time, and he wanted them to continue in this manner and not become grudging givers. He goes on to say that God loves cheerful givers not grudging givers (9:7). When God’s people give cheerfully and generously, blessings flow to them, and of course, to the recipients of their gifts. And do not forget the thanksgiving and praise that goes up to God (9:11).

We have recently been privileged to give to brothers and sisters who fell upon hard times because of a volcanic eruption and resulting tsunami. I hope we gave cheerfully and generously to the collection our church made for helping these brethren. Others churches asked to help and have given generously to the fund being administered by our deacon’s court.

When we give cheerfully and generously we will know God’s blessing upon our lives. Besides, we may one day need help from those we help today (8:14). I am sure the afflicted brethren will give praise to God when our help arrives, and so our fellowship across the miles and around the globe will be strengthened, to the glory of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**God loves a cheerful giver** 2Corinthians 9: 6-15

One of my tasks as an agronomist was to determine the optimum rate of sowing for various crops. After conducting field trials, I could tell farmers how many kilograms of seed per hectare they should sow to get a good crop of corn or lucerne. Wheat is a bit more flexible as it can produce tillers. When seed is expensive, some farmers cut back on their sowing rate but in doing this they limit the potential yield of their crop.

In Israel there were lots of farmers, even in the time of Jesus. Jesus used pictures of farming practices in his parables e.g. Parable of the sower. It was common knowledge that, ‘He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly’ (9:6). The apostle Paul reminds the Corinthians of this basic truth as he continues to challenge them to give to the collection for poorer brethren in Jerusalem.

Let no one think that in giving to others, after having given themselves to the Lord, they will be worse off. God’s arithmetic is very different to that of sinners like us! With God, ‘minus’ can mean ‘multiply’. Our three subheadings are, ‘Generous and joyous giving’, ‘Grace abounding’ and, ‘Glory to God’.

**1. Generous and joyous giving**

Philanthropy is rare in our country. Rich people tend to hang onto their money, telling themselves that they worked hard and deserve every dollar they have. Poorer people tend to more generous than the rich. But most giving to charities has to be ‘facilitated’ with raffles or lotteries. People give in the hope of getting a prize. For some the prize is a ‘thing’ while for others it is recognition or fame.

In a school I know, you get your name on a tile on a wall when you give a certain amount. People feel good at seeing their name on the wall, or feel guilty at not seeing it. Some churches adopt a similar method of fundraising, listing people’s names and the amount they give on the wall of the church. Such methods fundraising, such enticements to give, are contrary to the method of giving taught by Jesus and the apostle Paul (Mat 6:3). Such methods are rejected by our church as stated in our handbook: ‘The approved method of fundraising is by free-will offerings. Raffles, games of chance, or other forms of lottery are forbidden’.

After referring to a proverb about sowing seed, Paul tells the Corinthians and us to give generously. He was not teaching anything new to the people of God. Moses commanded the people to be generous towards the poor and not ‘tight-fisted’ (Deut 15:11). In Proverbs we read, ‘There is one who scatters yet increases more, and there is one who withholds but it leads to poverty’ (Prov 22:9). Paul himself quotes from Psalm 112:9 about giving to the poor. Jesus linked giving to hungry brethren with giving to Jesus, pointing out the blessing that would come from doing this (Mat 25:34f).

The link between giving and receiving is not a strict like-for-like equation of course. Firstly, the material gift to the poor may bring spiritual blessings to the giver. We do not agree with those preachers of the ‘prosperity gospel’ who say that material riches are a sign of God’s blessing. God does promise to supply our needs, but not our greed’s. He does not link our prosperity to our effective proclamation of the gospel. On the contrary, it is our giving, giving not only of our goods but of our time and our lives, that is most effective in our proclamation of the gospel. The missionary Jim Elliot, who died at the hands of the Auca Indians, wisely said, ‘He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose’.

The second way in which God turns the ‘equation of giving’ on its head is the abundant grace that he brings into the equation. Just as it is said of Christian marriage that it involves three persons, husband, wife and Christ, so Christian giving involves three persons, giver, recipient and Christ. The cheerful giver is loved by God, which makes a big difference to the equation. One who gives under compulsion, or grudgingly, or with selfish motives, is not pleasing to God because ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (9:7).

Paul wanted each of the Corinthians to give what he or she had determined in their heart to give. They should give in relation to their income or what they have, not in relation to what others are giving. Paul of course, challenged them to give liberally like the Macedonians, but it was always giving in relation to one’s ability and personal decision to give- meaning a decision that is the outcome of prayer.

**2. Grace abounding**

While it is true that God supplies our needs (Phil 4:19), it is also true that he often does this through other people in the church. ‘The believer must always be a human channel through which divine grace flows to enrich others’. In this way God strengthens and unites the fellowship of believers- more on this in our next point. For now, Paul’s focus is on the grace of God that knows no limits. God can use other people to supply the needs of his people. Or he can ‘multiply loaves and fishes’ as we might say. While some think Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand was through everyone sharing their lunch like the boy, clearly this was a miracle. Moreover, God’s grace is not only about material blessing. There are many rich people who are spiritually poor. God in his grace, and through his Spirit, gives many gifts to his people; he might even use a beggar to bring blessing to a rich person!

‘God is able to make all grace abound toward you’ (9:8). This verse is full of superlatives- all grace, always, all sufficiency, and every good work. ‘Those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing’ (Ps 34:10). There will be times when you will not get what you pray for, but never doubt God’s ability to give every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). God may withhold something for your benefit, or even take something away, as Job says (Job 1: 21).

We note the term sufficiency, ‘all sufficiency’ (9:8), meaning all my needs not all my greed’s. And this sufficiency is in ‘all things’, not just material things. And further, this grace of God, this sufficiency, and this abundance is ‘for every good work’. God gives to you, that you may be able to share with those in need. If we think all that God gives us is for us to accumulate, and for us live a life of luxury, we are sinking into sin. Heaping up treasure for yourself is condemned (Luke 12:20-21, James 4:3).

Psalm 112 is a wisdom Psalm, a Psalm about the righteous man who fears the Lord. God will bless such a person, and he will in turn be a blessing to others, being compassionate and gracious, just like the Lord himself (Ps 111:4). His giving to the poor is what draws the attention of the apostle as he quotes from Psalm 112 (9:9). If we know Christ’s love for us, we will want to show this love to those in need, and do so in practical ways.

Paul returns to the agricultural proverb about sowing and reaping in verse 10. He tells us that it is God who supplies seed to the sower, and then grain to the farmer to make into bread. The person who says, ‘I have earned everything I have’ is forgetting that God enabled him to earn everything he has. For the farmer, God supplies the seed, the rain, and the sunshine, not to mention health and strength to sow and reap. It is God who gives us our job and the skills to do this job, as well as the health we need to do our work.

We are told to do our work as unto the Lord (Gal 3:23), and to work that we may have something to give to those in need (Eph 4:28). God enables you to work to provide for your family and give to those in need because of his grace and love towards you. He wants you to be righteous like him, a person ready to bless others in the name of the Lord.

As we acknowledge the Lord in everything we do, we acknowledge him in our giving also. We do not agree with individuals and agencies who think acknowledging Jesus in our giving is somehow offensive. When I was involved in drilling wells to provide drinking water in Hindu villages, I took the opportunity to talk about Jesus as the living water (John 4).

**3. Glory to God**

We give to others because God gives to us. We give generously and joyously. We give according to what our Spirit-illuminated heart tells us to give, not according to what others are giving. Our giving is a test or proof of our faith in God. Our giving obviously helps others, but also results in thanksgiving and glory being given to God. This is the final outcome of Christian giving- glory to God (9:11-13).

Paul returns to the administration of this collection, of this service towards the saints in Jerusalem (9:12). Remember how careful he was about the administration of this collection in terms of transparency; he chose tested man and the church chose men also to administer this collection. This collection was not just a matter of almsgiving, of an unknown person throwing some coins to an unknown beggar. This collection was about one part of the body of Christ helping another part in a time of need. Moreover, Paul saw it as Gentile churches returning a material gift in response to the spiritual gift they had received from the Jews (Rom 15:27).

When Paul left Jerusalem to take the gospel to the Gentiles, he promised to remember the poor (Gal 2:10). Not all Jewish members of the church were pleased to see him going to the Gentiles. We will learn more about the pressure some Jewish Christians, or Judaizers, were putting on Jews and Gentiles to conform to the old covenant and its rituals. Paul saw this collection, so it seems, as a way to assure the Jerusalem church of the faith and love of the Gentile churches. He anticipates believers in Jerusalem giving thanks to God when they receive this collection from the Gentile churches.

Their thanksgiving for the material gift will flow into the giving of glory of God for the Corinthians demonstrating their obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ (9:13). If they had any doubts about the sincerity of the faith of the Corinthians, or of the Gentiles more widely, then this gift would go a long way towards overcoming such doubts, and to the strengthening of the fellowship between the Jerusalem church and the Gentile churches. Indeed, it would be a blessing throughout all the churches as they learnt of this gift and see in it the ‘grace of God in you’ (9:14).

‘Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift’ (9:15). Paul ends his teaching on the grace of giving with this doxology. While some think he is giving thanks to God in anticipation of his collection for the saints in Jerusalem being a success, most see this doxology as giving praise to God for the gift that is above all gifts, namely God’s gift of his Son, Jesus Christ for our salvation.

The word ‘indescribable’ occurs only here in the NT; it refers to something that cannot be expressed in words. Paul has already referred to Jesus who, ‘was rich yet for your sakes became poor’ (8:3). In his closing words he returns to this ‘indescribable gift’ from above that we as believers know but cannot describe, this gift of saving grace in Jesus Christ our Lord (John 3:16, Eph 5:2).

**Spiritual warfare** 2Corinthians 10:1-11

The persecution of Christians is more widespread today than it has been for many years. Christians are persecuted under Communist regimes, Hindu regimes and Islamic regimes. There are Christian organisations which focus on the persecuted church. However, it is interesting that the church is growing where such regimes are in place. The decline of the church is most pronounced in countries where Christians are free to worship and preach the gospel, countries like our own. How come? While Christians in these other places face physical or violent opposition, we have faced, and are facing, opposition of a different kind, namely spiritual warfare.

The church in our society has been decimated by Roman Catholic and liberal doctrines, as well as other false teachings. When the truth of the gospel is undermined, faith is undermined, and when faith is undermined conduct is open to corruption. It is no accident that churches which permit or promote sexual immorality in whatever form are declining.

Too many Christians either underestimate the power of our spiritual enemy, or fail to acknowledge him at all. I am talking about Satan of course. The apostle Paul writes, ‘Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil’ (Eph 6:11). The final four chapters of 2Corinthians are about spiritual warfare; Satan gets a mention in chapter 11:14.

The apostle Paul was battling insurgents in the church at Corinth, men who came with a different gospel (11:4), men who depended on worldly wisdom and conduct to ‘enslave’ men and women in the church. The apostle had had a partial victory against his opponents in this church when the majority acted to discipline the sexual offender (2:6), but these insurgents had gained a foothold, partly it seems through this offender and his supporters, and partly through their prowess as orators. While this offender had repented, these false teachers had not. They continued attacking Paul, his person and his authority in the church.

There is a pronounced change in tone in this letter as we come to chapter 10. Some scholars suggest that this chapter and those that follow comprise the ‘harsh letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians (2:3-4, 7:8), but most have other explanations for this change of tone: one writer lists seven possible reasons. We are not going into these because the reason already given, namely the change of focus towards false teachers in the church (11:4, 5, 13, 12:11) accounts for the apostle’s change of tone. These false teachers have been mentioned previously, referred to as ‘peddlers of the word of God’ relying on ‘letters of commendation’ (2:17, 3:1), but Paul now exposes them for who they are and what they teach. He does so that the church might deal with them as they dealt with the immoral man. Here in verses 1-11 we will look at the warning he gives, the weapons of spiritual warfare, and ask, ‘What authority?’

**1. Warning**

At the beginning of this letter Paul referred to Timothy as his co-author, and commonly used plural pronouns- ‘we’ and ‘us’. Chapter 10 begins, ‘Now, I Paul, myself’, and most pronouns are singular in these closing chapters. Paul has opened his heart to the Corinthians (6:11), but now he reluctantly turns to boasting as he deals with personal attacks upon his person and his authority (11:18). The strange thing is that he boasts in his weaknesses and his sufferings for Christ.

Personal popularity was of no concern to Paul, but for the sake of the gospel he had to defend his words and his actions. A man’s message is undermined by improper conduct. These false teachers seem to have sided with the sexual offender when he attacked Paul during his second, ‘painful’ visit. Paul wrote a ‘harsh’ letter after that visit and this had the effect of stirring ‘the majority’ to action and to discipline of this man. Discipline brought godly sorrow and repentance in the heart of the offender, but the intruders kept on attacking Paul’s credibility and apostolic authority; it is easier to attack the man than what he preaches when he is preaching the truth.

