



St Helen's
Bishopsgate

BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES

2 Corinthians



2 Corinthians

Introduction to the letter

Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church is an incredibly personal and passionate appeal that the Corinthians might live by faith, and not by sight (2 Cor 4.16-18; 5.7). The Corinthians were in danger of becoming ashamed of the visible 'weakness' of Christians like Paul, of distancing themselves from their impoverished brothers and sisters in the Judean churches (chapters 8-9) and of giving their allegiance instead to some new teachers in Corinth - the impressive 'super-apostles' (2 Cor 11.5; 12.11). Paul longs for the Corinthians to renew their allegiance to him (1.12-14; 7.2), to the poor Christians in Jerusalem (chapters 8-9), and especially to God (5.20).

We live in an age that often 'boasts about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart' (5.12). Many evangelical churches in the West have swallowed the spirit of the age and focus much of the time on externals and personalities rather than on truth (13.8) and sacrifice (8.4; 12.15). We too can look for glory rather than suffering. At St Helen's, we may feel that we have been sufficiently inoculated against these dangers, but very few of us 'boast' in our weaknesses (12.9). Some of the Corinthians saw the issues clearly, but they kept their convictions to themselves – Paul wanted them to 'reveal' their 'earnestness' more clearly (7.12). 2 Corinthians will challenge us to 'examine' ourselves (13.5), and will, if we hear it correctly, build us up (12.19) and restore us (13.9) to authentic Christian experience and ministry.

Background

The Apostle Paul had a long and complicated history with the Corinthian church. It may be helpful to set it out in stages:

- i. During an 18 month stay in Corinth, Paul taught God's word & **planted a church** (Acts 18.1-11).
- ii. Paul **wrote a letter** to the Corinthians (1 Cor 5.9) and they **replied** (1 Cor 7.1).
- iii. Some time later, Paul heard of factions in the Corinthian church & **wrote 1 Corinthians**.
- iv. In a slight change of plan from those outlined in 1 Corinthians 16, Paul made a second '**painful visit**' to Corinth (2 Cor 2.1). He flopped.
- v. Paul wrote the Corinthians a '**severe letter**' in an attempt to resolve by letter some issues that he had not succeeded in overcoming in person (2 Cor 2.4). That letter does not survive, but we know that it had some positive effect in Corinth (2 Cor 7.8-9).
- vi. Some time later, Titus brought to Paul **good news of the Corinthians' faith** – much to Paul's delight (2 Cor 7.6-7). More troubling, however, was Titus' report that the 'super-apostles' were gaining a following in Corinth.
- vii. **Paul plans to visit Corinth again** (2 Cor 12.14, 20; 13.1, 10), as he had originally planned.
- viii. In advance of his visit, **Paul writes 2 Corinthians as a pre-emptive strike** – in the hope that the Corinthians' flirtations with the super-apostles' ministry might be overcome in advance.

Situation in Corinth

Titus' report had brought good news about the Corinthians' faith. Paul is confident that the majority of the church is in good heart: he has pride in them (7.4); he knows that they are 'zealous' for him (7.7); his 'boasts' about their spiritual state have been proven true (7.14); he can even say, 'I have perfect confidence in you' (7.16). That observation should prevent us from being too negative about the situation in Corinth. There were genuine signs of grace in the church: many had been brought to repentance by Paul's severe letter (7.9); many had renewed their allegiance to Paul (7.10-12).

But for all the encouragements, not everything in Corinth is quite right. Two groups are of particular concern to Paul:

i. The unrepentant minority:

There are still some in the congregation who have not repented of their wickedness (12.20-21; 13.2). Paul longs for the wicked to be restored (13.9, 11) lest his labours on their behalf might prove to be in vain (12.20-21).

ii. The equivocating majority:

This group is Paul's primary target in the letter. He has confidence in them, but he is concerned about the impact that the super-apostles are having on their 'thinking' (11.3). He is worried that they will be 'led astray' by the newcomers (11.3). It seems as though this group is no longer wholehearted in their commitment to Paul and his gospel. They do acknowledge him, but only 'partially' (1.14). They support him, but they have kept pretty quiet about it (7.12). Their waning commitment to Paul seems also to have resulted in their wavering commitment to other Christians, as the collection they had started for the relief of Christians in Judea seems to have lapsed. Paul writes 2 Corinthians to warn them about the dangers of the super-apostles in the hope that they will 'make room for [him] in their hearts' (7.2), and 'fully acknowledge' (1.13) him on the day of the Lord Jesus. Again, this observation will help us read the letter as Paul intended. His concern is pastoral. He is not writing to the super-apostles, but to his friends the Corinthians who were in danger of being seduced by the super-apostles ministry. He is exposing the wolves because he desires to guard the flock. The primary application of the letter, therefore, will be to ourselves and not to false teachers. What kind of ministry do I like hearing? Am I in danger of slipping away from the gospel that I was taught? The drift might be quite subtle; the false teacher may use biblical vocabulary (11.4). Where are my allegiances?

At the same time, we will be challenged about our commitment to other Christians. A church that glories in strength and success will make little time and give little money to the marginalised and unsuccessful, even if they are Christians. Paul wants his Corinthian readers to emulate the poor Macedonian Christians who begged for the privilege of giving to other believers (8.2). He wants to see practical evidence of 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' (13.14) in the church. In this regard, the Apostle Paul himself is a great example to us. Throughout the letter he responds to the accusations of those who suggest that he does not love the Corinthians (a charge occasioned in part, paradoxically, by his refusal to accept their financial support for his personal use, e.g. 11.11; 12.13) by assuring them of the depth of his commitment to them (e.g. 6.11; 12.15). Do we love others as Paul did?

The super-apostles

What does the letter tell us about these men who were in danger of unsettling Paul's friends? The better we understand them, the more we will be able to recognise their contemporary equivalents.

a. Their identity

The super-apostles could not have seemed more 'kosher' to the Corinthians: they were 'Hebrews, Israelites, descendants of Abraham and servants of Christ' (11.22-23); they came with glowing 'letters of commendation' (3.1; cf. 10.12), and they had the credibility of large numbers (notice the 'many' in 11.18); they even taught about Jesus, the Spirit and the gospel (11.4). But for all their appearances and claimed experiences, Paul is clear that they were in fact 'false apostles, deceitful workmen' (11.13). They had the appearance of being apostles of Christ, but they were in fact servants of the devil (11.13-15). He calls them 'super-apostles' twice (11.5; 12.11), but the term is laced with irony – these men are 'without understanding' (10.12). Chillingly, Paul concludes that they are 'false brothers' (11.26), and says, 'their end will correspond to their deeds' (11.15).

b. Their criticisms of Paul

As we read through the letter, it is easy to see why the Corinthians might have been tempted to distance themselves from Paul. The attacks on his character and ministry were legion (some of these are explicit attacks, some more implicit):

- his letters are 'frightening' (10.9) and cause 'pain' (2.4; 7.8-9)
- his 'bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account' (10.10)
- he does not keep his word (1.17)
- his wisdom is 'according to the flesh' (1.12; ESV: worldly), as is his planning (1.17), and his ministerial weaponry (10.3)
- he may not even be a Christian (10.7; 13.3)
- he is weak, and his life is a catalogue of suffering (4.8-9; 11.21-13.4)
- he is not competent to be a minister of Christ (3.5-6)
- his most recent visit to the city had been a failure (2.1)
- he does not even accept money for his ministry (11.7; cf. 11.20; 12.13)
- he does not love the Corinthians (e.g. 11.11)

If Paul is going to rescue the Corinthians from the super-apostles inauthentic Christianity, he will need to re-establish his own credibility and authority as an Apostle of Christ. There is such a close connection between Paul (and his gospel) and the Lord Jesus that it is just not possible to be of Christ and to deny Paul. That is why 2 Corinthians is such a passionate and personal letter. It gives us more insight into Paul the man than any of his other letters, but his goal is not self-aggrandisement (he leaves that to the super-apostles). Rather his goal is that the Corinthians might once again embrace Paul and his message in order that he might on the last day present them as a pure virgin to Christ (11.2).

c. The root issue:

The commentators each come up with their own 'key verse(s)' for the letter. Some favour 1.12-14 – will the Corinthians fully acknowledge Paul and boast of his ministry? Others go for 5.7 – 'we live by faith and not by sight'. Others still think that 5.12 summarises the argument of the book: 'We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.' Others point to Paul's purpose statement in 13.9, 'For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.'

In reality, there may not be a single 'key verse' to 2 Corinthians, but when looked at together these verses begin to take us to the heart of the letter. The Corinthians are in danger of falling for the lies of the super-apostles and taking pride in outward appearance rather than what is in the heart. That is why they are beginning to distance themselves from Paul – who would support such a weak apostle?; it is also why they have stopped participating in the collection that Paul has launched to support the financially poor Christians in Jerusalem (chapters 8-9) – who would give money to such weak Christians? Paul longs for them to make room in their hearts for him (7.2), in order that they might be reconciled to God (5.20). Their financial commitment to the weak Christians of Jerusalem will therefore be a litmus test of their response to Paul and to God (8.7-8).

Perhaps we can push it even further by asking why the super-apostles were so fixated with externals like strength and confidence and success. Ultimately, it is because they are preaching a different Jesus (11.4). It looks as though they believe in a Jesus of 'glory' (cf. 3.6-18) without pain. They are ashamed of his sufferings, and therefore they are ashamed of the sufferings of His people and of the poor Christians in Judea. For the super-apostles, the message of glory was to be communicated by glorious and successful messengers. By contrast, Paul believed in a suffering Messiah (1.5). He knew that authentic Christians share in Christ's sufferings (1.5), 'carrying around his death' in their body (4.10). He believed that the glory lay exclusively in the message rather than in the messenger. For that reason, he was not ashamed of his sufferings, but rather boasted in them (12.9). He knew that God deliberately purposed to make Paul weak and to keep him weak in order that His own grace and power might be evident to all (4.7; 12.7, 9).

It is easy to see why the confidence, certainty, strength and success of the super-apostles might seem impressive and attractive to the suffering Christians (1.6) in Corinth. Who would not want a more powerful and dramatic experience of God? Paul writes to persuade the Corinthians that the 'Christianity' on offer from the super-apostles is not just a super-sized version of Paul's own faith, but a different religion altogether.

Purpose of the letter

In a sentence? How about this: 'Don't be fooled by appearances but live by faith, rejoicing in weakness, for Christ's grace is sufficient to make you strong.'

Application of the letter

Bible readers are not at liberty to invent their own applications of God's word. God wants to say to us today through 2 Corinthians the very same thing that He wanted to say to the Corinthians in the first century. To put it differently, the situation in Corinth, and Paul's intention as the author controls our application of the letter today.

The primary application of 2 Corinthians therefore is about our attitude to Paul and the Christianity that he teaches. Are we in danger of being seduced into a 'version' of Christianity that prides itself on externals rather than what is

in the heart? How much emphasis do we place on the strength, success, professionalism, rhetoric and personality of our Christians leaders? About the right amount, or a bit too much? If it is too much, what does that say about our understanding of Jesus? How much care and support do we give to poor Christians in other places? What evidence of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is there among us? Ponder some of these questions:

1. What does 2 Corinthians say to the 'celebrity Christian leader' culture of modern evangelicalism?
2. Which qualities do I esteem in Christian leaders? How do I pray for my Christian leaders? What would I think of my church leader if he told me he was despairing even of life itself (1.8)? Why?
3. How do I gauge the 'successfulness' of a church or Christian ministry? Do I think of my church as a 'successful' church? By what criteria do I make that judgement?
4. What are the things I value about my church at the moment? What are the things that I would like to change? What do my answers to these questions tell you about my values and beliefs?
5. How do I feel about my own afflictions as a Christian? How do I respond when God uses external circumstances or internal anxiety to show me my weakness?
6. Am I in personal danger of taking pride in external things (a) in life, and (b) as a Christian?
7. Do I live by faith or by sight? Do I long for the new creation?
8. What does my use of money say about my priorities?
9. Is there any sin of which I need to repent (12.21)? Am I in the faith (13.5)?

At the same time, we need to remember that Paul views his own ministry as an example for other Christians to emulate (1 Corinthians 11.1). In 2 Corinthians he speaks to us very personally and passionately about his own ministry – he lays his heart bare and tells us of some of the motivations and convictions that persuade him to persevere in ministry. We should expect therefore, as we read this letter, that we will ourselves be motivated to 'proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord' (4.5). It will be good for us to ask, 'How does my ministry compare to the ministry of the Apostle Paul? In which ways should it look the same? In which ways might it look different?' Thinking about my own ministry (and every Christian has a ministry of one kind or another) is not the primary application of this letter, but at the same time, it will never be too far from the surface. In this regard, it will be good to ask:

1. Do I proclaim Christ as Lord, and myself as a servant?
2. Am I willing to sacrifice myself in service of others (12.15)?
3. Am I willing to choose a path of suffering for the good of another's soul?
4. What motivates me to proclaim Christ? How do my motivations compare with Paul's?
5. What steps am I taking to present my brothers and sisters to Christ 'as a pure virgin' on the last day (11.2)?

2 Corinthians 1.1-14

Introduction

The Corinthians were beginning to take pride in what is seen, rather than what is in the heart (5.12); they were living by sight, and not by faith (5.7). Their ungodly emphasis on strength, power and oratory was causing some to begin to distance themselves from the very average-looking Apostle Paul – he looked weak, his speech was of no account (10.10), he suffered wherever he went (11.23-29) and even his travel plans came to nothing (1.17). Paul responds to the situation with the most passionate and personal of all his letters. He longs for them to renew their allegiance to him (1.12-14; 6.13; 7.2), to the weak-looking poor Christians in Jerusalem (8.7-8) and above all to God (5.20).