The false teachers cleverly latched onto these events, saying that Paul was lowly or timid when present but bold when absent and communicating by letter (10:1). These men were trained in speech (cf.11:6), good at public speaking and debating (1Cor 1:20). They were quick to speak but slow to submit. They probably knew and used words that Paul would not use as they tried to bully him out of town. But Paul was not intimidated by these bullies. He refused to give up on the Corinthian church. At the same time, he refused to adopt the worldly or ‘carnal’ tactics of his opponents.

Paul pleaded with the Christians at Corinth, ‘by the meekness and gentleness of Christ’ (10:1). His model of leadership was Christ, not some person exalting himself by his looks, or his speech, or his actions; or by the number of followers he had on Facebook! Jesus was not a great leader in the eyes of the world. He attracted many followers of course, but when he was crucified there were few mourners; no state funeral for Jesus Christ, then or now! But the name taken by millions in the world today is that of Christ.

While on earth, Jesus invited men, women and children to follow him, to take up his yoke for, ‘I am gentle and lowly in heart’ (Mat 11:29). Have you heard this invitation? Have you accepted it? Paul knew what Jesus said, and as a follower of Christ, and indeed as an apostle of Christ, sought to imitate Christ (1Cor 11:1). He was ‘not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation’ (Rom 1:16). Nor was he ashamed of his conduct when present at Corinth. They might see him as ‘lowly’ or ‘timid’, a man of no importance, but the Greek word also means ‘humble’, and Paul was not ashamed to be humble. Humility is seen as weakness in the eyes of the world, but it is a great strength in the eyes of God, as Jesus made clear in his Sermon on the Mount.

Paul was humble and gentle but by no means a coward. He was not backing down from the fight, the spiritual fight for the hearts and souls of men and women. A spiritual battle is not fought with worldly weapons. Paul’s weapons would be different to those of his opponents, the false teachers at Corinth; prayer is our greatest weapon, of course (Eph 6:18).

Like everyone, Paul walked in the flesh; he felt the barbs of these attacks but was shielded by faith in Christ, and he fought back with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph 6:16-17): ‘We do not war according to the flesh’ (10:3). If Paul had to be ‘bold’ or forthright with some he would, but it would be in the strength of Jesus Christ.

**2. Weapons**

Our sermon title is ‘Spiritual warfare’ because this is how Paul saw his relationship with the Corinthians at this time, more specifically with the false teachers who had come into this church. Sometimes battles in the church end up as property disputes in secular courts, but this only shows that the spiritual battle is over, and lost (1Cor 6:1). Paul’s battle was for hearts not property. His opponents were false teachers preaching another Jesus, a different gospel and a different spirit (11:4). They were building a stronghold in this church through a ministry that focused on men and money. They were proclaiming the law and the glory of Moses, but such glory was superseded and surpassed by the glory of the crucified and risen Christ. It was interesting to read about evangelical missions in the Pacific and their struggle to protect new Christians from outsiders teaching doctrines of works righteousness (SDA) and other doctrines of men (e.g. RC).

Paul was not intimidated by the strongholds built by these men. He may have recalled Joshua and the battle of Jericho as he wrote these words. In obedience to the Lord, Joshua and his men marched around Jericho carrying the Ark of the Covenant. In the end they gave a great shout and the walls of the city came crashing down.

We are not told how many false teachers were in the church at Corinth but we know they were experts in ‘carnal’ warfare, with quick and sharp tongues. Some Christians are quick to enlist top lawyers in disputes within the church. Paul was not concerned at the cleverness of their arguments, or the force with which they made them. The word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ were the only weapons he needed to demolish strongholds raised up by men (10:4).

What are these strongholds raised by men? Paul refers to ‘arguments’ and ‘pretensions’ or high opinions which men lift up in opposition to the knowledge of God (10:5). Paul faced arguments from Judaizers seeking to preserve the old way of works righteousness, according to their misunderstanding of Moses and the OT. The pope and his priests seek to preserve the traditions of the church even when they are against the knowledge of God as revealed in Scripture. Other churches sometimes depend upon traditions rather than the truth of the Bible.

Paul also faced the wisdom of the Greeks who saw the cross of Christ as foolishness (1Cor 1:23). Secular humanists, who abound in our society, take the same view of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. The theory of evolution came from a supposedly Christian man. It is a theory that opposes the clear teaching of the Bible, yet a teaching that is accepted by many Christians, by people who have a higher opinion of science and scientists than they do of the Bible and faithful preachers.

Then there are the literary critics seeking to rewrite the Bible according to their understanding of literature, philosophy and history. Thankfully, God has preserved a faithful few, and has raised up leaders in the church like the apostle Paul to demolish these strongholds of false teachers in the church. False teachers defer to words of other ‘exalted’ individuals rather than the Bible (cf.10:12).

The Corinthian Christians were being taken captive by these false teachers and their worldly arguments. Paul was determined to ‘bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ’ (10:5). Paul’s apostolic authority was under attack and he would defend this, not in his own strength but in the strength of the Lord. ‘Obedience to Christ entails submission to his appointed representatives’.

Paul demanded firstly, that the church in Corinth reject the claims being made by false teachers in their midst. Their letters of commendation were worthless and their eloquence empty. It was the ‘timid’, poor speaker Paul who had all the credibility and authority. They must submit to Christ and to men appointed by Christ, namely the true apostles. They must complete their obedience (10:6) by separating from false teachers and submitting to the authority of their true apostle.

Secondly, they must be ‘ready to punish all disobedience’ (10:6). They had punished a man guilty of immoral conduct (2:6) and now they must punish those guilty of disobedience to Christ and his gospel. False teaching threatens the church of Christ as much as, if not more, than immoral conduct.

**3. What authority?**

The false teachers were doing their utmost to establish their credentials and to undermine the apostolic credentials of the apostle Paul. They were doing this by worldly comparisons, by merely superficial criteria (10:7). They brought letters of commendation and spoke of visions and dreams. They were accomplished speakers who took fees, as expected of public seekers. From the outside they looked like accomplished servants of Christ. But Paul would not have them saying he was an imposter as a Christian, or an apostle. Some commentators think Paul has a particular person in mind but he generally refer to these false teachers in the plural.

Paul could have given his testimony at this point, as it is recorded three times in the Book of Acts. But he simply reminds the church that the Lord gave him authority as an apostle, authority no less than the other eleven apostles. This authority was for the building up of the church not for its destruction (10:8). Paul was very careful in using this authority, careful not to dominate or bully people as the false teachers were doing.

Paul had been accused of writing ‘weighty and powerful letters’ so was restrained in what he wrote in this letter. Even so, he wanted them to remember his authority as an apostle, and to know that he would use this authority if necessary. The church must not listen to slander about his bodily presence being weak and his speech contemptible (10:10). He was ready to take action against false teachers but appeals to the silent majority to take action before he comes.

No church should tolerate immoral conduct or false teaching. The church, as the body of Christ, must act with the authority given by Christ (Mat 18:20) to discipline members or leaders who depart from the true gospel, or for conduct that does not accord with the word of God.

**Worker approved by God** 2Corinthians 10:12-18

Some years ago my brother-in-law, who was principal of a Bible college at the time, commented on how theologians reference one another rather than the Bible as they seek to establish a point of doctrine. This is especially common when the doctrine they are establishing is not actually in the Bible! I have been criticised for not agreeing with a theologian who wrote a hundred and fifty years ago; the critic held that everything this man wrote was true. The only book that is true in every word is the Bible, the canon of Scripture.

Those who disagree with the clear truth of the Bible do their best to undermine this truth. One way they do this is to by referring to like-minded men or women, especially those famous in the academic world; but sometimes they reference politicians, or even celebrities who know nothing about the Bible. ‘They compare themselves among themselves’ as the apostle Paul writes (10:12).

The apostle Paul, who had planted the church in Corinth, continues defending his personal integrity, and the gospel he preached, in the face of attacks from false teachers who had infiltrated this church. He was engaged in spiritual warfare, in a battle for the hearts and the faith of brothers and sisters at Corinth. But he was not going to take up the weapons they were using, namely carnal weapons. Paul was fighting a spiritual battle and he would use spiritual weapons (10:4). With God’s strength, he would demolish their worldly arguments.

Just as they boasted, so he could boast, but in his weakness not in some personal attribute applauded by the world. Paul was writing to the church, urging the faithful members not to listen to these false teachers, and to take action against them. In the passage before us today he exposes flaws in the boasting of these false teaches, and accuses them of being ‘sheep stealers’.

**1. Seek commendation from the Lord**

As Paul writes to the church, condemning the false teachers in their midst, he often resorts to irony and sarcasm; verse 12 is a case in point. With ‘tongue in cheek’ as we say, he says in effect, ‘I dare not compare myself with these eminent teachers; I do not even belong in their class!’ But in reality, their commendations were self- commendations; they were praising themselves. And their standards were totally subjective because they were measuring themselves against each one another. Just because 95% or 99% of the ‘experts’ agree that something is true does not necessarily make it true. In the Bible we have truth from God- one Lord and one truth.

These false teachers were Hebrews who had come from Jerusalem, most likely. They probably wrote letters of commendation for each other (3:1). It is unlikely that true apostles like Peter and John sent them to Corinth after agreeing that Paul and Barnabas go to the Gentiles and they to the uncircumcised (Gal 2:9). Besides, these false teachers were undermining the gospel that they, like Paul were preaching. These false teachers were, in fact, self-appointed men carrying dodgy documents. Their main ‘claim to fame’ was eloquence in public speaking; when men preach a false gospel can we call it preaching?

How could the apostle Paul compare himself with men who were preaching ‘another Jesus’ and ‘a different gospel’? (11:4). What measure could he use? They had departed from Scripture, so the only measure they had was worldly or carnal. They were not like the Bereans, who tested whatever Paul and Silas preached by ‘searching the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so’ (Acts 17:11).

Paul concludes that by, ‘measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves among themselves’ these men were not wise (10:12). Actually, they were being foolish. Such behaviour was not fitting in the church. Too often those in the church forget that Christ is the head of the church. Highly educated or otherwise qualified people are welcome in the church, but they must have wisdom from above and not start acting with worldly wisdom (James 3:13-17). Paul is content to be called an ‘untrained speaker’, but he reminds the Corinthians he is in no way deficient in knowledge (11:6).

Paul had no letter of commendation because he did not need one; the church itself was sufficient authentication of his ministry (3:2-3). These false teachers seem to have boasted of ecstatic gifts also (12:12), an all-too-common claim to fame among church leaders today. Paul performed many signs and wonders (Rom 15:19), but it is interesting that he does not use these to authenticate his ministry in Corinth, or anywhere else.

While Paul referred to the church at Corinth as his letter of commendation, he did not boast in the number who believed or the number he baptised (1Cor 1:17). It is a great temptation for preachers or evangelists or missionaries to boast about such numbers. The pastor of a small, struggling church is often compared unfavourably with the pastor of a huge, growing church. When both are working hard and faithfully preaching the gospel, why are such comparisons made; and why does the pastor of the huge church get paid more? The apostle Paul, who preached the gospel free of charge at Corinth, would be horrified by practices in the church today.

While the apostle begins verse 12 with sarcasm, he ends on a serious note saying, they ‘are not wise’. And he concludes this matter of commendation or self-praise in verse 18 by saying, ‘For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends’. A pastor who depends upon the people for affirmation or praise will not remain for long. Although elected and appointed by the church, a pastor is ultimately responsible to the Lord. He seeks to be faithful to the Lord’s calling upon his life and in his ministry. The apostle Paul was one hundred percent clear about his calling to be an apostle, and he worked selflessly in fulfilling this high calling. He would later say, ‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith’ (2Tim 4:7).

**2. Sheep stealers**

The door was opened for missionaries to go to India in the early 1800’s, following the pioneering work of William Carey. With the influx of missionaries, there became a need to agree on spheres or regions of work, at least among evangelical missions. Presbyterians agreed to work in certain areas, Baptists in another, and Lutherans in another; the Church of England was attached to the colonial government. Mission work was similarly divided up in other parts of the world. If a group came into an area allocated to another church they were called sheep stealers because they ‘stole’ members from other churches.

At his conversion, Paul was called by Christ to preach the gospel of Christ to ‘the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel’ (Acts 9:15). Paul was later brought into missionary work by Barnabas. Together they went to see the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, who agreed that Paul go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised or the Jews (Gal 2:9). Two spheres of ministry were established, although there was just one church, as seen in Paul’s collection for the church in Jerusalem.

It seems that these false teachers at Corinth were telling the people that Paul should not have been ministering in their region. Yet he vehemently denies that he was ‘overextending’ himself (10:14). He was ministering ‘within the limits of the sphere God appointed us’ (10:13), and therefore had authority as their apostle. Paul had a number of helpers of course, who ministered under his authority, but these false teachers were ministering without his authority. They were intruders, and they were sheep stealers taking credit for ministry not done by them, for their own selfish purposes. Jesus spoke of false prophets as wolves coming in sheep’s clothing to devour the flock (Mat 7:15). Paul writes of these false teachers at Corinth as ‘deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ’ (11:13).

When Paul spoke of the Christians at Corinth as being effectively his letter of commendation, it could not be said that his boasting was beyond measure or out of order (10:15). He was the one who brought the gospel to this city. He was not working in another missionary’s territory, and he was not guilty of sheep stealing. Paul was proud of the Christians at Corinth, people whom he had betrothed to Christ (11:2), but he gave all glory to God. He was delighted to see their faith increasing, and hoped they would reach out to others in their city.

Paul spent only one and a half years in this city planting this church. There is no indication that he appointed elders in Corinth, as he did on other churches (Acts 14:23), but he was confident the church could manage on its own after this length of time. Missionaries or preachers today are not confident to leave a church to itself after ten years or more, let alone a year and a half! New converts are not accepted until they are actually old. Is it any wonder the church is not growing as it should be? ‘But look at what happened at Corinth’, you might say. Certainly, Paul had to intervene with regard to immorality in the church and with regard to false teachers who entered it, but he does so by urging the church itself to exercise discipline, and shows no regret for leaving this church when he did- after just eighteen months, as we are told (Acts 18:11).

Years ago there was a missionary organisation called RBMU, Regions Beyond Missionary Union. They took their name from this verse in 2Corinthans 10: ‘To preach the gospel in regions beyond you’ (10:16). Paul was a pioneer missionary; he aimed to preach the gospel in areas where it had not yet been taken within the sphere of his ministry to the Gentiles. He was not called to build on another man’s foundation (Rom 15:20), or to steal sheep as these intruders were doing at Corinth. In writing to the Romans not long after writing 2Corinthians, Paul spoke of going to Spain (Rom 15:24). The church was already established in Rome- hence his letter to them. He hoped they would assist him as he went to regions beyond to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**3. Glory in the Lord**

The apostle Paul refused to fight the false teachers on their terms, their worldly or carnal terms (10: 4). Their claims were false, their methods deceitful, and their commending of themselves was foolish. Paul may have looked weak by their standards, but he was strong in the strength of the Lord. Paul was seeking the approval of the Lord not men.

Paul closes by again referring to words from the prophet Jeremiah (10:17, cf. 1:31). When Paul first wrote to this church, they were arguing about which apostle they were following. He condemned this division in the church saying, ‘Is Christ divided?’ (1Cor 1:12-13). Paul was not competing against Apollos: ‘I planted, Apollos watered and God gave the increase’ he wrote (1Cor 3:6). Therefore, ‘Let him who glories, glory in the Lord’ (1Cor 1:31).

The division being caused by the false teachers came later and was quite different. They were not building on the foundation established by Paul but destroying this foundation, which is Jesus Christ. Paul had to tackle these deceitful workers head on. He does so with the truth, with sarcasm, and with boasting in his weaknesses and his suffering for the gospel rather than in his own strengths. And in the end, Scripture remains his greatest weapon. He again quotes the prophet Jeremiah, who faced some of the same challenges that Paul was facing. Jeremiah warned the wise against taking glory in their wisdom, the mighty against taking glory in their might, and the rich taking glory in their riches, declaring, in Paul’s words, ‘Let him who glories, glory in the Lord’.

**Do not listen to false teachers** 2Corinthians 11:1-6

The media in our city recently reported the sacking of a popular pastor and leader of a mega-church. He was sacked for drunkenly entering the hotel room of a woman. Such conduct brings shame to the name of Christ, as shown in the gloating of the hypocritical press. The apostle Paul persisted with the church at Corinth until they removed the man guilty of sexual immorality. He goes on in these closing chapters of his second letter to insist that the church also deal with false teachers in their midst. We pray that any false teachers in this mega-church referred to, or in any other church, might be sacked just like this moral offender.

The church that the apostle Paul planted at Corinth was listening to false teachers who had come from far away to preach another gospel. They had come with letters of commendation, and they were good speakers. If not Judaizers, they were like them, preaching Moses and the law as the way of salvation (4:6-7). In the verse before us, Paul clearly explains that what these men were preaching was not the gospel, and not the Jesus that he and the other true apostles preached. The Corinthians were being led astray by these clever speakers, these ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’, as Jesus would say. Part of their rhetoric was criticism of the apostle Paul. They reasoned that by destroying the credibility of the messenger they would destroy his message.

Paul saw that Satan was attacking this church through these false teachers (2:11, 11:14). We continue to see Satan attacking the church in the same way, which is why we must be careful who we listen to, and must test what they say against Scripture. Paul urged Timothy to, ‘Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you’ (1Tim 4:16).

Reluctantly, Paul continues ‘boasting’ about his credentials and his relationship with the church at Corinth. He asks them to hear him a bit longer as he tells them that he is jealous for them with godly jealousy, as he explains that there is only one Jesus, and as he urges them to judge on the basis of knowledge not just fancy talk.

**1. Jealous for the ‘bride of Christ’**

We teach our children not to be jealous of others when they have things we want. But not all jealousy is wrong. Our God is a jealous God; he is jealous for exclusive worship from us (Exod 20:5). It is right for a husband to be jealous for his wife- not of his wife but for his wife, and for her faithfulness (Prov 6:34). Paul was not the husband of the church at Corinth but Christ was, and he was jealous for them on Christ’s behalf. Actually, he speaks of being like a jealous father, a father who has betrothed his daughter to one husband (11:2).

Paul saw the church he planted, and which he loved and cared for, as being betrothed to Christ. The church is often spoken of as being the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25-27). The marriage, according to this metaphor, will be consummated when Christ returns. Nevertheless, until that time the bride must remain ‘a chaste virgin’ and refrain from entertaining other suiters. Betrothal in those days was akin to marriage, such that breaking a betrothal or engagement was regarded as divorce. Today, even after marriage, some women are seduced into leaving their lawfully wedded husband.

Paul knew that the false teachers were seducing the believers at Corinth. He had betrothed them to Christ and was jealous for them, but these intruders wanted to betroth them to someone else. They were like Satan in the Garden of Eden, whispering lies about God into Eve’s ear. God made Adam and Eve, he made them in his image and wanted the best for them. He wanted them to enjoy the garden and to worship him, to worship God alone. But Satan sowed seeds of doubt about the goodness of God, and Eve listened to Satan.

Paul was the spiritual father of the believers at Corinth and he wanted what was best for them. The false teachers were like Satan in sowing seeds of doubt concerning the apostle Paul and the message he preached. If the Corinthians listened to them they would end up like Eve. Christ does not accept ‘spoiled goods’; he demands a church without spot or blemish. He has cleansed his church with his own blood and will not accept any unfaithful behaviour. Listening to lies leads to corrupted thinking, and corrupted minds lead to corrupt behaviour.

The gospel the Corinthians heard from Paul, and which they believed, was ‘sincere’ or ‘simple’, meaning that it was without duplicity. It was not opened to various interpretations. Paul preached Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1Cor 2:1). He preached the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, nothing more and nothing less. These false teachers were probably downplaying the cross because it was foolishness to the Greeks and offensive to the Jews. Churches today do the same thing as they focus on the power of God displayed in miracles. There are of course, churches that deny miracles to focus on social welfare and climate action. The only power they see is that of street marches and politics.

Remember, God is a jealous God who demands undivided worship from you and me. Jesus demands priority and loyalty; he must rank above everything in your life, even family: ‘Whoever does not forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:33). Does Christ have this place, first place, in your life?

**2. Only one Jesus**

In writing to the Galatian churches some years before writing this letter to the Corinthians, Paul began by condemning false teachers in no uncertain terms. The false teachers there were Judaizers, Jewish Christians demanding Gentile believers keep the law and the rituals of the old covenant, especially circumcision. Paul saw this demand for works as undermining the gospel of grace. His words are ‘perverting’ and ‘another gospel’ (Gal 1:6.7). He calls down a curse or ‘anathema’ upon this preaching a different gospel. We might ask how many are preaching a perverted gospel today because any element of works righteousness is condemned and cursed by the apostle Paul. We must be careful not to be making demands upon Christians by way of beliefs or conduct which go beyond Scripture.

False teachers followed Paul to Corinth with a similarly perverted gospel, although he does not specifically mention circumcision (cf. 3:6f). He speaks of them bringing a ‘different gospel’ just as he did with the Galatians (11:4, Gal 1:6). Paul does not condemn the false teachers directly as he did in Galatians; rather he criticises the Corinthian church for listening to these men: ‘You may well put up with it!’ (11:4). His plea is that they put up with these men, so let them put up with Paul as he refutes their claims (11:1, 4).

Paul points to three errors in the eloquently delivered messages of these false teachers. Firstly, they preached ‘another Jesus’. Years ago I listened to talk about Jesus visiting Kashmir and dying there after being crucified. A Muslim sect called ‘Ahmadiyya’, which has a temple or mosque not far from here, believe this. People believe all sorts of things about Jesus and his resurrection, but there is only one truth and only one Jesus Christ, ‘Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, whom God raised from the dead‘ (Acts 4:10).

There is only one Jesus Christ, who came from Nazareth, went through towns and villages in Palestine, was crucified outside Jerusalem, and was raised by God on the third day. Even Christians make up their own Jesus; social activists preach Jesus the politician, feminists preach a feminist Jesus, homosexuals preach another Jesus, and so it goes on. The Corinthians were not the first, nor were they the last, to listen to another Jesus being preached. Paul preached Jesus Christ and him crucified, and we must do the same.

Secondly, Paul spoke of a ‘different spirit’ being given out by these intruders at Corinth. When the Corinthians believed, they received the Holy Spirit from God. The false teachers seem to have boasted of signs and wonders and visions. These were not done through the Holy Spirit but through a ‘different spirit’. We might similarly question what spirit is behind some ‘signs and wonders’ ministries today. In parts of Africa, the gospel has not replaced pagan religions but has been mixed with them in horrific ways. Some think the false teachers at Corinth were reviving pagan ways in the church. They seem to have sided with sexually immoral people in the church.

Thirdly, they were listening to a ‘different gospel’ to what Paul preached, and that they accepted when they believed. They heard and accepted the gospel of grace: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast’ (Eph 2:8-9). Any preaching of works righteousness, or grace plus works righteousness, is not in accordance with the gospel preached by the true apostles (Rom 4:6, Titus 3:5). How sad to hear preaching in which works or sacraments are made the basis of salvation.

**3. Judge on knowledge not fancy speaking**

Our third and final section is signalled by another, ‘For I’ (11:5, cf. 11:2, 4). ‘For I consider I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles’ (11:5). Paul is again being sarcastic in calling them ‘eminent’ or ‘super’ apostles (‘*hyper*’ in Greek). He is not referring to the apostles chosen by Jesus. These men who came to Corinth appointed themselves apostles. They made a lot of Paul’s ‘weak bodily presence’ and ‘contemptible speech’ (10:10). They were probably present when Paul made his ‘painful visit’, five years after his first visit. Paul admitted to being ‘untrained in speech’ compared to these intruders, although a sarcastic tone continues. Some Greeks made a career in public speaking and for this they got training in rhetoric; Paul had no such training. Some preachers do the same today, although there are naturally gifted speakers.

Every preacher should be able to speak with clarity and conviction, but it is disturbing when Christians flock to a church just to hear a good speaker. An evangelist came to our town in India and people flocked to hear him, but I was later told that most of the crowd were traveling the country with him. People are attracted by a crowd, and all secular activities get measured by the size of the crowd. But true Christians are not crowd-followers, any more than they are followers of a dynamic speaker. The internet has made such behaviour common among many Christians, to the extent that some no longer attend their local church; they just sit at home surfing the web for a dynamic preacher.

Paul was not focused on being trained in speaking. His focus was on knowledge, knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ, and he would not have anyone challenging him on this basis. Paul obtained his knowledge through the revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1:12). It was not second-hand knowledge, and certainly not ‘dreamt -up’ knowledge. The gospel that Paul preached to the Corinthians was pure, received from Christ himself.

Paul preached the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He did not hold anything back as being only for the ‘initiated’. He did not add to what he received from Christ. What he received was in full accord with the Scriptures he had been taught, but totally misunderstood until the day he met Jesus Christ. The false teachers were still in the darkness experienced by Paul before, ‘God shone into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (4:6).

**Servants of Satan** 2Corinthians 11:7-15

The culture in India is very different to that here in Australia; indeed the culture in England is also very different. These cultures are marked by class structures, while ours is marked by egalitarianism. When I took my students to the field for practical work, I rolled up my sleeves and joined them in transplanting rice. Only later did I realise that teachers did not do this in India; teachers stood in the shade and gave orders. I still remember one student, from a high caste family, actually bringing a servant to the field to dig his plot for him! Did I adjust to the culture and stop joining my students in planting rice? No. Why? Because Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as an example for us! All cultures are different, and all have features that don’t conform to the culture taught in the Bible.

When the apostle Paul came to Corinth he made a decision not to accept any fee for his preaching. He was entitled to payment, and had accepted payment in other places, but not here in Corinth. We suggest that this had something to do with the culture of this city. Even when his opponents used this decision of the apostle as ammunition against him, Paul did not change his practice. His opponents in the church at Corinth had already criticised Paul for his ‘contemptible speech’ and ‘weak bodily presence’ (10:10).