In this opening passage, we get a taste of Paul's approach to the whole letter. He will not be embarrassed about his sufferings (1.8), but will boast in them (11.30) because of the good things that come from them. Specifically, they make Paul dependent on the comfort that comes from God alone, and because they enable him to serve the Corinthians. Ultimately, Paul knows that it is God's purpose to keep him weak in order that the glory might go to Christ (4.7). He ends the section by calling upon the Corinthians to acknowledge him fully (1.13), despite his weakness.

Structure

1.1-2	Opening greeting
1.3-11	God uses our afflictions for good
3-7	Praise God for comforting us so that we can comfort others
8-11	Praise God that he uses even the greatest afflictions for good
1.12-14	Take pride therefore in your weak apostle

Text notes

1. Opening Greeting, 1.1-2

New Testament readers are often tempted to skip over the initial greeting, thinking it to be generic, but when we read the greeting in the light of the whole letter, we observe how carefully Paul chose his words in each situation. Here in 2 Corinthians, we learn about Paul, the Corinthian church, and the church's need.

a) The Apostle Paul

Paul's own authority had already been in question in Corinth (1 Cor 9.1); now, opposition to him had hardened under the influence of the super-apostles. He begins the letter, therefore, by reasserting his own credentials. The super-apostles were self-commending (10.12; 3.1) peddlers of God's word (2.17), but Paul was an Apostle by the will of God. As such, he was at liberty to exercise his authority among them (13.10), and would not be afraid to do so (13.2), if necessary. Because he is appointed by God, Paul knows that he is accountable to God alone, and not to the court of Corinthian public opinion. He does not write 2 Corinthians because he is concerned about his own popularity, but because he is concerned about the Corinthians' own spiritual welfare (12.19). (Timothy is identified as the co-sender of the letter to demonstrate that Paul is not an isolated maverick, but he was probably not a co-author.)

b) The Corinthian church

Paul describes the Corinthians as, 'the church of God.' Because they belong to the very same God who willed Paul to be an apostle, they should take pride in him, remembering that they do not belong to the super-apostles, but to God alone. Paul Barnett draws out the irony of the description by asking 'How could the church of God be in such a godless city and be so divided a community of professed believers? It seems likely that there were a series of splinter groups with points of difference as great if not greater than points of agreement. One group was interested in the 'judaizing' message of the 'false apostles' (11.4), while another was involved in impurity & sexual immorality (12.21), and probably in worship in the local cults (6.14-7.1). Nonetheless, Paul addresses them solemnly as an entity, as the church of God, very probably to encourage them to become what God graciously saw them to be.' (Paul Barnett, 2 Corinthians, p60).

The letter is also addressed to the other churches in Achaia – partly because the collection for the Christians in

Jerusalem will be from all the churches in Achaia (9.2), partly to humble the proud Corinthians, and partly to remind us that Paul's letter is of universal significance. He refers to the Achaian believers as 'saints' – those who have been set apart from the world for God's service. It is no longer appropriate therefore for them to view things from a worldly point of view (5.16); rather they should separate themselves decisively from all evil (6.14-7.1).

c) The church's need

Paul wishes the Corinthian Christians grace and peace. Paul will later end the letter by reminding the Corinthians that God is a God of peace, and encouraging them to live at peace with each other (13.11), be reconciled to Him, and demonstrate their love in the collection for the relief of the saints in Jerusalem. 'Grace' will become a key theme of the letter. Paul wants the Corinthians to grow in grace (1.15; 13.14) and renew their allegiance to God lest they transpire to have received the grace of God in vain (6.1). It will be the grace of Jesus Himself (8.9), which is sufficient (12.9) which alone will enable them to boast in weakness and take pride in what is in the heart.

2. God uses our afflictions for good, 1.3-11

i. Praise God for comforting us so that we can comfort others, 1.3-7

Afflictions are not a source of shame to Paul; ultimately, they are a source of praise to God, whom Paul describes as the 'Father of mercies' and the 'God of all comfort' – God who watched His own Son suffer will not be without sympathy or assistance for His suffering people. (Comfort is used extensively in this section and repeatedly in the letter. It is likely that the word is used with reference to its background in Isaiah (cf. 40.1; 49.13; 51.3, 12, 19; 52.9; 61.2, and 66.13). If so, it refers in 2 Corinthians not just to sympathy and kindness but to the blessings that come from the gospel.) Specifically, Paul gives thanks that his own suffering results in comfort for the Corinthians. Think of it as a 'suffering & comfort' chain. As Paul suffers (described as sharing 'abundantly' in Christ's sufferings in v5), he experiences God's comfort (notice that this equally abundant comfort comes to Paul through Christ, rather than apart from him, v5). Paul is thereby equipped to pass on God's comfort to the Corinthians when they suffer (v4, 6). That is, he can praise God, despite all his suffering, for he knows that it results in the Corinthians' comfort and salvation. As readers of his letters, we too can praise God that He used Paul's suffering to equip him to pass on the comforts of the gospel to us.

ii. Praise God that he uses even the greatest afflictions for good, 1.8-11

Paul now expands a little on the nature of his 'abundant' suffering (he will do so again in 4.7-11 and 11.23-33), and on the nature of the comfort that he received from God. His suffering in Asia was not trivial. Indeed, it burdened him far beyond the limits of his own 'strength', so much so that he despaired of life. The wording is particularly telling in the 'strength-obsessed' Corinthian context. Perhaps in part because of their own sufferings (v6), the Corinthians were attracted by the powerful-sounding ministry of the super-apostles. But, in reality, the super-apostles have nothing to say to Christians who know that they are weak. Paul on the other hand can testify that even when he despaired of life itself, good came from his afflictions. In particular, God allowed him to suffer in order to cause him to rely on God rather than himself (v9), and to foster in him a greater hope for the last day (v10 – Paul has experienced the deliverance of which he speaks already, and may do so again in this life, but even if he does not, he knows that he will experience it in the next). Further, as Paul suffered, so it strengthened the community of God's people by causing them to pray for Paul (v11) and, in time, to give thanks for God's blessing of him. Thus, Paul's afflictions produced faith (v9), hope (v10) and love (v11); the comfort he received was spread in turn to others.

3. Take pride therefore in your weak apostle, 1.12-14

Paul's ministry may not be marked by the sort of power that the world loves (although 12.12), but unlike the super-apostles who were disgraceful and under-handed (4.2) and relied on the wisdom of the world as they peddled the word of God for profit (2.17), his ministry was marked by simplicity, by godly sincerity and by the grace of God (v12) – qualities which were abundantly evident to all, even when Paul suffered (v13). His weakness, therefore, did not undermine his credibility as an apostle and teacher, but rather enhanced it. Paul's hope is that the Corinthians will have been persuaded of the blessings that have flowed to them (v6) as a result of his suffering and will therefore be assured of his commitment to them and take pride in him, despite the accusations of the super-apostles, and despite his weakness. In many ways, these verses give us the aim of the whole letter. In the light of the Day of the Lord (which dominates Paul's perspective throughout the letter), they challenge those Christians who are a little,

'yes, but...' in their allegiance to Paul.

Application:**1. Weakness & suffering**

It is very easy to view weakness and suffering as wholly negative. Many of us think that God owes us at least 70 years of unbroken happiness and health; we are quick to doubt his goodness when we suffer, and try to build heaven for ourselves on earth. Paul viewed his own afflictions very differently (it is gospel suffering that is primarily, though perhaps not exclusively, in view). He knew that God chose to keep him weak for Paul's own good (so that he might grow in faith and hope) and for the good of others (so that he might in turn comfort them with the comfort he had received from God). How do I view my own afflictions? And how do I respond to the suffering of my Christian friends? Is suffering a problem, or an opportunity for growth and thanksgiving? And where do I look for comfort when I suffer – to the comfort that comes through Christ (v5), or to the world?

2. Paul & his authority

Still today, Paul's authority is questioned, even in 'evangelical' churches. What would a contemporary church look like that acknowledged Paul only partially? What would a church look like that acknowledged Paul fully? Similarly, what would a church look like that was obsessed with strength and power? How different would that church look if it began to take pride in weakness?

Aim Take pride in Paul, despite his weakness, because God uses weakness for good.

2 Corinthians 1.15-2.13

Context

The opening verses of the letter introduced us to its major themes. Will we be Christians who glory in the 'externals' of strength and power and success, or will we be Christians who take pride in what is in the heart – even able to give thanks for the good that comes from our afflictions? 'Super-apostles' had infiltrated the church in Corinth and were corrupting their value systems – so much so that the Corinthians were tempted to distance themselves from their weak-looking Apostle. In 1.12-14 Paul called for the Corinthians to acknowledge him fully. In this passage he aims to neutralise the suspicion and prejudice against him that had been caused by his changed itinerary. He is not fickle, he is a faithful servant of the faithful God whose desire is to serve the Corinthians.

Structure

- 1.15-22 Paul is not fickle, but faithful!
- 1.15-17 Paul's faithfulness asserted
- 1.18-22 Paul's faithfulness guaranteed by God's faithfulness
- 1.23-2.13 Paul is not nasty, but loving!
- 1.23-2.4 Why Paul wrote instead of returning to Corinth
- 2.5-13 The positive outcome of Paul's strategy

Text notes

1. Paul is not fickle, but faithful! 1.15-22

i) Paul's faithfulness asserted, 1.15-17

Paul's integrity (upon which he prides himself, v12) is under attack: is he all talk and no action? Does he say one thing and do another? The attack springs from changes that Paul had been forced to make to his travel plans. In 1 Corinthians 16.5-6, he had told them of his intention to spend the winter with them after his time in Macedonia ('if the Lord permits' – 1 Cor 16.7). There is some confusion about how many different sets of plans Paul then had! What is clear is that he did make a painful visit (2.1) to them, which went so badly that Paul cancelled a scheduled visit, and wrote them a 'severe letter' instead.

Paul's opponents seized on the change of plans and accused him of 'vacillating' and making his plans 'according to the flesh' (v17 – cf. the use of the same word in v12, where it is translated 'earthly' by the ESV) – in other words, while he said, 'Yes, yes' (I am coming back soon), he really meant, 'No, no' (I am not coming back until much later). Were the Corinthians worried that Paul does not really care about them? If so, the triple 'you' of v16 would reassure them of how central they had been to Paul's plans. Paul denies the accusations against him emphatically by asking two questions which, grammatically, only permit the answer, 'No'. His earlier boast stands: his conscience bears witness that he has acted to them with godly sincerity, and in accordance with the grace of God.

ii) Paul's faithfulness guaranteed by God's faithfulness, 1.18-22

Slightly surprisingly, Paul now continues his defence by arguing that God's own faithfulness guarantees the fidelity of Paul's 'word' to the Corinthians. Thus, these verses are not an abstract theological digression about God's faithfulness, as many assume, but are in fact central to Paul's self-defence: as surely as God Himself is faithful (Numbers 23.19), so too is Paul's 'word' (v18). Paul supplies two pieces of evidence to back up the claim.

First, Paul did not preach a message about a vacillating saviour, but about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in whom is fulfilled every single promise of God (vv. 19-20). If Paul had faithfully preached a 'word' about a faithful God and saviour (and the Corinthians knew that he had), why would they doubt his 'word' now? (Paul's comment about Jesus as the fulfilment of God's promise may also be a 'dig' at the super-apostles, who seem to have had a misplaced emphasis on the OT – 3.7-18).

Second, God has been and is now at work in both Paul and the Corinthians. In the past, he 'anointed' them – lit. he 'christed' them for his service; he 'sealed' them – a mark of ownership; and he gave to them His Spirit as a 'guarantee' – lit. a deposit / first instalment who guarantees their future salvation. All three of these works

happened at their conversion. Now, in the present, and on the basis of that past work, God is 'establishing' them (the verb refers to an ongoing action) 'in Christ.' Two questions follow. First, if God worked in them so decisively through the ministry of the Apostle Paul, why do they question him now? Second, if God is working in both Paul and the Corinthians, establishing them together in Christ, how can they now tolerate any division between them and their apostle?

[This passage contains many interesting theological insights about the faithfulness of God and the work of God the Trinity in the life of the believer. We must remember, however, that the passage was included in the letter not as an abstract theological treatise but to defend Paul against his accusers. The primary application must follow the same lines.]

2. Paul is not nasty, but loving! 1.23-2.13

In this section, Paul continues his defence against the charge of vacillation by explaining his motivation for changing his travel plans. The argument proceeds in two stages:

i. Why Paul wrote instead of returning to Corinth, 1.23-2.4

Having earlier called his conscience as a witness on his behalf (1.12), Paul now calls the faithful God Himself as his next witness for the defence (v23, cf. 1.18). He did not fail to return to Corinth because he was worldly-minded or because he did not care for the Corinthians, but because he wanted to spare them (v23) from the sort of disciplinary confrontation which had proved necessary on his previous, painful visit (2.3; 12.21-13.3). His goal was not to serve himself, but them – just as the Lord Jesus has commanded (Mark 10.35-45). His aim was for their 'joy' (an eschatological blessing (Rom 14.17), temporally anticipated (Gal 5.22)).

Another element of Paul's thought emerges in verse 2: just as the joy of the Corinthians came from Paul's ministry (1.24), so too his own joy came from their maturing faith (2.2). He had wanted to avoid another painful visit to them for fear that another round of church discipline would have ruptured their relationship with him terminally. That would have been bad for Paul personally, as well as for the Corinthians themselves.

Having explained why he did not visit, Paul now explains why he wrote instead. His goal was positive as well as negative. Yes, he wanted to avoid the pain of a visit, but he also wanted to express his 'abundant love' for them (Paul's love for the Corinthians is also expressed at 8.7; 11.11 and 12.15), and something of his anxiety for them (2.4) in order that in time both parties might know 'joy' as a result of the Corinthians' unequivocal allegiance to Christ. (You may like to follow through other uses of 'abundance' in the letter – nearly all are linked with love: 1.5; 4.15; 7.4, 13, 15; 8.2, 7, 14, 15; 9.8, 12; 10.15; 11.23; 12.15.)