As the newcomers to the church compared themselves to Paul, they pointed to their letters of commendation, when Paul had none. They followed up with criticism about him not receiving payment for his preaching, which was the practice in this culture. I have never heard of a preacher being criticised for refusing payment for his ministry, but Paul was! Our first subheading is, ‘Free of charge’ our second, ‘False apostles’, and our third, ‘Followers of Satan’.

**1. Free of charge**

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians just over twelve months previously, he explained that although he had the right to be paid for his ministry, he chose not to receive any payment from them (1Cor 9:9-15). It is not clear why he made this choice when he accepted help from the Macedonian churches (11:9, Acts 18:5). In fact, he chose to work as a tentmaker when he first arrived in Corinth, alone (Acts 18:3, 5).

Some ministers or missionaries do not like to accept support from new converts lest they think he is peddling the gospel, or preaching for profit- which was the case with the false teachers in Corinth (2:17). Money can easily mess with the clear preaching of the gospel. On the other hand, it is good for a church to be taught tithing and giving from the very beginning; some mission-planted churches never become self-supporting.

Corinth was a cosmopolitan city with many rich people. Some rich people became patrons of philosophers and public speakers. Their support came with a degree of control or power over the speaker. ‘The truth is, that in our pride we do not like to be put in debt to others but rather put them in debt to us’ writes Grogan. If this was the culture of this city, as seems to be the case, Paul was anxious to avoid any such patronage. He was a preacher of the truth, not a politician speaking what itching ears wanted to hear.

What Paul did in not accepting ‘patronage’ was not a sin. As he argued in 1Corinthians 9, it was his right as an apostle and preacher to receive remuneration from his hearers and from the church, but also his right not to receive such support. He refers to the other apostles receiving support, but he chose not to (1Cor 9:12). Moreover, he did not want to burden these people, so preached free of charge. Further still, he did not want to be seen as preaching for profit like other roving public speakers and philosophers in this region.

The false teachers who came to the church at Corinth picked up on this aspect of Paul’s ministry; they may have felt guilty about their own peddling of the gospel. They could not deny the effectiveness of his ministry in terms of the church established by Paul. So they made a big deal out of his preaching free of charge, suggesting that it pointed to him not being a true apostle. To make matters worse, Paul worked with his own hands, a real ‘No, No’ within the Corinthian culture. Educated men did not do dirty work. In doing manual work in the paddy field in India, I embarrassed some class conscious colleagues, but they dismissed me as a strange foreigner! But others understood and learned from my example.

While Paul did not accept support from the Corinthians, at least not for himself, he did get support from other churches, namely those in Macedonia; he did not actually rob them! (11:8). Was this decision of the apostle seen within the context of some regional rivalry between Macedonia and Achaia? Did Paul love the Macedonians more than the Corinthians? Money matters can get very complicated, especially when misunderstood or deliberately twisted by one’s opponents-just ask for financial support for your church!

‘Did I commit sin?’ asks Paul, in a rhetorical question (11:7). Such was the depth of animosity stirred up against Paul, that preaching free of charge should be called a sin! The gospel of Jesus Christ does not call humility a sin. Paul explains his humility, and indeed his suffering, as coming from a love for them, and a desire that they be ‘exalted’ or lifted up in Christ. When he came to their city they were living in darkness; Paul wanted the light of the gospel to shine into their hearts to give ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (4:6). He did not want money or anything else hindering his presentation of the life-saving truth of the gospel.

Paul was not the least embarrassed or ashamed of his preaching free of charge, and nor should they be. He would continue to do so, and to boast of doing so, despite what was being said about him doing this in the regions of Achaia (11:9-10). To suggest that he did not love the believers in Corinth was ludicrous; it was outright slander. God of course, knows the truth; he knew Paul’s heart, as well as theirs. This is Paul’s last word on the matter (11:11).

**2. False apostles**

Out of love, the apostle Paul did not burden the believers in Corinth by asking for a preaching or ministry fee. To have this loving act turned into a weapon to undermine his apostolic credentials was very disappointing and disturbing. He knew who was behind this deceitful behaviour, this malicious attack upon his credibility within this church. The newcomers who were ‘peddling the word of God’ (2:17) must have been embarrassed about the high fees they were accepting as false apostles (11:20). To justify their conduct, they had to undermine the apostle Paul, who had planted this church. They were comparing themselves to Paul, but he was reluctant to compare himself to them, knowing and declaring them to be deceitful men, and indeed, false teachers (11:13).

In his most blistering attack yet upon these intruders in the church at Corinth, Paul calls them ‘false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ’ (11:13). The word ‘apostle’ simply means ‘sent one’. In what sense was Paul using this term for these intruders? They certainly did not have the status of the apostle Paul and the other eleven apostles of Christ. He probably uses this title because they called themselves apostles, even superior apostles. But the truth was, they were masquerading as apostles of Christ.

Deception marked the ministry of these men, as it does all false teachers. They make themselves out to more important than they are- with letters of commendation. They slander honest and humble ministers of the gospel like the apostle Paul. They promise things that cannot deliver in terms of salvation from sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit (11:4). To the extent that they looked like apostles of Christ, it was all an outward show, a mask-wearing exercise or masquerade. Paul saw through this masquerade, and he urged the believers in Corinth to do the same. Paul saw the truth about these intruders, and he wanted the church to see the same.

**3. Servants of Satan**

The disturbing truth about these false teachers was that they were actually servants of Satan. ‘And no wonder!’ exclaims Paul (11:14, 15). Just as Satan transforms himself into an angel of light, so these men were ‘transforming themselves into ministers of righteousness’. While there are Jewish traditions about Satan adopting the role of an angel, there is no clear reference to his portraying himself as an angel of light. Satan’s deceptive ways are clearly seen in his behaviour in the Garden of Eden, of course (cf. 11:3). ‘Satan does not come to us as Satan; neither does sin present itself to us as sin, but in the guise of virtue; and the teachers of error set themselves forth as special advocates of truth’ writes Hodge.

These false teachers were not simply followers of Christ who lacked a full understanding of the gospel. They were not just spreading misinformation but propagating disinformation. As agents of Satan, they were preaching lies. Did not Jesus say, ‘Whoever is not with me is against me’? (Luke 11:23). Jesus also called the Jews who claimed Abraham as their father but rejected Jesus as God’s Son, children of the devil (John 8:44). Paul was doing exactly what Jesus would have done. These men were liars and deceivers, just like their father, the devil.

Jesus saw into the heart of the matter with the Jews who rejected him; Paul did the same with the false teachers in the church at Corinth. We would do well to imitate Jesus and Paul, and be discerning of those preaching the gospel today. I wrote an essay about a missionary who was, in fact, a liberal theologian. When I concluded that this man was not a believer or born-again Christian, I was criticised by the examiner. We must be careful in making judgments, but when someone denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus or the centrality of the cross, we must question their claim to be a true Christian. It will not do to ignore such preaching, or to practice tolerance at the cost of the truth.

The intruders at Corinth were preaching another Jesus, a different gospel, and offering the blessing of a different spirit (11:4). Paul concluded that such men were false apostles and servants of Satan. Why should we think that such men or women are not masquerading in the church today? Satan, through his agents, seeks to divide the church, seeks to keep the true gospel hidden from us, and seeks to sever us from Christ with false teaching. We must resist Satan and make sure he has no place in our life or in our church (1Peter 5:9).

Paul has a final word for such men, and for anyone listening to such men: ‘Whose end will be according to their works’ (11:15). Just as God knew Paul’s heart and his love for the Corinthians, so he knew the hearts of these false teachers. And as a true apostle, Paul knew that God will judge all people according to what he sees in their hearts. What is in our hearts is revealed in our conduct of course, but some are good at hiding what is in their hearts. Some even portray themselves as followers of Christ when they do not even know Christ. But again, God knows our hearts.

When God judges according to works, it is not works as we or the world see them, but as God sees them. Do not forget the solemn words of Jesus in Matthew 7: “Many will say to me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you; away from me you evil doers’” (Mat 7:22, 23 NIV).

**Paul’s credentials and experiences** 2Corinthians 11:16-33

In the Book of Acts we read an historical account of Paul’s missionary journeys written by Luke, a colleague of Paul. This account is by no means exhaustive, as this passage in Paul’s own letter reveals. Paul tells of experiences and trials that Luke does not write about. What Paul writes is a letter to the church at Corinth and, as with any letter, we have to read between the lines to some extent in order to picture the situation. We have learned a lot already about the Christians in Corinth and about some men who came to this church with letters of commendation (3:1). From this passage we see that they were Hebrews, meaning they probably came from Judea (11:22). They came preaching Moses and the Law rather than the new covenant (3:6f). From Galatians we learn about so-called Judaizers doing this, as well as insisting on circumcision.

Failure to preach Christ crucified, and salvation by grace alone through faith alone, meant these men, these intruders into the church at Corinth, were preaching a ‘different gospel’ and ‘another Jesus’ (11:4). Paul urged the church, which he had planted, to see through the masquerading agents of Satan in their midst, and to stop listening to them (11:15). These false apostles were clever enough to see Paul and his gospel as a threat to their influence and control over this church. So they set about discrediting Paul, calling him a ‘contemptible speaker’ and ‘weak little man’ (10:10). They criticised Paul for preaching free of charge; we assume they were preaching for profit, an assumption confirmed here in verse 20.

Although not embarrassed by these criticisms, Paul did defend his position as the Lord’s appointed apostle of the congregation. In the verses before us he reluctantly engages with these false teachers in some boasting, which turns out to be boasting in his weaknesses. Paul was desperate to expose these men as charlatans and false teachers out to destroy their church. Our subheadings are: ‘reluctant boasting’, ‘report of credentials and experiences’, and ‘reminder of weakness’.

**1. Reluctant boasting**

Paul began this chapter with light-hearted sarcasm, asking members of the church to bear with him in some foolishness. This foolishness related to defending himself against the self-appointed ‘super apostles’ in their midst. He reminds them that he will continue speaking like a fool because they were being told he was a fool by men who were fools. They were putting up with fools gladly, thinking that they were wise (11:19). I am reminded of liberal theologians and those who listen to them. Learned men subjected the Bible to literary and historical criticism, not wanting to be seen as unlearned men in a scientific world. Bible students were taught this modern or ‘progressive’ way of looking at the Bible. They spent more time reading what the critics wrote than reading the Bible itself. Liberalism continues to be taught in colleges and in churches, but thankfully some students read their Bibles and now reject this false teaching.

Paul urged the Corinthians to remember what he taught them and what they believed, and to reject what these newcomers were teaching them. Paul felt uncomfortable to be boasting like a fool. It was not something he learnt from the Lord Jesus. Mind you, Jesus was sharply critical of the Pharisees, calling them ‘hypocrites’, ‘fools and blind’, and ‘blind guides’ who devour widow’s houses (Mat 23:14). The Pharisees did not accept the authority of Jesus, which was divine authority. Jesus did not boast like men of course, because he was not like other men; he was the Son of God.

Paul was surprised that the Corinthians were putting up with men bringing them into bondage to the law, with men making them religious slaves (11:20). This is what we see with religious sects today, sect leaders treating their followers like slaves, and the women like sex slaves. Some churches border on being religious sects. These false teachers were devouring the Corinthians, taking from them whatever they wanted. They were taking their money and leaving them poor, and the Corinthians accepted such bullying and controlling conduct. These intruders demanded respect and honour and the church gave it to them; they allowed them to exalt themselves. What were they thinking!

Paul’s last ‘put up with’ is, ‘if one strikes you on the face’ (11:20). Church members even allowed these bullies to strike them. These men were probably big on church discipline being applied to others, but not to them. Paul is incredulous. With sharp irony he says, ‘To our shame we were too weak for that!’ (11:21). Not for a moment could Paul think of treating fellow believers in this way. This was not the sort of conduct he had learnt from Jesus, and not the sort of conduct he taught in the churches. Did he not just declare his desire not to be a burden to them? Did not Jesus teach his disciples not to lord it over the brethren? (1:24, Mark 10:42-45)

**2. Report of credentials and experiences**

Paul was astounded that the believers in Corinth were allowing these newcomers to lord it over them. These false apostles were manipulating them into rejecting Paul as their true apostle. These men were full of self-praise. They boasted just like worldly people - and the church listened! Paul reluctantly resorted to some worldly boasting in order to counter their influence for evil in the church. He expresses his reluctance again in verse 21 saying, ‘I am speaking as a fool- I also dare to boast’. Ironically, his boasting is not in his achievements but in his sufferings as a true apostle and servant of Christ.

Paul was chosen by the risen Christ to be an apostle to the Gentiles. The gospel was, and is, for both Jew and Gentile. Both Jew and Gentile are saved by grace alone through faith alone. Some Christians from a Jewish background regarded themselves as superior to other Christians; for example, these intruders at Corinth. Paul did not go around boasting of his Jewish heritage as these intruders were doing, but he would defend himself against their boasting. Paul was no less a Hebrew than they were!

‘Hebrew’ is a cultural and linguistic category (11:22). Many Jews were Hellenists or Greek speaking. Paul spoke Greek of course, but also spoke Hebrew (Acts 21:40). These intruders boasted of being ‘Israelites’, but so was Paul. Israel was the nation of God’s chosen people; they were the children of Israel or Jacob, whom Moses led out of Egypt. Paul knew the Law of Moses just as well as they did; Paul had been a Pharisee (Phil 3:5, 6). Some Jews took their boast back to ‘Abraham’. The Jews who rejected Jesus spoke of Abraham as their father (John 8:39). God made a covenant with Abraham, promising to make him a great nation through which all the nations would be blessed. The false apostles failed to see this promise being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. They failed to see that the old covenant had given way to the new covenant, as announced by Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20).

When it came to ‘servants of Christ’, Paul becomes very reluctant to boast (11:23). How can anyone boast in Jesus Christ, who shed his own precious blood for the forgiveness of our sins? Paul uses a different word for ‘fool’; he calls himself a ‘mad man’ for daring to speak like this. ‘To glory about so sacred a matter as the servant of Christ is downright madness’. Actually, being a servant of Christ meant suffering, something that the false teachers knew nothing about, and certainly they could not measure up to the suffering experienced by the apostle Paul. Paul had worked harder, suffered more violence, been in prison more often, and faced death more often than these self-appointed ‘super apostles’ (11:33).

Missionary prayer letters are often taken up with the challenges of travel in other countries- certainly ours were. Almost every train journey was ‘eventful’, meaning our booked seats were already occupied, or a bag was stolen, or we were pickpocketed, or the train just stopped for hours on end- until it arrived on time the next day! If not on trains we were on buses, which broke down on many trips. Once I was left standing on the side of the road with my family until a kind person stopped to give a lift back to town in his car, and put us up for the night in this unknown place.

Travel in Paul’s day was even more hazardous. He travelled on foot hundreds of miles, sometimes in harsh weather and across flooded rivers (11:26). Sometimes he passed through mountains where robbers attacked him- as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In Paul’s day, travel by ship was common, and this brought its own dangers. ‘I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep’ (11:25). This was before the shipwreck he suffered on his way to Rome.

Many missionaries have faced hostilities, and some have lost their lives at the hands of those they ministered to. The apostle Paul, not to mention Christ himself, was their example. Paul was a Jew but a true Jew who believed in Jesus, and like Jesus, he was hated by the Jews. He was given forty lashes minus one five times- one does not forget such experiences (11:24). The law allowed forty lashes, but fastidious law-keeping Jews avoided any breaking of the law by giving only thirty nine (Deut 25:1-3).

As a Roman citizen, Paul should not have been beaten with Roman rods, but this happened at Philippi, and a couple of other times, not recorded in the Book of Acts (11:25, Acts 16:22,23). The forty minus one stripes from the Jews were meant as a deterrent, but they even tried to kill Paul. Paul was stoned and left for dead at Lystra, but survived (Acts 14:19). Apart for these life-threatening experiences, Paul faced numerous dangers, not only in travel as mentioned, but from false brethren. His experience here in the church at Corinth was among the most painful; slanderous accusations hurt the apostle deeply, but what caused him even more grief was the threat to the life of this church in Corinth.

Paul writes of his, ‘deep concern for all the churches’ (11:28). His physical suffering was one thing, his deep concern for the believers in the churches another. His sleepless nights and fasting, with prayer, were the result of such concern (11:27). Paul saw himself as the father of these churches, and as such felt for his children in the faith when they were weak and not able to defend themselves against bullies and false teachers. He speaks of ‘burning with indignation’ when the devil or his agents try to make his ‘spiritual children’ stumble (11:29).

**3. Reminder of weakness**

Apart from ‘boasting’ that he was as much a Jew as these false teachers in Corinth, Paul’s boasting was rather unusual in that it was not boasting in his achievements but boasting in his suffering, and in his weakness. He speaks of ‘deep concern for all the churches’ but does not boast in them as his churches (11:28). He established these churches by the grace of God, and they belonged to Christ not the apostle Paul. Unlike the false apostles, it was not Paul’s aim in life to dominate these churches and have their members bowing down to him. Paul’s aim was to exalt the people, not himself.

As Paul concludes his ‘boasting’, he vows that he is telling the truth (11:31), and he recalls an incident from the early days of his Christian life that must have been very humbling for a recently converted Pharisee. In Roman and Greek society, men boasted of capturing cities by scaling city walls. Paul boasted of escaping capture by having friends let him down from a window in the city wall in a basket!

Luke tells us that the Jews in Damascus plotted to kill Paul and waited at the city gates to capture and kill him (Acts 9:23-25). Paul tells us that the governor of the city was ‘desiring to arrest’ him (11:32). He mentions King Aretas, an Arabian king who was given authority in Damascus by the Romans. Did the Jews ask the governor to help them in capturing Paul? Maybe Paul was already known to this king; he had spent three years in Arabia after his conversion, and was no doubt active in preaching the gospel, and making enemies during this time (Gal 1:17,18).

Whatever the details, Paul remembered his escape from Damascus all those years ago. Paul’s opponents would have been ashamed to tell such a story- if they had ever had to flee for their lives- but not Paul. He tells this story to conclude his boasting, boasting in his weakness, boasting in the power of God and the grace of Jesus Christ. The Lord’s grace and power shine through when we show our weakness, when we show humility and commitment to serving Christ whatever the cost.

**Vision into heaven and thorn in the flesh** 2Corinthians 12:1-10

The apostle John was on the island of Patmos when, on the Lord’s Day, he was ‘in the Spirit’, hearing and seeing wondrous things. He saw into heaven where a throne was set, ‘and One sat on the throne’ (Rev 1:9, 10, 4:2). The book called Revelation is John’s record of that vision. The apostle Peter had a vision of a sheet descending from heaven (Acts 10:10). The apostle Paul also had visions and revelations in which the Lord spoke to him and he saw wondrous things. His conversion was the result of a blinding vision, and the piercing voice of the risen Jesus. Paul had other visions in which the Lord spoke personal words of guidance and reassurance to him (Acts 16:9, 18:9). Paul must have told Luke, who records these visions, but Paul did not base his preaching of the gospel on visions, apart from his actual conversion (Gal 1:12). He did no go around telling people about some new revelation from the Lord. He preached Christ crucified ‘according to the Scriptures’ (1Cor 15:3, 4).

Here in the penultimate chapter of the apostle’s second letter to the Corinthians, Paul continues his boasting to the brethren in Corinth. They had been listening to boasting from false teachers who had infiltrated their church, so let them listen to their true apostle for a moment. The boasting of these intruders was aimed at discrediting the apostle Paul and establishing their own power base within this church. They boasted of their Jewish heritage, but Paul countered such boasting ‘in the flesh’. They boasted in their rhetorical skills, deriding Paul as a poor speaker who refused to charge a preaching fee. Paul had a boast which they could not match, namely the extent of his suffering for the sake of the gospel. He boasted in his weakness (11:30).

It seems that the intruders also boasted of ecstatic experiences through which they received divine revelation. Paul did not dismiss such experiences but questions the way these men boasted of such experiences. He writes, ‘I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord’ (12:1), even though boasting of such experiences is pointless. Paul tells of a thorn in the flesh that kept him humble (12:7), and concludes with the Lord answering his prayer with the words, ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’ (12:9).

**1. Visions and revelations**

Paul was reluctant to boast from the beginning, but having been compelled to do so (12:11), he questions the credentials, the commitment, and the experiences of the men who came to Corinth with a different gospel. Their letters of commendation were really self-commendation. Sure, they were clever speakers, but what was their message? Besides, they were enslaving and exploiting ordinary church members (11:20). Paul’s reference to visions and revelations points to these men boasting in such experiences. As we said, Paul does not dismiss such experiences, but having accused these men of being agents of Satan (11:14), we can only conclude that their visions and revelations were from Satan.

In his ministry at Corinth, Paul displayed ‘the signs of an apostle’, namely ‘signs and wonders and mighty deeds’ (12:12). Visions and revelations were different, and were matters that Paul did not even speak about, let alone boast about in his ministry. Visions were given by the Lord for personal guidance and strengthening, as we said when we listed a few visions recorded by Luke. But Paul goes on to speak about ‘a man in Christ’ who was ‘caught up to the third heaven’- some call this a rapture (12:2).

The apostle suddenly starts speaking in the third person- ‘I know a man in Christ’. Speaking in this way has the effect of distancing oneself from the person spoken about, but there is no mistaking that Paul is speaking about himself. Carson points out that there was no point in Paul boasting about some else’s revelation in his own defence against his opponents. I recall a student going on about a young man wanting to study medicine but now studying dairy science. I thought it was his brother, but he finally said he was talking about himself. We often speak like this, but not with a whole story like this student.

Apart from Carson’s comment, Paul is careful to say, ‘A man in Christ’, meaning a believer like himself. He also refers to the time, namely fourteen years previously, another give-away. If Paul was writing in AD56 he was referring to AD42, a time when he was in the region of Tarsus, prior to a call from Barnabas (Gal 1:21, Acts 11:25). There is no other record of this experience of the apostle Paul, and what he records here is lacking in detail- he explains why.

Paul writes of being ‘caught up to the third heaven’ (12:2). He does not know if he was caught up in the body or out of the body, but assures us that God knows. Why does Paul repeat this aspect of his experience? Repetition has the effect of making sure the words are heard. This experience was very real to Paul, even if he had trouble explaining it. He knew that God knew, and may have been looking forward to when he could ask God about it. We are reminded of Phillip being caught away by the Spirit of the Lord, and the three disciples being on the mountain with Jesus when Moses and Elijah appeared.

Paul was ‘caught up to the third heaven’ or, ‘caught up into Paradise’ (12:2, 4). The atmosphere where birds fly was regarded as the first heaven, the place of the sun and the stars the second heaven, and beyond this was the abode of God or the third heaven. Paradise is a Persian word for a walled garden; the Garden of Eden is called the paradise of God, as in heaven (Rev 2:7). Paradise is a place of bliss in the presence of the Lord (Luke 23:43, Heb 4:14).

Paul cannot describe what he saw in Paradise, or reveal what he heard. He says that he ‘heard inexpressible things, things man is not permitted to tell’ (12:4 NIV). Paul heard things that were impossible for him to relate in this sphere of our existence. The purpose of this experience was to strengthen Paul for the work he was to undertake as an apostle of Christ. Paul was called to suffer for Christ’s sake (Acts 9:16). This revelation, and other visions, were for personal strengthening not for him to boast about. Knowing the reality of heaven was especially important for Paul (5:8). Heaven or paradise is an important reality for all believers, but details in the Bible are scant, and it is not for us to speculate beyond what is written.

The revelation given to Paul by the Lord did not distract him from the ministry he was called to undertake here in this world. It did not set him above other believers in any way; he wanted everyone to judge him on the basis of his words and actions, not unprovable experiences. He would not boast about revelations given to him because they were not his doing. Paul could only boast in his sufferings. He chose to serve the Lord, knowing that this would mean suffering like that described in the previous chapter. ‘In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ said Jesus (John 16:33). These words of our Lord rang very true for Paul, and I trust they ring true for you also.

**2. Thorn in the flesh**

Pauls ‘thorn in the flesh’ is a well-known aspect of his life and indeed has become proverbial; what is your ‘thorn in the flesh’? There has been a lot of speculation as to the exact nature of this ‘thorn’, but we are not told, so do not know. Some think it a reference to enemies and persecution (cf. Numb 33:55), but most think it to be something in his physical body. The word means ‘stake’ or ‘thorn’. I am sure you have had a thorn or splinter in your finger or foot at some time, and maybe for some time. I once got a splinter in my finger that made it swell. I went to the doctor and had an X-ray, which showed a tiny piece of metal in my finger. It was more an irritant than a pain so I left it, and this piece of metal eventually emerged from my finger. Paul’s thorn in the flesh did not go away. Many think, on the basis of Galatians 4:15, that it was something in Paul’s eye, but others a speech defect, on the basis of 2Corinthians 10:10 and 11:6.

One thing we do know about Paul’s thorn in the flesh is the context in which he tells us about it. He has just told us about a wonderful revelation in which he was caught up into paradise- yes, he was the man he was talking about in verse 2. This thorn in the flesh was given him by God to stop him from becoming proud or ‘exalted above measure’. It was to keep him humble and thus close to the Lord (12:7). He is not telling us out of self-pity. Paul learned a most valuable lesson from his thorn in the flesh.

Paul understood that this thorn in the flesh was given him by the sovereign Lord. The Lord allowed Satan to afflict or ‘buffet’ Paul in this way. We think of Job, a blameless and upright man of God, whom God allowed Satan to afflict with painful sores, among other disasters. Job did not understand what was happening to him, and neither did Paul at first. This thing or this thorn brought such discomfort that Paul prayed to the Lord not once, not twice, but three times, asking the Lord to remove it (12:8). Did Paul remember Jesus praying three times in Gethsemane? The Lord heard his Son’s prayer and sent an angel to strengthen him; he did not take the cup from him (Luke 22:43). The Lord heard Paul’s prayer but did not remove the thorn; he gave Paul the grace to endure this affliction.