(Paul will need to explain the integrity of his motivations repeatedly in this letter: cf. 2.17; 4.2; 5.11; 11.10, 31; 12.6, 19. For the faithful minister, it seems, there is no distinction between 'public office' and 'private life' – his motives matter as much as his message. Thus Paul is commended by his love, and makes himself a slave to the Corinthians. Conversely, the false apostles not only proclaim a false Jesus (11.4), but make slaves of their hearers (11.20).)

ii. The positive outcome of Paul's strategy, 2.5-13

As Paul waited for news of how his letter had been received, he was deeply anxious (2.12). Perhaps then, he was as surprised as we are (in view of Paul's defensive tone up to this point) that the letter seemed to have had much of its desired effect. Paul's non-appearance had been controversial (1.12, 15-17, 23), but it was ultimately effective (cf. 7.4-16).

This paragraph is concerned with the relationships between Paul, the Corinthians, and 'a man' (v5) who had acted inappropriately towards Paul (probably during his failed visit; cf. 7.12). Although the man's displeasure was directed at Paul personally, Paul insists that it was damaging to all the Corinthians (v5). Eventually, it seems, the 'majority' (v6) of the Corinthians had agreed and had decided to discipline the guilty man. But whereas they had once seemed reluctant to discipline, now it seems that they are reluctant to draw a line under proceedings. Thus Paul tells them that the man has paid sufficiently for his offence (vv.'s 6-8), and that, now that the Corinthians had demonstrated their obedience to God (v9), it was time for active reconciliation with him, lest the evil one get a foothold (vv.'s 9-11). Just as Paul refused to visit, and had then written the severe letter for the Corinthians' sake, so too now he is willing to forgive for their sake as well (v10). How can they question the loyalty or faithfulness of an

Apostle who, at every stage, has acted for their best interests and because he loves them?

If anyone were to question Paul's affection for them, verses 12-13 provide further evidence that they would be wrong to do so. While in Troas, an 'open door' for gospel ministry was presented to Paul. But so deep was his inner turmoil about the Corinthian situation as he waited for Titus to bring news of how the church in Corinth had responded to his letter, and so great was his concern for them personally, that he was unable to minister in Troas. Instead he travelled to Macedonia. Perhaps some in Corinth were suggesting that he loved the Macedonians more than he loved them – and that that was why he had spent longer with the Macedonians than he had with them. Again, such accusations are misplaced. Paradoxically, it was the depth of Paul's love for the Corinthians that made him travel to Macedonia.

Application

The Apostle Paul & me:

The primary application of a passage that seeks to defend the Apostle Paul's reputation must be to do with our attitude to Paul. In His wisdom, God included this passage in the Bible because He wanted to refine our attitude to His apostle. What sort of image do I have of Paul? Like the Corinthians, do I think him weak and vacillating? Or maybe, like the liberal wing of the church, do I consider him harsh and unloving? Both images will be blown out of the water by this passage. Paul is the faithful messenger of the faithful God. Any distance that exists between me and Paul also exists between me and God.

My minister & me:

What do I look for in my church leaders? By what criteria do I judge them? Do I trust them and give them the benefit of the doubt, or am I quick to question and criticise their judgements? Am I more concerned about what my minister does for me personally than what he does for the gospel?

Me & those to whom I minister:

On a secondary level, it is also true to say that my own ministry (in my family, among my friends and at church) should emulate that of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 11.1). Does my conscience testify to my own integrity (1.12)? Would I be able to call God as a witness in support of my motivations in my ministry? Am I as concerned for the spiritual well-being of those whom the Lord has entrusted to me as Paul was? Do I have an 'abundant love' for my small group?

2 Corinthians 2.14-3.6

Context

Up until this point, Paul has given a rather depressing account of his ministry. He has told us of:

- the great hardships that he suffered in Asia ('we despaired of life itself' 1.8-10)
- the severe criticisms that have been levelled against his personal integrity (1.12-14)
- the specific charge of 'vacillating' about his travel plans (1.15-2.4)
- the painful aftermath of his church discipline in Corinth (2.5-11)
- his inability to settle into preaching the gospel in Troas Corinth – not just because he missed Titus' friendship but because he was so anxious to learn from Titus how the Corinthians were getting on spiritually (2.12-13).

Paul returns to the subject of Titus in 7.5, which seems to 'follow on' from 2.13, causing some to suggest that 2.14-7.4 is in fact a later insertion into the letter by a different author. Much better is to realise that Paul deliberately waits before telling of Titus' encouraging report in 7.5 so that he can give a fuller answer to the questions raised in 1.12-14. Is Paul a faithful minister of the gospel or not? Indeed, what constitutes a faithful 'apostolic' ministry? By what criteria should a ministry be evaluated? How powerful does true ministry look? What sort of results does it produce?

Paul's aim in this section of the letter, therefore, is to teach the Corinthians about authentic Christian ministry in order that they might see for themselves that they ought to acknowledge him fully (1.12-14). While it is true that this defence of his ministry is written in the light of the super-apostles' challenges and accusations (e.g. 5.12), we should beware of making too much of his opponents at this stage of the letter. Paul's writing here is positive – he will spell out the negative implications much more directly and with much greater force when he turns on the super-apostles in chapters 10-13.

(Remember that Paul does not want the Corinthians to 'boast' (1.14) of him because he is proud. Rather, he knows that if the Corinthians set themselves apart from Paul and his ministry, they are in fact setting themselves apart from God. Paul therefore teaches them about his true, authentic ministry in order that they might make room in their heart for Paul (7.2) and 'be reconciled to God' (5.20)).

Structure

2.14-17	True gospel ministry is 'triumphant'
3.1-3	True gospel ministry is 'commended'
3.4-6	True gospel ministry is 'new covenant' ministry

Text notes

1. True gospel ministry is triumphant, 2.14-17

The tone of the letter becomes much more positive with the 'Thanks be to God' of v14 (surprisingly so, in view of 1.3.2-13). The metaphor is of a triumphant Roman military procession in which the defeated soldiers were led in shame behind the victor – and so bring glory not to themselves, but to the victorious general. We are to notice both who leads the procession, and the part that Paul plays in proceedings.

i) The victory of Christ

There would have been very few more impressive sights in the ancient world than that of a conquering army returning home from battle to parade through the streets of the city. The whole town would have turned out to cheer the victorious soldiers. All eyes would have been drawn in particular to the leader of the army as the crowds saluted him – his was the victory, his the might, his the power. Paul borrows the imagery, and gives thanks to God for Jesus, the Christ, the Mighty King who reigns victorious over all through his resurrection from the dead. The 'triumph' of true gospel ministry is that of Jesus.

ii) The humiliation of the messenger

By contrast, Paul and others are 'led' in the procession. The BDAG lexicon (following the REB) glosses the

phrase, 'But thanks be to God who continually leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession.' That is, Paul sees himself not as one of the victorious generals (that role belongs to Christ alone), but as one of the prisoners – a defeated and chained enemy who brings glory to the king by being publicly shamed. (The same phrase is used in Colossians 2.15 of Christ's triumph over the devil at the cross.) The imagery is incredibly striking: while Christ is utterly triumphant, Paul is utterly humiliated. Any hint of 'triumphalism' in Christian ministry will always be wide of the mark.

During these processions it was customary for sweet-smelling incense to be offered in thanks to the gods of the conquering army. Again, Paul borrows the imagery with telling effect: the way that God chooses to spread the knowledge of Himself in the world is through humiliated gospel workers as they persevere in living and speaking faithfully for Jesus (2.14b). Such ministers inevitably (note the 'always' and 'everywhere' of v14) divide those who 'smell them' – some find life itself in their message and are saved; others find only death and are condemned to face the second death (2.15). Christian ministry will never be universally popular therefore – it produces responses as polarized as heaven and hell.

In this context, it's not surprising that Paul asks the question 'Who is sufficient for these things?' As those who 'imitate Paul', we are meant to be feeling overwhelmed by the enormous weight of responsibility of gospel work. From the human perspective, it is as our friends respond to us and our message that their eternal destiny is sealed. Who indeed is sufficient for that level of responsibility? The question itself is not answered until 3.5. All Paul does at present is to remind them that in this whole process they are looking to God rather than their own personal gain, as some do. Authentic ministry therefore brings knowledge of Christ even through the appearance of suffering and death and leads to the triumph of God being made known in the world.

2. True gospel ministry is commended, 3:1-3

The question here is: how is the true minister 'authenticated' to his hearers? The answer is that he is authenticated both by his love for those among whom he ministers (verse 2), and by the results of his ministry (verse 3).

Verse 1 speaks of two different sorts of 'letter of commendation.'

i) Letters to the Corinthians:

'Some' (probably the same group as the 'many' peddlers of the word in 2.17) produce letters of commendation (probably from the church in Jerusalem) that vouch for their own authenticity (not dissimilar to a reference on a C.V.). The Corinthians seem to have been expecting something similar from Paul – it looks as though he has been under attack for not providing any letters of commendation of his own.

Paul replies to this point in verse 2: his love for them (they are written on his heart) which was evident to all is sufficient authentication of his ministry to the Corinthians.

ii) Letters from the Corinthians:

Again, it seems to have been customary for travelling preachers to request a 'letter of commendation' to take with them to their next port of call. It seems as though the Corinthians were piqued that Paul had requested no such letter from them.

Paul replies to this point in verse 3: the true minister does not commend himself (cf. 10.12), or get others to commend him – rather he is commended by the results of his ministry. Paul says that if anyone needs proof of the authenticity of his own ministry, all they need to do is to look at the existence of the church in Corinth. His point is deliberately polemic: while 'some' point to letters written by human beings for their legitimacy, he can point to the Corinthians – a letter written by Christ Himself, of which Paul was merely the postman (3.3a)!

The rest of verse 3 is a gloss on Ezekiel 36.26-7 where human ministry is associated with the law and results in hearts which are as hard as the tablets of stone upon which the law was written. Authentic ministry, on the other hand, is by the Spirit who transforms hearts of stone to hearts of flesh and writes inwardly on them. The Corinthians' conversion evidences Paul's legitimacy as a minister.

3. True gospel ministry is new covenant ministry, 3.4-6

Paul now answers the question that he raised in 2.16. No human being, in and of themselves could ever be competent for such an eternally significant ministry. Remarkably however, God, by his gospel and by his Spirit 'has made us competent to be ministers of the new covenant about which Ezekiel prophesied. This is astonishing: though, like Paul, we are weak, humiliated captives, God, by the gospel, equips us, as he equipped Paul, to be agents of eternal life in his world. The Christian's confidence in ministry therefore is never in ourselves but in God, who by his Spirit can use our feeble efforts to bring eternal life to sinners. (We will see much more about the contrast between the ministry of the letter and the ministry of the Spirit next week when we study verses 7-18.)

Main points and applications:

Throughout this section, Paul is seeking to give us a right understanding of gospel ministry principally in order that we may take pride in him, our Apostle, and be better equipped to spot fake ministers, but also, so that we may imitate him in our own ministry (1 Cor 11.1).

1. Evaluate Christian ministry in the right way

How am I to test whether a Christian minister / ministry is 'faithful'. Other parts of the Bible have much to say about the message that is being proclaimed – is this person twisting God's word, or are they a faithful workman? Indeed, Paul himself will apply this test in 4.1-6. Here, however, he points us in a different and surprising direction. Authentic ministry, says Paul, comes from the heart and is validated by its results – you will know that a gospel ministry is faithful because it will produce authentic gospel fruit in people's lives. Positively, we are to be thankful therefore for every conversion, every evidence of growth (Paul will return to this theme in chapter 7). Negatively, we are not to look for human commendation or trust in human methodology, and we are to be wary of those Christian ministers who make a point of parading their spiritual CV's in public.

At the same time, we notice the deep affection that Paul has for the Corinthians – he can describe them as a letter written on his own heart. It is easy for the 'successful' Christian minister to be more committed to his own ministry platform than to the people among whom he ministers. Perhaps Paul had spotted this deficiency in the super-apostles? Certainly, 2 Corinthians is giving us a glimpse into the heart of Paul. He is not a cold and heartless rhetorician, but one who carries around in his body a great anxiety for the churches (11.28) because he loves them so much.

2. Have the right expectations of Christian ministry

Do not expect Christian ministry to be one long triumphant march in which, if you do it right, everyone will love you. By contrast, the true minister expects to be paraded like a conquered and shamed slave. Wonderfully, however, it is precisely as we suffer that we are involved in a work of glorious, eternal significance. It is as we suffer that God spreads the knowledge of him everywhere.

Be confident that as the message of Jesus is made known through us, it will bring life to those being saved; don't be surprised that it will also bring death to those perishing. Keep preaching it.

3. Be confident that you are equipped by God for this ministry.

Many Christians feel inadequate much of the time about the ministry that God has given them to do. They are right to do so: when we consider the significance of the ministry that God has given His people to do, we can only ask, 'Who is sufficient for these things?' But we are wrong if we never get past our feelings of inadequacy, because God has made all His people competent for this task – not by means of our own natural abilities and personality, but by His gospel. Our sufficiency for gospel ministry (of every kind) comes not from ourselves or from others but from the God who empowers us and the Spirit who himself brings life to those amongst whom we work.

Main theme

Be confident that authentic gospel ministry, though costly and opposed, will bring gospel fruit and glorify God. Trust the Spirit, therefore, not human methodology.

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

Context

From 2.14 all the way to 7.4, Paul is seeking to give the Corinthians a right understanding of gospel ministry in order that they might both take pride in him and be able to spot impostors in their midst. Paul wants them to take pride in him, a faithful minister of godly sincerity (1.12), and to distance themselves from 'some' who 'peddle' God's word for profit (2.17). His ministry is authenticated by his love for the Corinthians and their own changed lives – the ministry of the others relies on letters of human commendation.