**3. Answer from the Lord**

If I had a painful affliction, I am not sure I would stop praying for healing after just three times! What about you? Some say you must pray till you get what you want, and if you are not getting what you want you need more faith. We must have faith when we pray, but we must also accept that the Lord knows best and will give us what is best for us. For Paul, and maybe for you, the best may not be relief from pain or suffering but the grace to endure it, even if that suffering is a difficult marriage or family life.

Sometimes the Lord has to stop us from boasting, or from going after the things of this world. You may have heard someone testify of how an affliction brought them back to the Lord. We hear the Psalmist say, ‘It was good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes’ (Ps 119:71).

The apostle Paul shared the feeling of the Psalmist when he received an answer from the Lord; ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness’ (12:9). He went even further than the Psalmist in saying, ‘Most gladly I will boast in my infirmities’ (12:10). How amazing! How can anyone be glad of his or her thorn in the flesh? Paul was when, with God’s help, he understood how this thorn made him more dependent on the Lord, and more eager glorify God rather than self.

Many think that Christian maturity means being less dependent on the Lord, but the Bible teaches the opposite. Paul was certainly a mature Christian, but he learned total dependence on the Lord saying, ‘When I am weak then I am strong’ (12:10). Do you understand what Paul is saying? Do you believe what Paul is saying? You cannot understand if you do not know the grace of God, and many a Christian does not know the grace of God in salvation or in sanctification. They think they are saved by their good works, or that salvation simply means making God their friend; ‘There is nothing that God and I cannot do together’ they say. Is this what Paul is saying. Of course not. Apart from what Paul says, the cross of Christ is the supreme example of power-in-weakness.

The apostle Paul concludes his boasting by saying, ‘I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake’ (12:10). Not for his sake, or his glory, but for Christ’s sake and Christ’s glory, Paul endured the suffering that came with being a preacher of the gospel. Paul suffered both physically and mentally for the sake of Christ.

The Corinthians, especially the false teachers with their slander and worldly criticism, had caused Paul a lot of hurt and grief. They may even have targeted his thorn in the flesh. But, while defending himself against their attacks, Paul affirms that as a true servant of Christ, he trusted himself into the hands of Jesus and the grace and strength of almighty God. ‘Paul’s glory rests on the assurance that only in his low estate will he be protected by the overshadowing power of Christ’.

**A pastor’s patience and perseverance** 2Corinthians 12:11-19

The apostle Paul came to the city of Corinth on his second missionary journey. He stayed eighteen months, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and, by the grace of God, a church was established. His first letter, written some five years after this, reveals a division in this church over personalities like Apollos, Peter, and Paul. But these men were all preaching Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Those who for their own purposes wanted to split a church are sure to find some cause for division.

Furthermore, some in this church were slipping back into pagan ways regarding sexuality and idolatry. Paul had taught, and also shown them how to live and behave as believers in Christ. They had received the Holy Spirit when they believed, and he expected them to ‘grow up in all things into Christ who is the head’ (Eph 4:15). He expected them to show appreciation for his ministry among them even if it was some years before. Paul boasted in them and he expected them to boast in him (1:14).

But in the intervening years, false teachers had come to Corinth from Judea, men teaching a ‘different gospel’ about ‘another Jesus’ (11:4). Satan is always trying to attack the church, so we must be alert to his devices (2:11). The Corinthians were not alert; they listened to these intruders in their midst, so much so that they turned against the apostle Paul. They criticised Paul for changing his travel plan, criticised him for not accepting a preaching fee, and joined the intruders in calling him a weak little man whose speech was contemptible (10:10). Nothing hurts a parent more than when their own child criticises them in public and wants to be free from them. It was one thing for the false teachers to be commending themselves with letters and the like, but another for this church to be accepting such self-commendations, and not responding by commending their father in the faith, the apostle Paul.

As Paul draws this, his second letter to a close, so he concludes the boasting he was compelled to engage in in defence of his ministry and the gospel he preached. His boasting was largely about his weaknesses and his suffering as a servant of Christ. He sought to imitate Christ, and he urged the Christians to imitate him, not the self-appointed and self-commending ‘super-apostles’ who came to Corinth. Our subheadings are: ‘Signs of an apostle’, ‘Spend and be spent’, and, ‘Speak before God in Christ’.

**1. Signs of an apostle**

Paul was called by the risen Lord Jesus to preach the gospel, not to talk about himself or defend himself as a preacher of the gospel. But when the gospel itself was under threat, as was the case with the false teachers at Corinth, Paul was compelled to defend himself and the gospel he preached. He was very reluctant to boast in personal attributes or in what he had done. He was not an eloquent speaker but he was not lacking in knowledge; he was an educated ‘Hebrew of Hebrews’ (11:6, 22). When it came to ministry, he reflected on the suffering and distress he endured for Christ’s sake and for the church.

None of this foolish boasting would have been necessary, of course, if the church had stood behind Paul when the false teachers started attacking his credentials and person (12:11). Paul urges them even now, to see that he was in no way inferior to these puffed up ‘super-apostles’ (11:5, 12:11). Paul called himself ‘the least of the apostles’ because he persecuted the church (1Cor 15:9), meaning the twelve apostles, not these self-appointed ‘blow-ins’. They were full of words but short on substance, more politician than preacher. Besides, did not Jesus say, ‘The last will be first and the first last’ and, ‘Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Mat 18:3, 20:16).

The ministry of the apostle Paul was accompanied by signs and wonders and miracles, the ‘signs of an apostle’ (12:12 NIV). At Lystra he healed a cripple, just as Peter and John did at the temple (Acts 14:10). There is no record of miracles done through Paul at Corinth, but he says that ‘the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you’ (12:12). They are not recorded because Paul’s ministry was not simply a ‘signs and wonders’ ministry; it was a gospel ministry, a ministry calling for repentance and belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The apostolic age has passed so ‘the signs of an apostle’ are no longer seen. In any case, the key word in the miracles of Jesus and the apostles is ‘signs’. Signs point to something- they are not meant to be an end in themselves (Heb 2:3, 4). In the words of Calvin, ‘Signs are not empty shows, but are appointed for the instruction of mankind; wonders, because they ought, by their novelty, to arouse men and strike them with astonishment; and mighty deeds, because they are more signal tokens of divine power than what we behold in the ordinary course of nature’.

And let us not overlook the word ‘perseverance’, ‘all perseverance’ or ‘great perseverance’ here in verse 12. Paul did not enter the city of Corinth like a celebrity and start performing miracles. He came alone and started working as a tentmaker, while preaching in the synagogue that Jesus is the Christ. He was thrown out of the synagogue but kept on preaching. The Jews later dragged him before a Roman court. Perseverance marked Paul’s ministry more than miracles.

Paul’s failure to visit this church as planned, and his refusal to accept a preaching fee, had been misconstrued as evidence that he loved the Corinthian church less than other churches. But this was not true. Paul has already pointed out why he changed his plans, and why he did not accept a fee, but would they listen and accept his word? Since when was it a sin to refuse financial help! (11:7, 12:13). Paul can do no more than sarcastically ask them to, ‘Forgive me this wrong!’ Paul saw the hands of his detractors, the hands of the false teachers, behind all this twisting of the truth.

**2. Spend and be spent**

Paul decided not to burden the Corinthians by asking for support, even though he was entitled to do so (1Cor 9:9). He had not burdened them in the past, and would not burden them in the future. What did the future hold? Paul was planning to make a third visit to Corinth. He may have changed his initial plans because of a hasty retreat from Ephesus, but he still intended to come, and quite soon: ‘I am ready to come to you’ (12:14).

Paul tries to put the money matter to rest by pointing out that it is not for children to support their parents but for parents to support their children (12:14). Although entitled to support, he did not want their money: ‘I do not seek yours, but you’ (12:14). What he wanted was for them to mature in their faith and to become adults, as it were. As their father in the faith he would gladly ‘spend and be spent for your souls’. Paul would give whatever he had, be it money, possessions or time, in order to see them grow in their faith. He would run himself into the ground, worrying and praying, writing letters and visiting, for the joy of seeing them mature in the faith.

Paul was disappointed that his demonstrations of love for the Corinthians had been twisted and turned back on him. It seemed to Paul that the more he loved them, the less they loved him. They were like ungrateful children. They were a disappointment to Paul, and also to Christ whom they believed in when Paul preached the gospel in Corinth. They had been given the Holy Spirit when they believed but there was little evidence of the Spirit’s work in their lives at this time. The fruits of the Spirit were sadly lacking in their conduct towards their true apostle.

For a third time in just four verses, Paul stresses that he did not demand a preaching fee from the Corinthians because he did not want to burden them (11:7). His conduct was in contrast to the money-hungry false teachers; hence their slander concerning his motives for not accepting a fee, and the rumour that he was taking from the collection being conducted by Titus. They were charging Paul with being ‘crafty’ and ‘cunning’, accepting no fee but in fact dipping into the funds they were giving for the poor brethren in Judea. This charge was so ridiculous that the apostle sarcastically replies, ‘Crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery’ (12:16).

To have dipped into this collection would have required the complicity of those in charge of it, namely Titus and another brother (12:18, 8:17, 18). Paul was careful to send two men, the second being the choice of the churches, not his choice, as we saw back in chapter 8. Besides, Titus was well-known to the Corinthians. He had carried Paul’s severe letter to them, and had brought a good word back to Paul from that visit (7:6, 7). Titus loved the Corinthians as much as Paul (7:15, 8:16). Titus was a brother who imitated Paul, just as Paul imitated Christ (1Cor 11:1). He was a man of faith who was faithful to his calling in Christ Jesus, and loyal to the brethren. Paul challenges them with three rhetorical questions concerning the character of Titus (12:18). He was Paul’s friend and colleague, but, like Paul, was first and foremost the friend and servant of Jesus Christ.

**3. Speak before God in Christ**

Many scholars see verse 19 as beginning the next section of this letter, but we see it as a fitting conclusion to this section. You will note a different reading in some translations, but Paul’s point is clear. The boasting which they compelled him to engage in was not about making excuses, not about self-vindication, and not even about defending himself. Paul did not see the false teachers as his judges, and nor was the church his ultimate judge. Back in his first letter he declared that the Lord was his judge, not a human court and not even himself (1Cor 4:3, 4).

Paul concludes a ‘defence’ of his conduct by declaring, ‘We speak before God in Christ’ (12:19). The ‘we’ may be a royal ‘we’, may include Timothy as co-author of this letter, or may include Titus whom he just referred to. Paul was concerned all along, and indeed all the time, to be speaking the truth because he was speaking ‘before God in Christ’. All that we say is heard by God, and we will be called by Christ to account for every word on the Day of Judgment (Mat 12:36). To be speaking what is not true about a servant of Christ is tantamount to speaking against Christ. The Corinthians would do well to consider this! But Paul is referring to himself, and possibly his colleagues in saying, ‘We speak before God in Christ’. He declares that he is being honest before God in everything he says. God is his judge, not man.

The Corinthians were not his judges, but they were his ‘beloved’: ‘We do all things, beloved, for your edification’ (12:19). Paul was not trying to win a ‘war of words’ with the Corinthian Christians. The only winner he wanted to see was Christ. He wanted to see them walking closer to Christ or exalted in Christ. All that Paul said and did was for their edification, for the strengthening or building up of the brothers and sisters in Corinth, to the glory of Christ.

It would have been very easy for Paul to take all their accusations to heart and focus on personal vindication, or even revenge. But as a man imitating Christ, this was not the way. He would put up with being called a weak little man, a ‘nobody’ in the eyes of the world, but he would defend his honesty because any dishonesty on his part would undermine the gospel. But ultimately, he would ‘speak before God in Christ’, and persevere in loving them and doing all he could to strengthen them in their most precious faith.

**Concerns about a third visit to Corinth** 2Corinthians 12:20-21

The apostle Paul was the founding father of the church in Corinth and loved the Christians there. But he was critical of this church for its divisions and disorder, and for tolerating sexual immorality and idolatry in their midst. He writes of these concerns in his first letter, called 1Corinthians. A member living in incest was tolerated, and even praised by some as being liberated (1Cor 5:1). After two letters, and a painful visit, and another harsh letter delivered by Titus, they took disciplinary action against this man and he repented. Paul was pleased to hear this news when Titus returned, but it seems that sexual immorality and other corrupt conduct continued in this church.

Paul’s attempts to teach the Christians at Corinth how to conduct themselves as followers of Christ were seriously thwarted when false teachers came to this church from Judea. Much of 2Corinthians, especially from chapter 10, has been focused on these false teachers, with Paul exposing them for their teaching and their conduct. It appears that they went along with the sexual immorality and idolatry in this church. What they did was encourage the church to go on the offensive against the apostle Paul. It is said that the best form of defence is offence. They did their utmost to discredit Paul and undermine his authority over this church. In this way immoral conduct could continue unchecked. Pagan religions are marked by idolatry of course, and also by sexual immorality. Corruption of the gospel of Jesus Christ is also marked by idolatry and sexual immorality.