In last week's passage, Paul introduced us (3.6) to a contrast between an old covenant, law-based ministry that produces death and a new covenant, Spirit-empowered ministry that gives life. It is very likely that he introduced the contrast because the message of his opponents focused on the 'the letter of the law', and claimed to be 'glorious'. Paul now develops the contrast between these two ministries even further by using Exodus 34:29-35. His aim is to show why this new covenant ministry is even more glorious than the ministry of Moses, and why, despite enormous difficulties, he does not lose heart (cf. 4:1).

Structure

- 3.7-11 Be confident in a ministry more glorious than Moses' ministry
- 3.12-18 Be bold because in Christ the veil is taken away

Text notes

1. Be confident in a ministry more glorious than Moses' ministry, verses 7-11

The key word in this section is 'glory' (it comes 10x in these 5 verses), as Paul argues that new covenant ministry is even more glorious than the highly privileged ministry of Moses himself. There is no doubt that Moses' ministry was glorious – Exodus 34.29-32 describes how time in God's presence caused Moses' face to shine as he came down the mountain to deliver the law to the people. Paul adds that the 'glory' of Moses' ministry was so great that the people of Israel 'could not look' at his face (v7). Three contrasts, however, demonstrate that Paul's new covenant ministry is even more glorious:

- a) the ministry of the Spirit is more glorious than the ministry that brought death (v7-8) because
- b) the ministry that brings righteousness is more glorious than ministry that condemns (v9) and more than that
- c) the ministry which lasts is more glorious than the ministry which faded away (v10-11)

There can be no comparison at all between a ministry which is based on the old covenant and one which comes from the new, for the old covenant's ministry, based on a law which condemned sinners, brought death, and faded away at the coming of Christ and the dawn of the age of the Spirit. New covenant ministry by contrast is carried out in the power of the Spirit, it rightly relates people to God and will never end because it won't be superseded.

We can summarise Paul's contrast (which began at verse 3) in the following table:

	Old covenant ministry	New covenant ministry
Location, v3	Tablets of stone	Tablets of human heart
Means, v3	Written with ink	Written with the Spirit
End, v6	The letter kills	The Spirit gives life
Result, v9	Condemnation	Righteousness / justification
Duration, v10-11	Temporary	Permanent

Paul's point is not that the ministry of Moses was inglorious; but simply that new covenant ministry has an even greater glory. The contrast demonstrates a surprising paradox inherent within new covenant ministry: on the one hand the minister is humiliated, weak and suffers; on the other hand, his ministry is more productive, more effective and more lasting than the ministry of the man who wrote the first five books of the Bible.

Some may seek to denigrate the significance of new covenant ministry and to draw us off after a more

(superficially) exciting type of ministry. Specifically, in Corinth, some seem to have been advocating a return to old covenant ministry. The weakness of Paul and of the poor Christians in Jerusalem was tempting the Corinthians to switch allegiance from Paul to these 'old covenant advocates'. The Corinthians needed to remember, therefore, that new covenant ministry, though it seems weak, is in fact more glorious than Moses' ministry. The lesson for us is the same – we can have confidence (v4) in such a glorious ministry!

2. Be bold because in Christ the veil is taken away, verses 12-18

Paul moves in this section from a general contrast between old and new covenant ministry to focus on the messengers and recipients of the two ministries. As he does so, the background moves to Exodus 34.33-35 and the key word is 'veil'.

Paul's aim here is to explain why the 'hope' outlined in verses 7-11 leads to the 'boldness' of verse 12 (see also 4.1). He does it by contrasting the old covenant messenger Moses and the old covenant recipients Israel with new covenant recipients and new covenant messengers.

The messenger of the old covenant had a limited ministry, verse 13:

Verse 13 is difficult, but the simplest reading is that the veil on Moses' face not only stopped the Israelites from gazing at the glory of his ministry (demonstrated in his shining face) but also that it prevented them from observing the temporary nature of his ministry (as his face faded over time).

The recipients of old covenant ministry remain 'veiled', verses 14-15

Paul speaks now of a different, figurative 'veil' which prevents the recipients of old covenant ministry (in any generation) from 'beholding the glory of the Lord'. Old covenant ministry can do nothing to overcome the 'hardened minds' (v14) and 'covered hearts' (v15) of people who read the law. That 'veil' can only be removed by Christ Himself.

New covenant messengers & recipients

By contrast, in Christ, both recipients and messengers of new covenant ministry are transformed. Whenever someone turns to the Lord Jesus, the 'inner veil' on their heart and mind is removed forever. The result is that every Christian has the permanent freedom (v17) to behold the glory of the Lord (v18a).

This freedom to behold the glory of the Lord has a dramatic impact on Christians as it continually transforms us into the likeness of Christ. Just as Moses exhibited something of the Lord's glory in his shining face after speaking with the Lord, so now Christians are made more and more like our glorious Lord as we behold his glory in Christ. But whereas the 'glory' of Moses faded over time, the 'glory' of the Christian increases as God works, by His Spirit, to transform us. It is interesting to note that Paul expects to see ongoing growth and transformation in the lives of Christians. All who truly behold the glory of the Lord will reflect that glory.

The telling observation in the Corinthian context, however, is that a 'glorious' Christian will not look outwardly impressive in the world's eyes. They will not look like the super-apostles; in reality, they will look like the Jesus who suffered and died, and like Jesus' apostle, Paul, who was weak and opposed.

Main points and applications:

1. Be loyal

Paul's ministry may not look very impressive to human eyes; it may be under constant attack and its results may not look all that significant. But it remains a glorious ministry. Paul wants the Corinthians to reaffirm their allegiance to him. God wants us to do the same.

2. Be grateful

God has done a remarkable work in every Christian. By removing the veil of hardness from our heart and mind, he has given us the freedom to behold the glory of the Lord. He works in us still to transform us into the likeness of His Son.

3. Be bold

Christians are engaged in an amazingly glorious ministry. We do not need to be ashamed, or half-hearted or apologetic about telling others of Christ, because gospel ministry is glorious ministry. In fact, we are far more privileged than Moses himself. It will be worth stopping on that thought: when you sit in a coffee shop talking to a friend about Jesus, you are engaged in a ministry that is more glorious than the ministry that Moses had as he walked down the mountain carrying the 10 commandments on tablets of stone. There is nothing better or kinder that we could do than tell someone about Jesus, because only Christ is able to take away the veil of their own hardness and enable them also to behold the glory of the Lord.

4. Be expectant

As we come to know Jesus more, he will make us more like him. (The transformation in view is not primarily about our moral purity, but about our willingness to suffer as slaves of Christ in order that the fragrance of the gospel might through us be made known to the world.) The question is: do I have that expectation? Or do I settle for the status quo because I do not really believe that beholding the glory of the Lord in Jesus is a powerfully transforming experience?

Main point

New covenant ministry is glorious: it brings hope, freedom to behold the glory of the Lord and transformation to speaker and hearer alike. Therefore we do not lose heart; rather we are very bold.

2 Corinthians 4.1-6

Context

Throughout this section which runs from 2.14-7.4, Paul is clarifying the nature of true gospel ministry in order that the Corinthians will acknowledge him fully (1.13-14) and see the ministry of the super-apostles for what it is (5.12). In all this, Paul's concern is not for himself, but for the spiritual welfare of the Corinthians – he knows that insofar as the Corinthians fail to make room in their heart for him, they reveal themselves to be estranged from God (5.20). Paul is confident that the Corinthians will come good, spiritually speaking; he knows that a clear understanding of authentic Christian ministry will help them to do so.

Paul taught us in 2.14-17 that gospel ministry has a polarizing effect on those who hear it – to some the gospel is the fragrance of life, but to others it brings the stench of death. Authenticity is not defined therefore by letters of commendation, but by the genuine love of the minister and the transformation of the hearers. Further, authentic ministry is always 'glorious' (even when it does not look it and even when its hearers do not appreciate it), because only the Lord can remove the veil of blindness from the hearer. This section builds on the themes of 'glory' and 'veils', introduces another ground of Paul's commendation, and explains why Paul perseveres in ministry even though not everyone receives his message gladly.

Structure

Key principle	4.1	We do not lose heart
Implications:	4.2	... for our methodology
	4.3-4	... for our understanding of unbelief
	4.5-6	... for the nature of our proclamation

Text notes

We do not lose heart... verse 1

The temptation for the Christian minister to lose heart will undoubtedly come because of suffering, opposition, misunderstanding and the slow, unimpressive nature of gospel work. Paul knew that temptation personally – being humiliated (2.14) and being the stench of death to others (2.16) is not easy! Losing heart brings with it the temptation for the Christian minister to change methodology (by manipulating people or distorting the message – 4.2), to downplay the role of Satan in the world (by thinking the results are down to me – 4.3-4), and to preach themselves (rather than Christ as Lord, and self as servant – 4.5). But Paul does not lose heart because he knows that God, in His great mercy, has given him a share in a hugely privileged and glorious ministry (3.7-18).

The Corinthians can have confidence in an Apostle who sticks to his guns like that!

Implications:

1. For our methodology, verse 2:

It is easy when things are going well to do things right. But when they are going 'wrong', the temptation soon comes to do things differently. Many ministers (not to mention politicians!) seem happy to stoop to any depths to win allegiance, but Paul has decisively renounced 'disgraceful, underhanded' methods of ministry (Paul may have financial matters partly in view – 2.17). In particular, he refuses to 'practise cunning' or to 'tamper with God's word'. Both phrases amount to the same meaning:

- 'Cunning' was the tactic of Satan in the Garden (according to 11.3) who doubted, distorted, and even denied God's word (Gen 3.1-6).
- 'Tampering with God's word' involves any change to God's that word by denial, misrepresentation, or adaptation. Again, some 'ministers' (& politicians!) say one thing to one person, and another thing to another – whatever their audience wants to hear.

Every Christian will know the temptation to gloss over the elements of the gospel that sound harsh, to highlight the bits that sound appealing, or to adapt the message to make it sound more palatable. But the message of Christian

ministers is bound by God himself – it is His word. The role of the minister is not to be popular, but faithful.

In contrast to those who 'peddle' God's word (2.17), Paul will ensure that his own integrity and godly sincerity is on display to all by setting forth the truth plainly and intelligibly. By so doing, Paul 'commends' (same word as 3.1 etc) himself to all. Thus, his love, his message, and its results all commend Paul as an authentic gospel minister – the Corinthians should now be 'able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is on the heart' (5.12).

2. For our understanding of unbelief, verses 3-4

Paul knows that his role as the aroma of Christ will not result in life for all. Those who are being saved will rejoice in his message of life. But those who are perishing will discern only the smell of death in Paul's message (2.15-16).

It is tempting to think that clear gospel presentations and exemplary Christian conduct will bring everyone to faith, but that is not the way it works – if we are in any doubt, we need only look at the ministry of Jesus Himself! Jesus regularly preached to those who were blind – ministry will be no different for Paul, or for any of his successors. But Paul does not lose heart because he knows that even though Satan has worked to blind the minds of some, he has not worked that way in all – but only in those who are 'perishing' (same word as 2.15).

A realistic understanding of Satan's powerful but limited role in the world means that Paul will not be discouraged when his hearers do not believe his message. He knows that Satan is at work to prevent them from seeing Jesus for who He really is. Paul's thought links two things that he had already told us:

- the reason that the law of Moses could not remove the veil from the heart and mind of the unbeliever (or unbelieving Jew) is in part because of Satan's blinding work. Christ is able to remove the veil, for through His death and resurrection, Christ has the victory over all God's enemies – thanks be to God (2.14)!
- Paul is much less likely to twist the truth or deceive his listeners because he knows that, in one sense, Satan is also to blame for their unbelief.

3. For the nature of our proclamation, verses 5-6

Peddlers of God's word are no doubt tempted to preach themselves as they aspire to worldly greatness and financial profit. The Jesus they preach is a 'different' Jesus (11.4) because their concern is for glory without suffering.

By contrast, Paul preaches two things:

- he preaches Jesus Christ as Lord – he often mentions the name 'Jesus' when he wants his readers to call to mind the incarnation, suffering and death of Jesus: it is precisely the Jesus who died and rose again that Paul proclaims as Lord of all.
- he preaches himself as a 'servant' or even a 'slave' (calling to mind the imagery of the triumphal procession from 2.14). Even more humbling, Paul describes himself here as a slave not of Jesus, but of the Corinthians (notice how this sets Paul far apart from the super-apostles who make the Corinthians slaves to them, 11.20).

Both elements of Paul's message (the Lordship of Christ and the slavery of Paul) arise from Paul's own encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road (verse 6). The God of creation (Genesis 1) and of new creation (Isaiah 9) worked in Paul on the day of his conversion to persuade him of Jesus' exalted Lordship (when we look at Jesus, we see the glory of God), and of Paul's own spiritual poverty. God has done the same work in every Christian; that is why all authentic ministry will mirror Paul's – we can only preach to others the Christ we have met for ourselves. Further, we can only preach Christ as we serve those to whom we preach – the suffering, loving preacher and the glorious light of the gospel are inseparable.

Main points and applications

1. As Christians...

We have every reason to acknowledge Paul fully, because his ministry was authentic and uncorrupted – he taught God's word faithfully and clearly. We should beware Christian ministers who play games with God's word, who allow themselves to draw any of the spotlight away from Christ onto themselves, and whose message is not unambiguously clear about the Lordship of Christ. How does this passage challenge our 'celebrity Christian' culture?

2. As gospel ministers...

i. Don't lose heart in your methodology

- no deceit, but clear truth and godly living.

ii. Don't lose heart in the face of unbelief

- recognise unbelief is the work of Satan.
- the gospel is veiled only to those who are perishing. It is still powerful to bring life.

iii. Don't lose the heart of the message

- the gospel is about Jesus as Lord.
- our part is to speak from our own experience of Christ; we are servants of others both because we follow in the footsteps of one who served us, and because it is only by God's grace that we have come to see His glory for ourselves.

Main theme

The privilege of ministry and our own experience of Christ determines everything about our own ministry - our message, our method, and the manner of our dealing with a Satan-blinded world.

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Context

The Corinthians are beginning to fall for a sub-Christian ministry that takes pride in 'outward appearance' rather than 'what is on the heart' (5.12). In this section of his letter, from 2.14-7.4, Paul is reminding the Corinthians of the nature of true Christian ministry in order that they might 'open their heart' to him (as his heart is 'wide open' to them (6.11)), and that they might be able to see the 'super-apostles' for what they really are – servants of Satan (11.15).

In this passage, he nears the centre of his argument, explaining both why God deliberately chooses to keep his true ministers weak and afflicted, and that the true minister (and indeed the true Christian) lives not for this seen world, but for unseen, eternal glory. It is this God-centred and eternity-centred perspective that keeps Paul from 'losing heart' (the word in 4.16 is the same as the word in 4.1), despite his many struggles. Although there have been hints of Paul's eternal perspective already in the letter (e.g. 1.9-10; 1.14), his focus has been largely upon the present (e.g. the present fulfilment of God's covenant promises in 1.20-22 and the 'permanent' glory of 3.7-18). As his argument develops (and even though he does not lose sight of the present implication of the gospel, e.g. 5.17), Paul's emphasis becomes increasingly eternal.

Structure

Paul does not lose heart, because...:

- 4.7-12 ... through Paul's present suffering, God is glorified, Jesus is manifested and others are saved,
- 4.13-15 ... God will one day raise Paul and bring him with the Corinthians into Jesus' presence, and
- 4.16-18 ... Paul's present struggles both transform him now and prepare him for an incomparable future glory.

Text notes

1. We do not lose heart because, through their present suffering, God is glorified, Jesus is manifested & others are saved, verses 7-12:

These famous verses do not just tell us something of the weight of Paul's afflictions as a minister of the gospel; importantly, they also contain 3 purpose statements (verses 7, 10 and 12).

a) The fact of the minister's suffering

The super-apostles took great pride in their appearance (5.12), and criticised Paul for looking unimpressive (10.10). But looking 'weak' was not a source of shame to Paul. He compares himself to a 'jar of clay' – a common household vessel that was inexpensive and easily broken, much like a disposable plastic cup today.

In verses 8-11, Paul expands on his own weakness, describing himself as 'afflicted in every way', 'perplexed', 'persecuted', and 'struck down'. Jesus had earlier said that if anyone would come after Him, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Him (Mark 8.34): in fulfilment of that charge, Paul 'always' carries around the death of Jesus in his own body – his daily experience was to be 'given over to death' for the sake of Jesus and His gospel.

b) The purpose of the minister's suffering

It is easy to see why such a life-experience might cause a Christian minister to lose heart. But Paul's suffering, although painful, is not paralysing. God works in Paul through the gospel he preaches to prevent him from being 'crushed', 'driven to despair', 'forsaken', and 'destroyed'. Three purpose statements tell us why, in God's economy, He makes ministry this hard:

i) So that God is glorified:

God deliberately acts to keep Paul weak 'to show that the surpassing power belongs to God' and not to Paul (4.7). If Paul were strong, impressive and powerful, people might think that Paul was great. God keeps Paul weak to show that the great successes of Paul's ministry (not least his perseverance in ministry) come from the fact that God is great.

ii) So that Jesus is manifested:

Twice in these verses (verses 10 and 11), Paul tells us that God causes him to share in the sufferings of Christ in order that the resurrection victory of Christ might be 'manifested' or 'disclosed' or 'made visible' in Paul's body. As Paul perseveres in gospel ministry in the face of such affliction, people will be forced to ask: 'How does he keep going? He is so weak in himself. From where does he get the strength?' It will be clear to all that Paul's perseverance can only be attributed to the resurrection power of Jesus.

iii) So that others are saved:

Verse 12 is surprising. Verses 10 and 11 have a similar structure:

Paul experiences Jesus' death AND Paul experiences Jesus' life

But verse 12 is different:

Paul experiences death AND the Corinthians experience life.

As Paul shares in the sufferings of Christ, God works through him to bring life to others.

Taken together, these 3 purpose statements give a radically different perspective to gospel suffering, and help to explain why Paul did not lose heart (v16) in the face of his many trials. For he knew that it is God's deliberate intention to keep all ministers of His gospel weak, almost to the point of despair, in order that His kingdom might continue to advance in the same way in which it was established – through suffering (cf. 1.3-7).

2. We do not lose heart because we are confident that in the future God himself will raise us & bring us into Jesus' presence, verses 13-15:

Paul is like the psalmist (116.10) who maintained his faith in the face of suffering and so spoke of it. These verses expand on the ideas in verses 11 and 12. Even though in the present Paul is given over to death, he does not stop preaching the gospel because he knows that in the future God will raise him from the dead to live with Jesus in the presence of God Himself (v14). He can go on preaching because he knows that his eternal future is secure – death is not the end for him, and so he does not fear it.

Notice that Paul specifically mentions that the Corinthians will also be there in God's presence on the last day (v14). He is willing to suffer for them now because of the eternal reward that will come to his hearers as well as to him. As Paul perseveres in preaching in the face of suffering, the life of Jesus is manifested in him (v11) and the grace of God extends to more people (v15). This will result in more people (including the Corinthians themselves, cf. 1:14) giving thanks to God.

Enduring suffering will never be easy, but the eternal security of the true Christian minister, and the knowledge that his labours are not in vain (cf. 1 Cor 15.58) will prevent him from losing heart.

3. We do not lose heart because our present struggles both transform us now and prepare for us a future glory that is beyond comparison, verses 16-18:

In many ways these verses summarise the whole section. Many Christians feel that their Christian life is put on hold while we pass through troubles – we wait for 'normality' to return. Paul says the opposite. Amazingly, his eternal perspective enables him to call his present suffering 'light and momentary' (see verses 8-12 and 2 Cor 11.23-29 to get a flavour of them). He is not naïve or stoical about his suffering, but his focus is very clearly on the good that comes out of it, rather than on the suffering itself:

a) Transformation

God's sustaining grace during Paul's suffering transforms him in the present (v16) – cf. 2 Cor 3.18. It enables him to look beyond his very visible, temporary suffering to unseen heavenly, eternal reality (v18).

b) Glory

Verse 17 is another surprise. We might expect Paul to say that his suffering prepares him for glory. He actually says that his suffering somehow prepares 'an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison' for him. It is as though Paul perceives his heavenly bank balance to get bigger and bigger as he suffers.

In summary, Paul does not lose heart despite hardship because he knows God is glorified and the life of Jesus is seen in his weakness; because keeping preaching will bring benefit to his hearers and glory to God; & finally because he knows it will achieve for him glory beyond all comparison.

Application

As well as giving us further reason not to lose confidence in Paul despite his weakness, these verses yield two key lessons for our own ministry and life.

1. Being transformed into the likeness of Jesus

Surprisingly, it seems as if being transformed into the glorious likeness of the Lord (3.18) is not primarily ethical. It involves being made like him in his suffering and death (the hour of his glory). We should not expect faithful Christian servants to look gloriously successful in the present because that is not God's intention. His intention is to keep us weak. Jesus' image and his life are revealed not so much in our success, but in our weaknesses and failures. The glory of God is seen in the death and brokenness of Jesus carried in the bodies of those who preach him – the means by which his life is revealed. We do not need to pretend to be competent, brave, brilliant etc to be authentic gospel ministers. To do so is to take glory away from God. Instead, we are to trust him to glorify himself and bring benefit to others as we keep speaking of him, and keep looking to the eternal glory beyond all comparison.

2. Keeping the right perspective

Our focus rests very naturally on the world around us and our apparent success and well-being in it. But this world is transient – even the things that look permanent will not last forever. If our focus is on the things of the world (even our own health and safety), we will not persevere in faithful gospel ministry for a lifetime because the cost will seem too great. But if we use our suffering to remind ourselves that this world is passing away, and if we keep our eyes on the good that comes out of our suffering, present transformation and especially eternal glory, we will not lose heart.

Main theme

God uses our suffering to bring glory to himself, to bring life to others, to transform us, and to prepare certain glory for us in the presence of Jesus. Therefore we do not lose heart.

2 Corinthians 5.1-10

Context

Though Paul's ministry is marked by affliction, opposition and lack of 'glory', his aim in this section of the letter (from 2.14-7.4) is to convince the Corinthians that it is his ministry, rather than that of the peddlers of God's word (2.17) which is authentic, so that they will be able to boast in him on the day of the Lord Jesus (1.12-14).

In 4.1-18 Paul explained why he does not lose heart in ministry, even though God makes it painful. He gave 3 main reasons: i) the ministry itself is glorious (v1); ii) God uses Paul's suffering for his own glory and for the salvation of others; and iii) his sufferings prepare for him a share in Christ's eternal glory. In 5.1-10 Paul gives further insight into his eternal perspective and continues to explain how the hope of his future glory gives him courage in his present ministry. This is striking in the context of the apparent Mosaic emphasis of the false teachers: it seems that they want to stay with the (fading) glory of Sinai; Paul talks instead of the wilderness experience of the Christian, who, having seen and experienced God's glory (& being continually transformed by it), exists in a tabernacle until the day when we reach the temple of heaven – our true home.

Structure

- 5.1-5 Do not lose heart. Our resurrection bodies are waiting even while we groan
- 5.6-8 Be of good courage. It is better to be at home with the Lord
- 5.9-10 Fear the Lord & aim to please him, for we will all face Jesus' judgement

Text notes

1. Do not lose heart. Our resurrection bodies are waiting even while we groan, verses 1-5

In verse 1, Paul begins to unpack what he meant when he spoke of things 'unseen and eternal' in 4.18. He knows (cf. 1.7) that even if his 'slight momentary affliction' (4.17) results in the destruction of his body (i.e. death), still he has hope. The language that Paul uses in talking about his body explains his ambivalence about death. His present body is transient (a tent), earthly, and facing destruction (cf. 'mortal' in v4). But because Paul is a Christian, he knows that when he dies he will receive another body (this one 'from God') that is permanent (a house), heavenly and eternal (cf. very similar language in 1 Kings 8.27).

In verses two to four the tone changes slightly. Though Paul does not lose heart (4.6) his present experience is marked by 'groaning', 'longing' for heaven, and being 'burdened' (v2, 4). It is likely that Paul has in mind the sum total of his present afflictions – the opposition he receives from others (ch1, ch4, ch11), the anxiety he carries with him about his ministry (11.28), and possibly also the frailty of his body (? the 'thorn in the flesh' of 12.7) as well as the general struggles of life in a fallen world.

The Gnostics of Paul's day would have agreed with his realism about the struggles that accompany life in this world. As a result, they longed for a future in which their soul would be separated from their body – the 'nakedness' referred to in verse 3. But Paul has a hope which far transcends both our current existence and the 'nakedness' for which the Gnostics longed. For Paul knows that after a brief period of 'nakedness' (the time a Christian spends with Jesus in Paradise between their death and the return of Christ), he will be re-clothed with a new, permanent, resurrection body as 'what is mortal [is] swallowed up by life' (v4).

[The view Paul outlines here (and again in v8) is often called the 'intermediate state'. It stands in contrast to those who believe in a period of 'soul sleep' between our death and Christ's return.]

Verse 5 then comes as a great assurance. At times Paul despaired even of life itself (1.8). Perhaps he even doubted whether following Jesus was really worth it and was tempted to be ashamed of the gospel. But his hope was unbreakable for the one who had prepared an eternal home for Paul was God Himself – the one who keeps all His promises (1.20). Paul's groaning in this life therefore did not arise because he was running out of earthly hope (as is the case for so many), but because God had implanted within him His Spirit – a guarantee of his future inheritance. Being 'homesick for heaven' is, it turns out, a mark of the Spirit's work in a Christian (Cf. 1.22 where the Holy Spirit is also described as a guarantee of heaven for Paul and the Corinthians).

2. Be of good courage. It is better to be at home with the Lord, verses 6-8

Verse 6a points both forwards and backwards. Paul is 'always' of good courage because of the eternal hope outlined in verses 1-5, but also, as we see the phrase repeated in verse 8, because he knows that after death he will be at home with the Lord.

If the focus in verses 1-5 was upon the physical struggles of life as a Christian, verses 6b-7 highlight the Christian's relational 'distance' from the Lord in this life. Being at home in an earthly body means being away from the Lord – it necessitates walking by faith and not by sight. Although the Christian is absolutely secure in their relationship with God in the present (e.g. v5), it remains the case that we cannot 'see' him except with the eyes of faith. Therefore, Paul longs for the day when he will be at home with the Lord (v8), is able to see Jesus and to enjoy perfect relationship with him.

We live in a world where people long for intimacy and acceptance and to be part of a loving family. Paul says our longing for perfect relationship can only ever be met in heaven, but that it certainly will be met there, which means that we can be of good courage while we wait and walk by faith. Although we are homesick for heaven, we know that we will go home to glory one day, and so we are of good courage.

3. Fear the Lord and aim to please him, for we will all face Jesus' judgement, verses 9-10

Before we get drawn into too much speculation about quite what our resurrection bodies or the intermediate state might be like (!), Paul reminds us of what is important. It is his aim 'to please the Lord' (v9) wherever he is and in whatever state he is in. The reason is given in verse 10: we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ.

While of course it is true that all people must be judged, it seems that Paul's primary referent here is believers. Clearly, he is not suggesting that the Christian is saved from hell by their works (otherwise he would have no reason to be of good courage in verses 6 and 8). But he is teaching that all believers are accountable to the Lord for our actions and will be rewarded or suffer loss accordingly on the last day. It is vital to see that no believer's salvation will be in doubt on that day – think back to the hope that Paul outlined in 3.12, and think forward to 5.17 where we learn that all those in Christ have already become a 'new creation.' It may be better, therefore, to think of the judgement about which Paul is speaking as a 'family prize-giving' at which the Lord Jesus rewards His people for the works they have done in His name. But even though our salvation will not be in doubt, we should not minimise the significance of this judgement. It will be universal (we must all...) and it will be individual (so that each one may receive...). We cannot hide behind our family, or our church, or our spouse. It matters how we live – to some extent at least, the degree of our eternal 'reward' is determined by it.