As Paul concludes this letter, he turns from defence to offence. He has already spoken of a third visit (12:14), and in these verses expresses apprehension at the sort of conduct he might find in this church when he visits. Paul was a persevering preacher and apostle of Jesus Christ. He was not about to overlook conduct that was contrary to the gospel he preached. A gospel that tolerates sinful behaviour in not the true gospel, any more that a gospel that preaches ‘another Jesus’ (11:4). ‘If anyone loves me he will obey my teaching’ said Jesus (John 14:23). Our subheadings today are: ‘Fights and quarrels continue’ and, ‘Fornication continues’.

**1. Fights and quarrels continue**

While writing this letter from Macedonia, Titus returned from Corinth, to the great relief of the apostle Paul. Titus had delivered Paul’s severe letter and Paul was eager to learn of their response. Titus brought good news regarding their discipline of the incestuous man and his repentance. But not all the news was good news. There were still divisions and sexual immorality in the church, things which the false apostles were seemingly not concerned about. But Paul was their true apostle and he was concerned about these things.

Paul made clear his position, the position set down in the Scriptures, in his letters and his painful visit. But from what he had learned, presumably from Titus, the Corinthians had not changed their ways. In 1Corinthians 3:3 he wrote, ‘You are still carnal. For where there is envy, strife and divisions among you, are you not carnal’. Despite Paul’s condemnation of the party spirit between Apollos, Peter and himself, there is no mention of this being dealt with. Moreover, there is evidence that the coming of the false teachers led to further divisions in the church, although there was a certain degree of unity in their attacks upon the apostle Paul.

As Paul prepares to visit the Corinthian church for a third time, he fears that he will not find their conduct acceptable according to what he had taught and demanded from them. He also fears that they will not find Paul as they might have expected. They had been listening to a lot of slanderous talk about Paul and probably expected him to be a weak little man whose bark was worse than his bite. Paul goes on to assure them that this will not be the case (13:2).

Pride is very pernicious, and the Corinthians seem to have displayed an abundance of this sin. They were ‘me first’ people, grabbing food and drink ahead of others, speaking over one another in disorderly meetings, and taking one another to court if wronged (1Cor 6:6, 11:21). Such behaviour leads to divisions, and is called carnal or worldly by Paul. Such behaviour is not in keeping with the example given by our Lord Jesus Christ, who washed the feet of his disciples, and ‘came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many’ (Mk 10:45).

Paul lists particular behaviours which he feared he would find in the church at Corinth. The first is contentions or strife or quarrelling (12:20). The first chapter of his first letter addressed divisions in the church, in which each one was saying, ‘I am of so and so’; it was all ‘I’ and ‘me’. Where does such behaviour come from? James asked this question, and also answers it; it comes from the desires of the flesh, and ultimately pride (Ja 4:1-6): ‘God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble’ (Ja 4:6). Pride leads to envy or jealousy, to anger or outbursts of wrath, and to selfish ambitions, as Paul goes on to say in verse 20. Jealousy is covetousness, the desire to have what your neighbour has and you don’t have (Exod 20:17). ‘You lust and do not have’ (Ja 4:2). Lust can lead to anger and temper tantrums in which self-control goes out the door. Ambition, the desire to do well and get ahead, is not sinful in itself, but when this desire means trampling on other people it is selfish ambition and sinful.

Paul goes on to backbiting or slander, something he was experiencing at the hands of his opponents in Corinth. Whisperings or gossip falls into the category of sins of the tongue, which James addresses in strong words in chapter 3 of his letter. This small part of the body can do an untold evil. Gossip was the way of life in Corinthian society, as it is on our society. Social media had facilitated gossip and its disastrous effects upon a community. The community of God’s people should be different; it should be a gossip-free zone, but is this true? The church should be marked by members speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15).

Paul ends his list of behaviours not appropriate or acceptable in the church with the mention of conceit or arrogance, and tumults or disorders. In his first letter, Paul spoke of people being ‘puffed up’, a good description of arrogance, and the literal meaning of the Greek word. Pride reveals itself in arrogance, in an ‘I know everything’ attitude, and hence a ‘me first’ attitude. Paul said he would burst this pride bubble when he came to Corinth in the power of Christ (13:4, 1Cor 4:18-20). We have a saying, ‘The higher they rise the harder they fall’, and so to avoid a hard fall it is best not to rise too high in your opinion of yourself.

**2. Fornication continues**

As Paul contemplates a third visit to Corinth, he writes of apprehension about another matter, namely sexual immorality in the church. The matter of sexual immorality ‘not even named among the Gentiles’ seems to have been dealt with but not the matter of prostitution (1Cor 5:1, 6:15f). In Corinthian society prostitution was widespread; it was even part of pagan worship. If ever anyone could claim ‘everyone is doing it’ the Corinthians could do so with regard to prostitution.

Paul uses three words with regard to sexual sins that continued in this church. The first is ‘uncleanness’ or ‘impurity’ (12:21). From this Greek word we get the English word ‘catharsis’. These people needed to repent and undergo catharsis with regard to lustful thoughts and actions. Paul did not say ‘feed sexual immorality’ but ‘flee sexual immorality’ (1Cor 6:18). Pornography is a curse in our society and even in the church. This word actually comes from the next Greek word, ‘*pornea*’. Many a sexual abuser and rapist admits to an addiction to pornography. We feel compelled to warn readers and viewers about sexually explicit material on the screen, but the question of decency or morality does not get raised, even in the church. People talk about the morality of climate change but not the morality of sexual behaviour. And, sadly, some Christians think that whatever society says is legal, is permissible for them. The apostle Paul called for the Christians in Corinth not to live by worldly or carnal standards but by the standards set down in the Bible.

Fornication or ‘*pornea*’ is translated ‘sexual immorality’ in some Bibles. It refers to any sex outside marriage, especially prostitution; adultery is included, although there is another Greek word for adultery. Although sex before marriage is condoned or tolerated by many Christians, it is not condoned in the Bible. The ‘everyone is doing it’ excuse was not accepted by the apostle Paul, and is not acceptable for believers today.

The third word Paul uses is ‘lewdness’ or ‘debauchery’ or ‘sensuality’. This means living without moral restraint. The media is always ‘pushing the boundaries’, as they say, with regard to sexual content. Like some in the church in Corinth, writers and producers want to excel in lewdness and indecency. Party and festival organisers also promote lewd and debauched behaviour.

The Corinthian Christians had been washed and sanctified from their lives of fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and sodomy (1Cor 6:9, 11), but these sins persisted in the lives of some. Satan does not let his slaves go without a fight! Paul had warned them in his earlier letter to flee sexual immorality, but some had not yet repented of this sin. He believed that in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit they could repent and flee sexual sin, but he also believed in the authority and power of Christ given to him as an apostle, and to the church courts (Mat 18:17-20).

How wonderful it would have been for Paul to come to Corinth and rejoice with these believers in their victory over all sexual sin, and all lustful behaviour. How wonderful it would have been if the church at Corinth stood as a beacon of light within this city, the name of which was a byword for gross sexual immorality and corruption. The apostle, however, feared this would not be the case. He feared that his third visit would be like his second ‘painful’ visit. He feared that when he came, God would humble him among them (12:21). He would be witnessing his failure as a pastor to help these converts live in holiness, and in obedience to the commands of Christ. Paul would be left mourning rather than rejoicing, seeing people who had believed continuing in sin, or returning to sin because they have not truly repented.

Paul’s concern is shared by many pastors in the church. Sadly, pastors see more converts returning to sin than they do converts going from strength to strength in their Christian life. Mourning for members of the church is the lot of many a pastor, but we keep praying and hoping that the Lord, by his word and his Spirit, will bring revival, and through revival, joy and rejoicing to his servants, and glory to God.

**Final warning to the Corinthians** 2Corinthians 13:1-9

The Pharisees were jealous of Jesus because of the crowds following him. They got angry at Jesus when he condemned their corrupt behaviour. When Jesus drove the money changers from the temple these Jewish leaders were indignant. They confronted Jesus demanding, ‘Who gave you this authority’? (Mat 21:23). Jesus did not answer their question because they did not answer his about John the Baptist. But on another occasion, Jesus answered a question about bearing witness of himself. He knew the law of Moses required two or three witnesses; Jesus first spoke of John’s witness but then referred to a higher witness, namely the works which ‘the Father has given me to finish’, and to the witness of the Father himself (John 5:36-37, 8:17-18).

The apostle Paul faced similar questions about his authority, the apostolic authority given him by Jesus. Paul did not go around lording it over men and women any more than Jesus, but he was entrusted by the Lord with oversight of the church. Sinners do not like submitting to authority- does anyone like being pulled over by a traffic cop? Christians do not like submitting to authority either, especially if they are intent on continuing in sin.

The Corinthian Christians were intent on exercising their ‘freedom in Christ’ but did not understand that being a new creation in Christ Jesus meant living in newness of life. Sins of the flesh continued in the Corinthian church (12:21), and Paul was determined to rectify this situation. The church of Christ must look like Christ, not like the world. Moreover, Christ is the head of his church. As an ‘apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God’ Paul urged the ‘backsliders’ to repent and change their ways if they wanted to be spared when Paul came. Their attempts at undermining Paul’s authority had failed, so it was a case of, ‘Look out when I come this third time!’ Our subheadings are: ‘Third and final warning’, ‘The power of Christ’ and, ‘Test yourselves’.

**1. Third and final warning**

With the help of false teachers, the Corinthians had tried to undermine the apostolic authority Paul. For these false teachers, discrediting Paul meant they could take control of this church. For the sexually immoral members of this church it meant they did not have to listen to Paul and could continue living in sin. This is why Paul was compelled to defend his authority, with some boasting (12:11). Paul loved them too much to let them wipe their hands of him. He knew that wiping their hands of him meant wiping their hands of Christ! Moreover, Paul could not compromise on the gospel that he preached because it was the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Not even the church has the authority to change the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the demands of this gospel as set down in Scripture.

As he draws this letter to a close, Paul tells the Corinthians that he is ready to visit them for a third time- twice he tells them (12:14, 13:1). During his first visit this church was established. His second visit was hasty and brief, a painful visit to deal with the man living in incest, it seems; the church had failed to discipline this man according to the demand made in his first letter (1Cor 5). Pauls refers to this visit here in verse 2: ‘I have already given you a warning when I was with you the second time’ (13:2 NIV).

Always anxious to base his teaching and conduct in holy Scripture, Paul refers to the Law of Moses which required every matter or charge to be established by two or three witnesses (13:1, Deut 19:15). He may have recalled Jesus referring to this law when teaching about authority and discipline in the church (Mat 18:16). But Paul appears to adapt this law by saying his first two visits were like two witnesses, and that his third visit would be a ‘clincher’ with regard to establishing three witnesses.

Paul is saying that he has given sufficient warning in his first letter and second visit, and now in this second letter, so his third visit would be one of action. After his painful visit, Paul was reluctant to visit again; he wanted to spare them so wrote a letter instead (1:23). Things had changed since that time, such that he was now ready to come again and ‘not spare’ them (13:2). The incestuous man had been disciplined, but other forms of sexual immorality, e.g. prostitution, continued, so it seems (2:6, 12:21). The false teachers were a complicating factor in Pauls’ visit, but he was ready to deal with them also.

**2. The power of Christ**

‘Since you seek proof of Christ speaking in me’ (13:3). The contest between Paul and the false teachers at Corinth boiled down to who spoke with the authority of Christ. Paul had shown them to be servants of Satan; he was the only true servant of Christ (11:13-15). If the Corinthians were seeking proof of Christ speaking through him, Paul was ready to provide such proof. Paul saw the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus; it was a vision of power, not of weakness. Paul knew the power of the resurrection (Eph 1:19-20). He writes, ‘That I may know Him and the power of his resurrection’ (Phil 3:10).

He also knew the weakness of Christ, of course; Christ was crucified in weakness, and Paul imitated Christ in his weakness (13:4). His ministry was one of weakness, of being humbled and suffering for the sake of the gospel. The Corinthians knew Paul’s ‘weak presence’ and ‘contemptible speech’ (10:10), but just as Jesus’ crucifixion was followed by resurrection, they should remember that Paul’s weakness would be followed by power if necessary, the power of the risen Lord Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead with great power. There is no greater power known to man than the power of the resurrection, the power of a dead person being raised to life. Paul assures the Corinthians, especially those living in sin, that he is coming in the power of the risen Christ: ‘We shall live with Him by the power of God towards you’ (13:4).

Did not Jesus say, ‘All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth’ (Mat 28:18), and did he not give his apostles ‘power from on high’ to preach the gospel in all the world’? (Luke 24:49). The power available to the apostle Paul was from Christ, from the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Those in the church at Corinth who questioned his authority and power were warned to take note of this truth. ‘Paul will not come in the supposed power of visions or ecstasy but in the power of a godly man ‘in Christ’, who will exhort, judge and grieve over the unrepentant’. Barnett goes on, ‘We must be prepared to exhort, encourage, and discipline those who have fallen into sin, as well as restore the penitent’.