As Christians wait for the final day, therefore, our unshakeable confidence in being with the Lord is held in tension with a loving and fearful (v11) desire to please him now, knowing that it really matters. While we may not be sure what pleasing him away from the body might mean, it is clear from verse 10 that pleasing him at home in the body involves good things done in the body. One of those things (verse 11) is evangelism. We seek to persuade others about Jesus not just for their sake or to make us feel good, but because it pleases the Lord and because all of us, them and us, will have to stand before the judgement seat of Christ (see next week's study for more).

Our world believes that our actions (unless they are discovered) have no consequence. The reality of eternity teaches the opposite. All of our actions are open to the gaze of a loving God who has rescued us from condemnation and promised us new bodies and a home with him. That God will also make us face up to what we have done in the body and reward us (or not) accordingly.

Application

1. Take pride in a ministry that lasts

Remember the primary reason that Paul is writing 2 Corinthians. He wants his readers to acknowledge him fully and to be 'able to answer' those who take pride in external things and not what is in the heart. These verses reveal a key difference between Paul and his opponents: they may well look more impressive than Paul does now, but Paul knows that only the gospel of the Lord Jesus will look impressive from the perspective of eternity. He wants the Corinthians, and us, to share his eternal perspective and evaluate all those who claim to be doing 'authentic

Christian ministry' accordingly. It is very easy in our generation to evaluate Christian ministers according to their websites, their podcasts, their book-deals, the size of their congregation and how good they look on camera – but none of that is what really matters. We are to give our allegiance to those who proclaim Jesus as Lord, and themselves as slaves, because nothing but the gospel of the Lord Jesus can remove the veil from men's hearts, and transform them from one degree of glory to another, and get them ready to stand before the judgement seat of Christ.

2. Long for the new creation

It is very easy to look for security and comfort within this world. We live in a society that worships the body, and goes to great extremes to beautify it, to eke out its existence, and to minimise the effects of ageing upon it. Our society also encourages us to idolise the building of the perfect home and the pursuit of the perfect relationship. The Christian will take care not to put down roots in this world, for he / she will know that this world is only temporary and that no earthly body or relationship or home will last forever. This realisation, as the Spirit works in us, makes us homesick for heaven. Heaven is not a second best version of this life, but the perfection that God has made us for with wonderful resurrection bodies and a home with him. We have a glorious future – the question is: where is my hope? Here, or there?

3. Be of good courage while we wait

Christians need never despair, even when faced with ageing or frailty or the prospect of death (whether 'natural' or as a martyr). We can be confident, because we know what the future holds – a marvellous hope to share with a society terrified of all this and which sidelines the old and the frail almost as if by doing so it can pretend they do not exist.

4. Make it our aim to please the Lord

In spite of what we might want to believe, our actions do have consequences. The last day will be a day of great joy but also a day of reckoning for everybody. Our old bodies will be replaced, but the actions done in them will not be forgotten. Our lives now, therefore, will be characterised by a love for the God who has rescued us and promised us a home with him in the new creation, but also a right fear of him as we wait to face him as our awesome judge. Pleasing him will involve many things, but it will necessarily include a full acknowledgement of authentic ministry.

Main point

Be of good courage as you live longing for the new creation & seeking to please the Lord who will one day hold you to account for your life.

2 Corinthians 5.11-6.2

Context

1.12-14 is still central to Paul's purpose in writing. Notwithstanding his suffering (1.8-10; 4.7-18), his opponents (e.g. 2.17), and the blindness of some of his hearers (4.3-4), Paul wants the Corinthians to acknowledge fully what he knows before God to be true: that he is a godly, sincere minister of the gospel who lives by faith, not by sight, while he awaits his place in glory. This section of the letter (which runs from 2.14-7.4) will conclude with Paul's passionate appeal for the Corinthians to make room in their hearts for him (7.2) because he has wronged no-one, corrupted no-one and taken advantage of no-one. Rather, he has made himself a slave to the Corinthians and proclaimed Jesus as Lord (4.5).

In this passage, Paul again defends his ministry and its motivations (verses 11-13), and explains that God's plan to reconcile the world to himself through Christ is now broadcast through Christ's ambassador – Paul himself (5.14-21). He urges the Corinthians to make sure that they be reconciled to God, lest they be found to have received the grace of God in vain.

Structure

- 5.11-13 What Paul does – another defence of his ministry
- 5.14-17 What Christ has done – the results of the cross
 - 5.14-15 God's people live not for themselves, but for Jesus
 - 5.16-17 God's people gain an eternal perspective
- 5.18-21 What God has done – reconciliation accomplished and announced
- 6.1-2 Appeal: receive God's salvation gratefully

Text notes

1. What Paul does – another defence of his ministry, verses 11-13

In many ways these verses are not just the heart of the section (2.14-7.4) but also the heart of the whole letter. In them, Paul explains both the motivation that drives his ministry and its distinctive feature as he reminds the Corinthians of the chief purpose of his letter.

Paul's awareness that he will stand before the judgement seat of Christ to give an account of his ministry (5.10) causes him to fear the Lord, and therefore to want to persuade others. His 'fear' is not unhealthy dread (for he knows the love of Christ, 5.14) or eschatological insecurity (for he is looking forward to the new creation, 5.8) but a reverential awe of God and sense of accountability before Him. This 'fear' drives Paul to ongoing persuasion of others – notice that this verb is often used in Acts to describe Paul's evangelistic ministry – e.g. Acts 17.4; 18.4; 19.8; 26.28; 28.23. (For some reason, the NIV translates the present tense 'we persuade' conatively – 'we try to persuade men'; it is much better to understand it iteratively – it was his regular and ongoing habit to persuade people to put their trust in Jesus.)

Just as Paul knows that his ministry will be judged by God on the last day, so he knows that it is visible to God now (v11b). Indeed, while Paul is confident that his ministry meets with God's approval, his hope is that it will meet with the Corinthians' approval also (not least for their own sake – 5.20). He wants the Corinthians to 'acknowledge fully' (1.14) that, whatever his critics say, he conducts his ministry by God's means and according to God's standards. The super-apostles, peddlers of God's word (2.17) 'boast in appearances', taking pride in things that are external, superficial and transitory – instead of the heart – which is internal, essential and eternal' (cf. 1 Samuel 16.7). But Paul knows that the visible realm is 'incomplete, illusive and subject to the ravages of decay' (Garland, 2 Corinthians, p274), and that truly sound spiritual judgements can only be made from the perspective of eternity – he longs for the Corinthians to share that perspective.

Verse 13 is complex, as Paul seeks again to explain the rationale of his ministry to the Corinthians. The question is: what does Paul mean when he speaks of being 'beside himself'? There are two possible answers. First, it could be that Paul had such a zeal for ministry that, like Jesus before him (Mark 3.21), he was considered 'out of his mind' by some. Indeed, this specific charge was levelled against Paul by Festus in Acts 26.24. It might be that Paul is replying to this accusation by pleading a sort of 'divine madness' – saying, 'Yes, I do make life choices that by any worldly

criteria might be considered insane, but I do it for you, in order that you might be acceptable to God on the last day.'

The second possibility is that Paul is referring to his private, ecstatic, spiritual experiences. The super-apostles seem to have been making much of their own spiritual experiences (12.1), and we know that some fourteen years earlier Paul himself had been 'caught up to the third heaven' (12.1-7). If Paul is speaking about such 'visions and revelations' (12.1), his point is that his spiritual experiences are as impressive as any man's, but they are to be kept between him and God. Whichever possibility is correct (it could be a combination of the two), Paul's emphasis is that when he is ministering among the Corinthians, he acts 'in his right mind', i.e. soberly, and in an orderly way – making an open statement of the truth (4.2), preaching Jesus as Lord (4.5) and seeking to persuade others (5.11).

2. What Christ has done – the results of the cross, verses 14-17

These verses reveal 2 results of the death of Jesus, as well as an additional motivation that lies behind Paul's ministry.

a) God's people live not for themselves, but for Jesus, verses 14-15

If the fear of the Lord motivated Paul to persuade others in verse 11, then the love of Christ has the same effect – both Christ's past act on the cross and his future act of judgement control Paul's actions in the present. This love of Christ, demonstrated in his death and resurrection, controls Paul in such a way that he is no longer able to live for himself, but for Christ (v15) – that is why he makes himself a slave to the Corinthians as he proclaims the risen (v15) Jesus as Lord (4.5).

Verses 14 and 15 are parallel to each other and echo Romans 5.12 and 18, where the principle is established that the single act of one man can be effective for many others. Because Paul is convinced that Jesus' death will be effective for all who trust in him, he is compelled to the faithful, orderly persuasion of others. The parallelism helps us to understand the meaning of the controversial phrase in verse 15, 'he died for all':

v 14	One died for all...	... all have died
v15	He died for all...	... those who live...

Those who benefit from Christ's death are described in verse 14 as 'all' and in verse 15 as 'those who live ... for Jesus'. That is, Paul is not teaching, as some contend, universalism. Rather, the death of Jesus, which is of course sufficient in value to save all without exception, is only effective to save those who are in Christ. All die in Adam, but not all share in the benefits of the death of Christ, just as not all live for him. Paul is confident that the love of Christ, demonstrated in His death and resurrection, is the means by which all God's elect will be utterly transformed as they die to self and live to Jesus (unlike the false teachers). Therefore, he keeps preaching the gospel to all, certain that God will use his preaching to draw all His people to Himself.

b) God's people gain an eternal perspective, verses 16-17

One illustration of what it means for Paul to live not for self but for Jesus (v15) is that he no longer regards anyone according to the flesh – a direct contrast with those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart (5.12). Previously, Paul had failed to see Jesus for who He was, but now his understanding both of Jesus and everyone else has changed (5.16). The result is that as Paul looks at the world, he no longer judges people according to their credentials, achievements or status. Rather he sees just two groups – the same two groups that have been in mind throughout the section: those for whom the gospel is the aroma of life, and those for whom it is the stench of death (2.16).

This new perspective comes from the complete transformation that is brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus in the life of the believer (note the 'therefore' at the start of v17). The ESV reads, 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.' If this translation is correct, Paul is making a point about the individual Christian – the 'regenerate' (1 Peter 1.3) are individually a 'new creation', foretastes of the general 'regeneration' of all things (Matthew 19.28). Alternatively, Paul may be making a point about the new creation itself. Verse 17 literally reads, 'if anyone is in Christ – new creation'. Paul might be saying, therefore, 'There is a new creation'. If so, he is saying that the new creation itself (5.1-10) is experienced now by faith for those who are in Christ – the old has already passed away and the new come.

Of course, this does not mean that Christians exhibit an 'aura' that is visible to other believers; rather, that believers should not be deceived by outward appearance, particularly where there is suffering or hardship, knowing that 'being given over to death' signifies not lack of authenticity, but rather an identification with Jesus in his death and a demonstration of his life (3:11).

3. What God has done – reconciliation accomplished and announced, verses 18-21

The focus in verses 14-17 was upon Jesus, now it shifts to God Himself as Paul highlights God's initiative in salvation. The verses are chiastic in structure:

- i) verses 18a-19b God's act of reconciliation (God's initiative)
- ii) verses 19c-20 God gives Paul the ministry of reconciliation
- iii) verse 21 God's act of reconciliation (results)

i) 5.18b-19b God's initiative in reconciliation

God has acted, in Christ, to reconcile to Himself both Paul (v18b) and all believers (v19b). (The reference to 'the world' in v19 appears strange at first – but Paul defines the world as those against whom God does not count their trespasses – in other words, Christians.)

ii) 5.19c-20 God gives Paul the ministry of reconciliation

Those who are reconciled to God (i.e. Paul in v18 and all Christians in v19) are entrusted by God with the ministry of reconciliation. Of course, as an Apostle, Paul was a uniquely authoritative 'steward' of the gospel. Only insofar as later Christians are reconciled to him (5.20; 7.20) and boasting in him (1.12-14; 5.12) can they rightly think of themselves as ambassadors for Christ. In that sense, every Christian's ministry is derivative of Paul's. Nevertheless, God has made us competent to be ministers of the new covenant (3v6) and as such we are able to engage in the same glorious ministry as Paul and to proclaim the same wonderful message of reconciliation.

The Corinthians themselves were of course in a different situation – they were, at least in part, estranged from Paul, and therefore Paul urges them to 'be reconciled to God' (5.20b). So far Paul's description of himself and his role has been primarily as an evangelist (v11). It is something of a shock, then, that Paul suggests that the Corinthians need to be reconciled to God: they are already Christians, but they need to acknowledge their sin afresh and receive God's forgiveness anew, lest they be revealed to have received God's grace in vain (6.1).

iii) 5.21 God's act of reconciliation – the results

Verse 21 provides the emotional basis for Paul's strong appeal of v20, but also the theological basis for the whole section. It explains how 'the one' died for all, as the sin-saturated death of the sinless one enables sinful people to become the righteousness of God.

It is striking that in this elevated section of prose, Paul should place his own ministry of reconciliation at the heart of God's salvation plan for the world. But that is why it is so serious to be estranged from Paul – the means by which God's great plan of salvation, accomplished in Christ, is made known in the world is through the ministry of Paul and his successors.

4. Appeal: Receive God's salvation gratefully, 6.1-2

In 1 Corinthians Paul describes himself as a co-worker with Apollos; here, strikingly, he styles himself as a fellow worker with God himself. His language is pretty strong: by beginning to listen to the super-apostles and rejecting Paul, the Corinthians were in danger of rejecting the message of salvation and losing its benefits. In listening to the old covenant message of the peddlers, they are denying the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah, written to people in exile promising a second exodus – salvation and new creation. It has already happened in the cross, Paul tells us. Now is the day Isaiah was waiting for. The new creation has broken into the world in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul therefore warns his readers not to reject the salvation message that they had received from him.

The shock of these verses is that it seems to be possible to have heard the message of reconciliation in Christ, and then to drift away from its truth – by disliking its simplicity, or despising the suffering of the Christ and wanting something more glamorous, or by rejecting Paul as God's chosen messenger. Before we think about taking God's

message of reconciliation to others, we must make sure that we ourselves do not receive it in vain. (Remember that even though Paul employs such fearsome language here, he retains 'perfect confidence' in the Corinthians – 7.16).

Application

1. Be reconciled to God

Much of the ministry conducted in the name of Christ today, even in evangelical churches, is a pale imitation of the real thing. We are easily tempted to align ourselves with ministry that looks impressive on the outside, but fails to proclaim the right message for the right reasons. Insofar as we have been corrupted by the superficial, celebrity-focussed spirit of the age, we need to be reconciled to God, lest we be revealed to have received the grace of God in vain. This is the day of salvation: we need to test ourselves to make sure that we are in the faith (13.5).

2. Live for God

Jesus freely chose to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. He did it so that we might not live any longer for ourselves, but for God. It is deeply offensive to Jesus, therefore, when we claim to love him with our lips, but continue to live for ourselves.

3. Speak for God

Like Paul, we will all have to appear before the judgement seat of Christ to give an account for what we have done with the salvation, and the gospel that He has given to us. Fearing Him, and constrained by His life-giving love, we like Paul should seek to persuade others, because we too have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. What then prevents us from speaking up for Christ in His world? And when we do speak for Christ, do we do so for the right motives?

Main point

The death and resurrection of Christ is the only means of reconciliation with God – be reconciled to Him; you are a minister of reconciliation: fearing God and constrained by Christ's love, persuade others.

2 Corinthians 6.3-7.4

Context

It is never enjoyable to have your entire ministry questioned. But, despite his critics, Paul is able to boast with a clear conscience that he has always conducted his ministry by the grace of God, with simplicity and godly sincerity (1.12). He has confidence that the Corinthians are true Christians (e.g. 7.4), but is worried that 'peddlers of God's word' (2.17) are causing them to distance themselves from him, and therefore from his gospel and his God. This section of the letter (2.14-7.4) explains the nature of true ministry in the hope that the Corinthians will 'boast in Paul' and 'be able to answer' his critics – those who boast about outward appearance and not what is in the heart (5.12).

He has taught them to distinguish the message from the messenger. The message of the gospel is glorious – Jesus is Lord (4.5), He leads the triumphant procession (2.14), all glory belongs to Him (3.18) and He alone can remove the veil of blindness from man's heart (3.14). But that does not mean that God intends the messenger to look and sound equally glorious. Actually, God purposes to keep the messenger painfully weak, carrying around in him the death of Jesus (4.10), in order that he might rely on God (1.10), manifest the life of Jesus as he perseveres (4.11), and be a means of bringing both life to others (4.12) and glory to God (4.7). His experience of pain is such that he longs for the new creation (4.16-5.10), but that does not stop him from being effective for Christ in the present. Indeed, Christ's death on the cross in the past, along with His future judgement of all compels the authentic minister to persevere in persuading others (5.11, 14) and urging them to receive the salvation won by Christ (5.21-6.2).

In the light of this understanding, Paul has urged the Corinthians to be reconciled to God (5.20) in order that they might be ready for the last day. In this final passage of the section, he reminds them of the godly sincerity of his own ministry (6.3-10), appeals to them to show the same love and affection for him as he has shown for them (6.11-13; 7.2-4) and commands them to separate themselves from ungodliness (6.14-7.1).

Structure

6.3-10	Paul's apostolic ID card
6.11-7.4	Paul's appeal to shun the world and support him
6.11-13	A concerned call for love
6.14-7.1	A clear call for separation
7.2-4	A confident call for love

Text notes

1. Paul's apostolic ID card, 6.3-10

As one who has been entrusted with the 'ministry of reconciliation' (5.18), it is important that 'no fault' be found with his ministry (6.3). To ensure that he 'put no obstacle in anyone's way' (6.3) and that the Corinthians have good reason to open their heart to him (6.11-13), Paul therefore 'commends himself' to them. The tactic may seem hypocritical – he has just said that he does not commend himself (5.12; cf. 3.1), and later attacks the super-apostles for 'commending themselves' (10.12). The difference is that they commend themselves 'without understanding' (10.12), comparing themselves with each other, and by worldly standards (5.12) for their own glory; Paul boasts rather of his perseverance in suffering (6.4-5), and explicitly recognises that all of his progress is made 'by the power of God' (6.7).

Specifically, and his critics notwithstanding (6.3), Paul points to his 'great endurance':

i. In the face of 9 hardships (6.4c-5)

'Endurance' is a defining mark of an Apostle (cf. 12.12 – where the same word is translated 'patience'); here, Paul's 'great endurance' stands as the heading to the subsequent list of 9 hardships. His perseverance in the face of such a diverse list of challenges serves to commend him 'in every way' (6.4a). The list comprises: the 'generic tribulations' (afflictions, hardships, calamities) which arise from the difficulties of taking the message of reconciliation to a hostile, God-opposed culture; the 'specific tribulations' (beatings, imprisonments, riots) that Paul had experienced during his ministry (cf. the list in 11.23ff); and the 'personal tribulations' (labours,

sleepless nights, hunger) caused by Paul's itinerant ministry, his refusal to accept payment for his ministry, his concern for those to whom he ministers and his zeal for gospel advance.

ii. Expressed in 8 virtues (6.6-7b)

Paul's 'great endurance' is rendered all the more 'commendable' because of the character which accompanied his hardships. The list itself is made up of 2 blocks of 4, the first listing general virtues (purity, knowledge, patience and kindness). The second block is sandwiched by references to 'the Holy Spirit' and the 'power of God' – the means by which all the other virtues are produced. Perhaps this second block takes us to the heart of the Corinthian situation: two of Paul's chief marks of commendation thus far have been his love for them (3.2) and the truth of his message (4.2, 5).

iii. In the face of both praise and blame (6.7c-8)

Paul does not conduct his ministry with 'weapons of the flesh' but rather with 'weapons of divine power' (10.4), here referred to as 'weapons of righteousness'. Paul could mean 'weapons provided by righteousness' (5.21 – i.e. the gospel, prayer, as in 10.4), or, 'weapons consisting of righteousness' (cf. Rom 6.13). The context suggests that the subsequent phrase 'for the right hand and for the left' does not mean, 'for every situation', but 'in prosperity and adversity,' but it is hard to be sure.

Either way, taken together, these 3 antitheses remind us of one of the more remarkable things about Paul's ministry – he remained consistent in both message and conduct whether he was being honoured and praised or slandered and dishonoured. It is relatively easy to remain kind and patient when your ministry is popular and well-received; much harder when you are being beaten and imprisoned.

There is therefore a great contrast between human appearance and divine reality (6.8c-10). In the world's eyes (and perhaps in the eyes of the super-apostles) Paul is an impostor, a pauper and an irrelevance – he suffers and despairs and has 'nothing'. But even though he carries around in him the death of Christ (4.12), Paul lives (he knows where he is going), he makes many eternally rich as he preaches to them the gospel of Christ (8.9), and he possesses everything (for he enjoys the inexpressible gift of God's grace (9.15)).

2. Paul's appeal to shun the world and support him, 6.11-7.4

These verses consists of a clear call for the Corinthians to separate themselves from the world which is bracketed by two appeals from Paul that they might 'make room in [their] heart' for him. Many commentators conclude that 6.14-7.1 is not only a later insertion into this letter, but also that it was not written by Paul at all. Not so!

Having commended his own ministry to them (6.3-10) Paul is now in a position to make the appeal to which this entire section of 2 Corinthians has been building. He wants them to acknowledge him fully (cf. 1.12-14). The chief threat to the Corinthians' allegiance is their dalliance with the world and its standards. Assured of his integrity his love, Paul wants the Corinthians to break decisively with the world and line up behind him and his ministry.

i) A concerned call for love, 6.11-13

Paul has spoken freely and truthfully to the Corinthians – literally, 'our mouth is open to you'. There has been no deception, no forked tongue, no whispers behind the back of his hand – his argument is plain and his ministry transparently godly. There is therefore no barrier on Paul's side that might damage his relationship with the Corinthians. There is, however, a problem on the Corinthians' side. Their 'affections' towards Paul are 'restricted' (in the sense of confined or cramped). Speaking as their spiritual father, the one who had planted the Corinthian church in the first place (v13), Paul encourages them to 'widen' their heart to him (same word as v11).

ii) A clear call for separation, 6.14-7.1

These verses are not a digression. The Corinthians face a stark choice. It seems that, even after reading Paul's 'severe letter', some of the Corinthians have not repented of their involvement in the world of gentile cults and immorality (13.21). The majority of the Corinthian Christians may not be involved personally in these practices, but it appears that the temptation to become involved is a key reason why they are not yielding full allegiance to Paul. Perhaps the 'peddlers of God's word' were offering them a spirituality with a more lax morality – the chance to be 'of God' and 'of the world' at the same time. Paul uses a series of contrasts to highlight the impossibility of such compromise:

Righteousness, v14b	Lawlessness, v14b
Light, v14c	Darkness, v14c
Christ, v15a	Belial, v15a
Believers, v15b	Unbelievers, v14, v15b
Temple of God, v16a	Idols, v16a

The Corinthians need to remember who they are. They are not of the world, but are recipients of the promises of God, as outlined in the series of OT quotations in verses 16-18. Even though they inhabit bodies that are mere 'tabernacles' (5.1), corporately they are God's temple, His people (cf. Leviticus 26.11-12). Therefore, they must separate themselves from the world (cf. Isaiah 52.11), remembering that God promises to welcome them (Ezekiel 20.34), and to adopt them as His children (2 Samuel 7.14, which is applied to Christ Himself in Hebrews 1.5, but here to all Christians).

The Corinthians are the new people of God promised by God in the Old Testament. They are recipients of His grace (6.1), of new hearts (3.14; 5.17) and now therefore they are to live accordingly, separating themselves decisively from 'every defilement of body and spirit' in order that they may remain pure until the very end. It is noteworthy that Paul refers to defilements of both body and spirit. Some Corinthians were in particular danger of defilement of the body through impurity, sexual immorality and sensuality (13.21). All the Corinthians were in danger of spiritual defilement through their equivocations about Paul, and concomitant acceptance of the super-apostles. Assured of his love (6.11-13), and confident of his ministry (6.3-10), they need to cleanse themselves for service of the God whom it is right to fear (cf. 5.10-11).

iii) A confident call for love, 7.2-4

These verses conclude both this passage (as a bracket with 6.11-13) and the section (2.14-7.4). Paul is innocent and longs for the Corinthians to 'make room in [their] hearts for [him].' It is usual for the closing 'bracket' in a biblical sandwich (a chiasm) to advance the argument of the opening 'bracket' – that is what happens here as Paul's tone moves from concern to confidence. He is unflinching in his love for them (7.2) and is confident that they will make the right decision about him in return – that is why he is 'filled with comfort' and 'overflowing with joy.'

Application

1. Allegiance

The principle application of this passage is the same as it was for the Corinthians – in the light of Paul's clear apostolic credentials, we are to give our allegiance to him and to the pattern of ministry that he advocates in these chapters. We are not to seek a ministry that boasts in externals, but one which perseveres with godliness and great endurance even in the face of enormous trial.

2. Separation

The appeal of 7.1 is not difficult to understand, but that does not seem to make it any easier to obey. Notice that the charge is an active command – nothing suggests that this sort of spiritual cleansing will happen automatically; it is something that, by God's grace, we need to do. Specifically, we need to guard, work and pray against both bodily and spiritual defilement. What are the specific temptations with which you struggle in these two areas? What changes do you need to make to cleanse yourself in these areas? How will the motivations of God's promises (set out in 6.16-18) help you to do so?

3. Imitation

P E Hughes writes, 'This movingly beautiful hymn-like passage flows from the heart of the Apostle's knowledge and experience... It challenges every serious reader to re-examine as before God his own relationship to the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord and with redoubled earnestness to dedicate his life and talents afresh to the single-minded prosecution of the cause of Christ' (2 Corinthians, p328). In the light of 1 Corinthians 11.1, it is hard to disagree!

Main point

In the light of Paul's credentials and God's promises, cleanse yourself from every defilement and give your heart to genuine Apostolic ministry.

2 Corinthians 7.5-16

Context

In 2.12-13, Paul left us waiting (as he was) for Titus' report on the Corinthians' spiritual progress. Finally, Titus returns (7.6) with news that the Corinthians have responded well to Paul's 'harsh letter' and repented (7.9). As a result, Paul is full of comfort (v4, 6, 7, 13), joy (v4, 7, 9, 13, 16), and confidence (v16).

However, 2.14-7.4 were not an 'aside', a 'digression' or a 'parenthesis'. Even before Titus' report, Paul's major defence of his own ministry has vindicated his authenticity as a true man of God carrying out an authentic work of God. In one sense, the Corinthians' acceptance or rejection of Paul will change nothing – he is God's man. The good news that Titus brings from Corinth is the icing on the cake that explains the reason for Paul's 'overflowing joy' in verse 4 (note the 'for' at the start of verse 5).

As well as rounding off the narrative that began in 2.12-13, this passage points forward to the second half of the letter. The Corinthians' positive response to Paul lays the foundation for his desire to visit Corinth (stated repeatedly from here on: 9.4; 10.2, 6; 12.14, 20, 21; 13.1, 2, 10; cf. 11.9), and also gives Paul the pastoral confidence to address those areas in which the Corinthian church still needed to make progress (chapters 8-13). Specifically, the focus on Titus as Paul's emissary prepares the way for another delicate visit to Corinth by Titus – this time to facilitate the completion of the collection.

Structure

- 7.5-7 Paul, though afflicted, receives comfort and joy from Titus's report...
- 7.8-13a ...because his 'severe letter' effected true repentance & reconciliation in Corinth...
- 7.13b-16 ... vindicating his boasts & resulting in gospel unity, love and joy.