**3. Test yourselves**

Just as Paul was an ‘in Christ’ man, so all true Christians are ‘in Christ’ people. When we repent of our sin and believe in Jesus Christ we become ‘in Christ’ people. ‘And if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new’ (5:17). Paul writes of walking ‘in newness of life’, a life of victory over sin, not of compromise with sin or succumbing to sin (Rom 6:4-7). Every believer should know the power of Christ or the Holy Spirit, by which he or she can overcome sin.

How would the Corinthians see ‘proof of Christ’ in Paul if they did not know Christ themselves? Truly, Christ was speaking through Paul and he was also ‘mighty in you’ (13:3). Paul challenges them to examine their hearts and lives to see if they were ‘in the faith’, to see that ‘Jesus Christ is in you’ (13:5). Before judging Paul they should judge themselves. Let them humble themselves before the Lord. Let them examine themselves in the light of God’s word. If Christ was truly in them, they would ‘repent of the uncleanness, fornication and lewdness’ in which they indulged (12:21).

When Jesus said, ‘Judge not that you be not judged’ (Mat 7:10), he did not mean that there is no place for judgment of one another- as some claim! What he meant is that we must examine our own heart and life before we look at others. Instead of judging Paul, the Corinthians should examine their own hearts and lives to see if Christ was living in them- ‘unless you are disqualified’ (13:5). Some try to use this verse to prove that a person can be saved and then lost, but Paul is simply asking for self-examination. If one does not pass the test they are of course, disqualified, meaning they were never ‘in Christ’ or ‘in the faith’ (cf. 1John 2:18-19).

Paul however, is confident that after self-examination the Corinthian Christians will see their sin and repent, and that they will understand that Paul is ‘qualified’ to be exhorting and warning them, as he was doing. ‘It is somewhat ironic that discovery that their own faith was true should in fact point in the direction of the genuineness of Paul’s apostleship’ (Grogan). They might remember that they came to faith through the preaching of the apostle Paul!

Paul vigorously defended his faith and life against the claims of the false teachers, but he was not competing with the believers themselves. He was their father in the faith. He was not purging the church of unbelievers but was imploring them as believers to repent and return to Christ, and to accept him as their father in the faith.

Here at the close of his letter, Paul says he is praying to God for the Corinthians; we have assumed that he was doing a lot of praying as he wrote this letter! Paul prays that they ‘do no wrong’ but in fact do what is right or ‘honourable’ (13:7). He was not intent on proving his credentials by exercising the power of Christ in their midst. Paul was prepared to look disqualified, to look weak and vulnerable, if they would act to change their ways before he came. What Paul wanted was for them to mend their ways and then, as the body of Christ, to live in conformity to the teaching of the gospel. Paul was not about vindicating himself or restoring his reputation. He was about them repenting and restoring their relationship with Christ. Restoration of their relationship with the apostle would follow.

Paul would not put up with any compromise when it came to the gospel and living the Christian life. His prayer was based on the absolutes of right and wrong. He prayed that they do what is right and not what is wrong (13:7) because some things are right and some things are wrong. Paul’s prayer comes with two fundamental truths. Firstly, truth is absolute so, ‘we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth’ (13:8). ‘What is truth?’ asked Pilate. Jesus is the truth, he is ‘The way the truth and life, and no one comes to the Father except through’ him (John 14:6). There is only one gospel of Jesus Christ, and only one way to live for those who are ‘in Christ’, the true and living way.

Secondly, as a minister of the gospel, Paul prayed and laboured and suffered, ‘that you may be made complete’ (13:9). The Christian life is a journey that must be completed; it is a race to run, and no one gets the prize unless they finish. Paul would spend and be spent for the souls of the believers in Corinth (12:18). Are you focused on finishing the race? What about those running with you; are you concerned for their souls? What about your own children; are you concerned for their souls? Are you praying for them? Are you teaching them the truth and doing all you can to ensure they press on in the faith even after they leave home, and even after your death?

**Closing greetings and blessings** 2Corinthians 13:11-14

We recently visited a display of artefacts brought to Canberra from the British Museum. The display was called, ‘Ancient Greeks’. My wife thought there would be scrolls containing the writings of the ancient Greeks, but the display consisted of many ‘amphora’ or painted pots, marble statues, and metal coins or medallions. I was interested in the exhibition because the Greek Empire flourished not long before the apostle Paul visited the city of Corinth.

The Romans conquered Corinth in 146BC, but Greek culture persisted. A temple of Aphrodite, with its thousand or more priestess-prostitutes, and a temple of Apollo, were places of worship in this pagan city. In the exhibition we saw a white marble statue of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The Greeks were keen competitors in sports, in the arts, and in war. The Olympic Games began not far from Corinth, which had its own Isthmian games. These games included athletics, field events, wrestling and equestrian competitions in which men competed naked men, as well as music and drama competitions.

Greek society was made up of slaves, merchants and traders, and the rich. To show off their riches, citizens became patrons of artists, and sponsored performances. Such patronage may have discouraged Paul from accepting a preaching fee while at Corinth. As mentioned, there were no scrolls in this exhibition; it was all pots and statues and coins. The Greeks of course, wrote books or scrolls but parchment and papyrus pages readily decay. The oldest copy of ‘Caesar’s wars’, which was written between 58-50BC, is some nine hundred years later than Caesar’s day. Paul wrote his letters on parchments around 55-56 AD; we have fragments of these from just three hundred years after the date of writing. The earliest extant fragment of the NT is on a papyrus dated at just one hundred and fifty years after the time of writing.

As Paul closes his second letter to the Corinthians, he was probably reaching the end of his parchment or scroll. This may be why his greetings and blessings are brief. It is interesting that both his letters are of similar length. As missionaries, we wrote letters on ‘aerogrammes’, a single piece of paper that was folded and sent by air; we had to squeeze our last words up the side of the page!

**1. Goodbye**

After telling the Corinthians that he was ready to visit a third time, and urging then to examine themselves and reform to their ways, the apostle Paul writes, ‘Finally, brethren, farewell’ (13:11). ‘Brethren’ is regarded as an old word nowadays but is still in the dictionary, with the meaning ‘members of a religious society’. The word ‘brothers’ might be ‘softer’, but then we have to use ‘brother and sister’ all the time. Be that as it may, Paul is saying farewell or goodbye to the brethren in Corinth. Our word ‘goodbye’ is of course, a shortened form of ‘God be with you’. Paul is conveying wishes of joy and gladness towards the recipients of his letter. The Christian life can be, and should be, one of joy, even in hard times.

Such wishes extend into exhortations to ‘become complete/perfect’ and ‘be of good comfort’ or ‘be encouraged’ (13:11). The word ‘complete’ carries the sense of mend or repair your ways, or to set in order. Paul’s concern was for their ‘mending’ as individuals and as a Christian community. He mentioned this in his prayer back in verse 9. He wanted to see spiritual maturity, not ongoing carnality. Paul wanted to be encouraged on his visit, and above all wanted them to be encouraged in the faith and in holy living. The Greek word ‘*parakaleo*’ means to call to one’s side, to help and to comfort.

The third ‘be’ is ‘be of one mind’. This was a particular challenge to the Corinthians. History tells us that Greek society was particularly competitive; a competitive spirit is not conducive to unity. Church members have different gifts of the Spirit, which they should be encouraged to exercise for the building up of the whole church. Gifts of the Spirit are to be exercised in the fruits of the Spirit: in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). Note the contrast with what Paul fears he may find when he visits Corinth: strife, jealousies, outburst of anger, selfish ambitions, backbiting, whisperings, conceits, and tumults (12:20). Asking them to be of one mind was a big ask, but with God all things are possible.

‘Live at peace’ was Paul’s final ask (13:11). Peace remains elusive while ever we walk in the ways of the world because peace comes from God. In asking them to live at peace, Paul reminds them that God is the God of love and peace (cf. 1John 4:8). We see God’s love in sending his only begotten Son into this world to die bearing our sins (John 3:16). ‘God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him’ (5:21). If we see and know God’s love in Jesus Christ we must live in love, love for God and love for one another.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, we see God making peace with us, who were separated from him because of our sin. ‘Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom 5:1). Again, knowing we have peace with God, we can and must live in peace, peace with God and peace with one another. The apostle Paul urged two women at Philippi to be of one mind, to know the peace of God in their hearts, and to ‘Rejoice in the Lord always’ (Phil 4:4). ‘And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 4:7). He could have written the same words to the Corinthians, to all of them it seems.

What Paul writes as he closes this letter reminds us of the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:26: ‘The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The Lord lift us his countenance upon you and give you peace’. It also reminds us of the words of the risen Jesus when he appeared to his disciples: ‘Peace be with you’ (John 20:19, 21). Paul believed Jesus’ promise to his disciples as he in effect said goodbye to them and ascended into heaven: ‘Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’ (Mat 28:20).

**2. Greetings**

Paul’s greetings in this letter are very brief. He mentions no names even though he has often spoken of Titus. He mentions Timothy as co-author of this letter but not here in his closing greetings (1:1). Paul writes from Macedonia, maybe from Philippi, where the people may not have been known to the Corinthians. For this reason, and because he was coming to the end of the page, Paul simply writes, ‘All the saints greet you’ (13:13).

Paul’s first greeting is actually for the Corinthians to, ‘Greet one another with a holy kiss’ (13:12). He tells the Romans to do the same thing (Rom 16:16). This was probably the sort of kiss practiced by the Jews, and practiced widely in the Middle East still today, among men and women separately. A ‘holy kiss’ was not sexual in nature, of course. Greeting with a kiss was common in our culture some years ago, but a handshake is more acceptable among men- or it was before the pandemic.

Just as refusing a handshake was seen as unfriendly or rude before the pandemic, so it was with the holy kiss spoken of by Paul. ‘Holy kisses’ were probably few and far between in this church with all its divisions. Family members embrace and kiss when meeting one another. The church is a family is it not, the family of believing brothers and sisters in Christ.

**3. Grace**

The closing words of this letter are no doubt familiar to you. You hear them as the benediction or closing blessing in many worship services. It is a popular benediction because it includes all three persons of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; although the Lord Jesus Christ comes first in this verse. It is important that we refer to the holy Trinity in our worship because it is a biblical truth that is rejected or misunderstood by sects and other religions. It was of course, rejected by the Jews in Paul’s day, and still today.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is at the heart of the gospel. Paul preached ‘Christ crucified’, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks (1Cor 1:23). This is the message of the gospel and this is what he preached. Apart from the cross of Christ there is no salvation! Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Grace is the opposite of works: Grace or ‘*charis*’ means unmerited favour. Jesus Christ, who had no sin, took our sin to the cross and died in our place. The penalty for sin is death, and Jesus took this penalty for us.

God the Father is the almighty creator of heaven and earth, and the judge of all people; although Jesus was associated with the Father in the work of creation, and Paul refers to the ‘judgment seat of Christ’ (5:10). But in this benediction, God is love. This is because of God’s love for us in sending his only begotten Son, Jesus, into this sinful and corrupt world. We love God because he first loved us. We see God’s power and majesty in the creation, not least in his creation of us, but his love we see in the cross, where his beloved Son died in our place. We see his power again in the resurrection, but apart from the cross there is no salvation for you or me or anyone in this world.

God the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, promised by Jesus and sent by him at Pentecost; he is eternal with the Father and the Son, of course. The Holy Spirit is given to all who believe; he convicts of sin and guides us in the truth of Scripture, and stands beside us as our helper in prayer and in times of need. The benediction refers to the ‘communion’ or ‘fellowship’ of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, we have fellowship with God and with his Son, and fellowship with one another (1John 1:3).

We spoke of brethren being members of a religious society; it also applies to members of a guild or order or profession. I play tennis with men who like tennis as I do, but we have little else in common. People have ‘fellowship’ with workmates because they share the same profession, but usually not much else. As Christians, we have fellowship because we share a love for Christ. This sharing is much deeper than merely sharing the same love for tennis. Christian fellowship involves the indwelling Holy Spirit- we share the same Holy Spirit. Christian fellowship goes across racial differences, class differences, age differences, gender differences, and political differences.

In Paul’s day, Christian fellowship extended across the huge Jew-Gentile divide, as well as the rich-poor divide or master-slave divide. In the book of Philemon the apostle urges the master of a household to accept back a runaway slave because he was converted and was now more than a slave- he was a beloved brother. Is Christian fellowship unique in this regard? Tasker writes, ‘The only lasting fellowship between men is the fellowship of sinners redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ’. Let us remember that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the basis of our fellowship in the church. This indwelling reaches right around the world, and extends beyond this age into heaven itself.

The Holy Spirit is given to us as God’s seal upon our hearts, as a guarantee that we belong to him (1:22, 5:5). But we must not grieve the Holy Spirit or quench the Spirit (Eph 4:30, 1Thes 5:19), something the Corinthians were doing in their arrogance, their contentions and their sexual immorality. When we let the Holy Spirit guide us, we will demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control, to the glory of God, Amen.

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