Text notes

In his masterful commentary on the Greek text, Murray Harris sets out a helpful (and exhaustive!) chronology of the events referred to in 7.5-16:

- i. Paul writes his 'severe letter' (v8, 12) from Ephesus
- ii. Paul boasts to Titus about the Corinthians (v14)
- iii. Titus takes the letter to Corinth
- iv. The Corinthians welcome Titus with 'fear and trembling' (v15)
- v. The Corinthians feel sorrow when they hear Paul's letter (v8-9)
- vi. The Corinthians repent of their inaction about the wrongdoer, rectify the situation, and demonstrate eager concern for Paul (v.7, 9, 11-12)
- vii. Titus derives refreshment and joy (v13b) from their humble response
- viii. Paul, meanwhile, is downhearted, exhausted and afflicted (v5)
- ix. When Titus meets Paul (v5-7) he tells him of the Corinthians' sorrow (v8-11), repentance (v7, 9), and obedience (v15), and grows in affection for them (v15)
- x. Hearing of the Corinthians' grief, Paul feels momentary sorrow about his letter (v8), but lasting relief, comfort and joy (v6-7, 9, 13, 16)
- xi. Titus' own joy brings even greater delight to Paul (v13b)
- xii. Paul is relieved that his boasts to Titus have proven true (v14; see ii above)
- xiii. Paul assures his readers of their 'innocence' (v11) & of his confidence in them (v16)

1. Paul, though afflicted, receives comfort & joy from Titus' report... (7.5-7)

During Paul's 'painful visit' (2.1) to Corinth, he was 'wronged' by an unnamed man (2.5; 7.12). When the Corinthians failed to come to Paul's defence he resolved not to visit again until matters were cleared up (2.1) and instead dispatched Titus with a 'severe letter', calling upon the Corinthians to repent. Now in Macedonia and awaiting Titus' return, Paul continues to endure constant mental (7.5), spiritual (2.12-13) and physical (7.5) affliction – his body knew 'no' rest (the word is emphatic – 'not any'), but was afflicted 'at every turn' leaving him 'downcast' (7.6).

Against such a sombre backdrop, the Lord's gracious deliverance of Paul shines brightly (7.6). The pattern replicates

1.3-11. God, who is Himself the great 'comforter' (1.3), provided Paul with double comfort in the form of Titus and his news. Titus was a regular emissary of Paul and is variously referred to as Paul's 'brother' (2.13), 'partner and fellow-worker' (8.23), and as sharing 'the same earnest care' (8.16) that Paul has for the Corinthians. Titus' news was overwhelmingly positive (he is able to report of the Corinthians' 'longing, mourning & zeal' for Paul, 7.7) and is a catalyst for great rejoicing by Paul – note the 'for' at the start of verse 5: Titus' news is sufficiently heartening for the afflicted Apostle to describe himself as 'overflowing with joy.'

We must beware, however, over-stating the positives – Paul still felt the need to write this letter (in fact, verses 3-4 suggest that it is precisely because Paul has such joy in the Corinthians that he is compelled to write to them so 'boldly' now – cf. his 'divine jealousy' in 11.2). Certain aspects of church life in Corinth still required attention. For example, we saw in 2.14-7.4 that Paul still needed to challenge the 'equivocating majority' to side decisively with him. Then, as we read on, we will learn that the Corinthians had stopped their collection in aid of suffering Christians (chapters 8-9); some still considered Paul spiritually ineffective (10.1-7); some remained promiscuous (12.20-13.2); others were still in danger of siding with the super-apostles (11.1-4). More of those struggles in the future; for now, we rejoice with Paul at their longing (to see Paul again?); their mourning (for failing him on the painful visit?) and their zeal (for him and not the wrongdoer – 7.12?).

2 ... because his 'severe letter' effected true repentance & reconciliation in Corinth... (7.8-13a)

Paul was an astonishing pastor. Having been wronged by an individual in Corinth (v12), and hurt by an apparent lack of support from the majority, he wrote to them a 'severe letter', calling them back to him, and therefore to salvation. Interestingly, his reason for writing was not his own hurt pride, nor even a concern for the wrongdoer, but a concern for the Corinthians themselves – he knew that receiving such a stark and challenging letter from Paul would reveal to them where their real affections lay, i.e. with him (v12; cf. v2). That is what happened.

The severe letter was a source of short-term 'grief' among the Corinthians (a matter of temporary regret to Paul, for no godly pastor enjoys church discipline, v8) as they came to terms with the severity of the situation, and the depth of their wrongs. The choice of the word 'grief' is interesting – the ESV translated the same word as 'pain' five times in 2.1-11. Paul's ultimate goal was never to 'grieve' the Corinthians (2.4); indeed, Paul had himself been personally 'grieved' by events (2.5), but now he is able to rejoice because their 'grief' led the Corinthians to repent (v9).

In verse 10, Paul identifies two kinds of 'sorrow'. 'Worldly' sorrow is characterised by regret, and even by remorse but it falls short of repentance. Worldly sorrow may be accompanied by tears but they are the tears of hurt pride and of embarrassment, of being discovered and of letting oneself down, and not of repentance. True 'godly' sorrow on the other hand, although often accompanied by emotion, reaches beyond regret to true repentance – genuine change. To emphasise the distinction, Paul highlights the ultimate result: worldly sorrow leads to death, but godly sorrow (as demonstrated by the Corinthians) leads to 'salvation without regret' – a phrase that highlights the immense worth of the salvation worked by Christ in those who truly repent (cf. 3.14, 16).

Paul's use of the demonstrative particle 'see' at the start of verse 11 specifies the fruit of the Corinthians' repentance. No longer are they sitting on the fence between Paul and his wrongdoer, avoiding the controversy and letting evil flourish. Now they are marked by 7 qualities: 'earnestness.... eagerness (to clear themselves)... indignation... fear (cf. 5.11)... longing (cf. 7.7)... zeal... punishment.' Clearly, the Corinthians' repentance was dramatic and immediate as they acted in accordance with the truth to realign themselves with Paul, with his gospel, and [therefore] with his God. They 'feared' for their own salvation; they were 'eager' to clear their name; they 'longed' to be reconciled to Paul again; they were 'zealous' for godliness and truth; and most significantly (the list builds to a climax in the original as Paul introduces each of the last 6 qualities with a word that means, 'and not only that but also...'), they 'punished' the wrongdoer.

By means of this decisive repentance, the Corinthians 'proved' or better 'commended' (same word as 3.1; 4.2; 5.12; 6.4; 10.12, 18; 12.11) themselves to be 'innocent.' As Paul had first 'commended' his own ministry to 'everyone's conscience' (4.2), so now the Corinthians demonstrate the validity of their own faith 'at every stage'. Of course, Paul is not suggesting that the Corinthians had been 'innocent' throughout the whole episode; rather, their repentance left them without a case to answer. Paul's severe letter had thus achieved its intended purpose (v12) of provoking the Corinthians to make a stand. No wonder he is comforted (v13a)!

3 ...vindicating his boasts & resulting in gospel unity, love & joy. (7.13b-16)

Beyond his own encouragement, Paul rejoices yet more at the joy of Titus who not only brought good news from Corinth but was himself 'refreshed in spirit' by the Corinthians. Indeed, even since his departure from them, Titus' affection for the Corinthians has continued to grow as he remembers the reception he received from them, and their obedience to his message (7.15). Thus, Paul's affection for the Corinthians (you are in my heart v3) has led to his boldness towards them in order that they might have opportunity to repent and also have restored relationship with Paul. And through their obedience and repentance, relationship with Titus flourishes too. Paul has been spared embarrassment (v14a) and his boasts about the Corinthians to Titus have been vindicated (v14b) with the result that he can rejoice (again!) in his 'perfect confidence' in the Corinthians.

Thus reassured, and full of joy, Paul is now able to press ahead with his appeal for the collection (which will also be carried out by Titus – hence his prominence in this chapter) to be completed (8.6).

Application

1. Learning from Paul's reassurance:

The Corinthians are far from the finished article. There are serious matters in the congregation that still need to be addressed. Yet they seem to have heeded the warning of his 'severe letter.' In the light of their repentance (and even though several key issues, like the collection, remain unresolved) Paul is willing to reassure them of their spiritual standing. Insofar as we share the Corinthians' 'zeal' and 'earnestness' for Paul and his ministry, and insofar as (like them) we have 'repented' (6.14-7.1) (and thus been reconciled both to God and to Paul), we too can benefit from the encouragement of verse 16. If we are for him, Paul has 'perfect confidence' in us.

2. Learning from Paul's example:

Again, the Corinthians were far from perfect and yet Paul derives real joy from their progress. Indeed, Paul's joy can be seen as a uniting theme for the whole passage: he rejoices (i) at the arrival and reports of Titus (vv.'s 5-7); (ii) at the Corinthians' repentance (vv.'s 8-12); and (iii) at Titus' ongoing joy (vv.'s 13-15). Do we have this same sense of unity with and love for other Christians? Do we stop to rejoice at the signs of grace that we see in our own congregation? Or do we take one another's spiritual progress for granted? Are we quicker to criticise the failings of others than to rejoice over their strengths? If we do need to 'speak boldly' with another Christian, do we do so because we love them, or because we feel superior to them? What are the specific signs of grace that you have observed in your group and over which you can rejoice?

3. Learning from Paul's pastoral skills:

After his 'painful visit' to them, it would have been easy for Paul to give up on the Corinthians and distance himself from them. Alternatively, he might have been tempted to gloss over the controversy and pretend that it had never happened. Paul chose neither path, determining instead to remain committed to the Corinthians (such was his love for them) and to address (again!) their mistake. Some of us are conflict averse and forget that love must sometimes lead to costly 'boldness'; some of us rush into conflict without much grace – both would do well to learn from Paul's model of loving, costly, truth-speaking, gracious commitment to those in his spiritual care.

4. Learning from Paul's theology:

At the same time, it would have been easy for the Corinthians to dismiss Paul's letter – he was out of sight; they could easily have put him out of mind. But when shown their failings and confronted with the truth of the gospel, they were quick to repent. Would we have responded in the same way? Further, how much of our own 'repentance' is worthy of the name? Paul is very aware of the difference between 'worldly' and 'godly' sorrow. Is the distinction evident in your own life? How would you explain the difference to a friend?

Main point

Take heart at the evidence of true repentance in your own life. Love other believers enough to call them back to God & His word; rejoice at the signs of true faith that you see in them.

2 Corinthians 8

Context

Paul writes 2 Corinthians in order that his readers 'may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not what is in the heart' (5.12). Evidently, some in Corinth despised weakness and suffering and revelled instead in outward appearance and glory. These false teachers sought both the allegiance and the money of the Corinthian Christians. As a result, the Corinthians had little time for Paul, the weak Apostle and were in no rush to share in a collection for the weak Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul therefore spends the bulk of his letter addressing these two symptoms in turn. In 2.14-7.4 he assured the Corinthians of his love for them, taught them a right view of the weakness of Christian ministry and urged them to make room in their hearts for him. Now, having received Titus' report of the Corinthians' new-found affection for him in 7.5-16 Paul is free in chapters 8 & 9 to turn his attention to the incomplete collection for impoverished Christians in Jerusalem (Rom 15.26 suggests that they are the intended recipients).

Structure of passage & section

8.1-15	The appeal for the gift: the need for generosity
8.1-5	The generosity of the Macedonians
8.6-12	The generosity of Christ & the exhortation to give
8.13-15	The aim of fairness
8.16-9.5	The administration of the gift
8.16-24	The delegates and their credentials
9.1-5	Paul's impending arrival & the need for readiness
9.6-15	The manner & results of generosity

Text notes

On the whole, Paul was greatly heartened by the news that Titus brought back from Corinth. Several matters, however, were of concern and Paul turns to address the first of them now: the failure of the Corinthians to complete the collection begun the previous year in aid of other impoverished believers. Paul first holds up the example of the Macedonians (8.1-5), then appeals for similar generosity from the Corinthians (8.6-12) before spelling out something of his own motivation for the appeal (8.13-15). In 8.16-24 Paul commends his emissaries to the Corinthians as faithful men, and again appeals to the Corinthians to make good on his boasts about them (cf. 7.14).

1. The appeal for the gift: the need for generosity, 8.1-15

a) The generosity of the Macedonian Christians: though afflicted, they beg to give (8.1-5)

It is very evident to all that God's grace has been at work among the Macedonian Christians (presumably he is referring the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica & Berea). Like Paul himself (7.4, 5), those Christians are experiencing both severe affliction and abundant joy as disciples of Christ (v2).

These Christians knew the very depths of poverty (a literal translation of the phrase rendered 'extreme poverty' in the ESV), and yet they 'overflowed' (the same word is translated 'shared abundantly' in 1.5, and as 'increase' in 4.15, and comes again in 8.7, 9.8 and 9.12, and also in its noun form at 8.14) in rich generosity towards others. The Macedonians' generosity impresses Paul, but he knows that it originates not in them, but in the grace of God. 'Grace' is itself a major theme of these 2 chapters, recurring with slightly different nuances some 10 times. Interestingly, the outworking of God's grace in them does not remove their affliction or alleviate their poverty – rather it causes them to open their hearts & their wallets to others in the midst of their affliction. As a result they give 'of their own free will' (cf. Titus in 8.17), 'begging earnestly' for the privilege of giving even 'beyond their means' for the relief of their fellow Christians. Thus, the Macedonians' generosity revealed what was going on in their heart – they had given 'of themselves' both to the Lord and to Paul himself (v5). This giving was more than writing a cheque – it was an expression of heartfelt commitment to God and His people. Would the Corinthians do the same? Will we?

b) The generosity of Christ and the exhortation to give (8.6-12)

As a result of the Macedonians' generosity (the Greek word translated 'accordingly' introduces a result clause), Paul has urged Titus to complete the work that he had previously begun. He also wants the Corinthians themselves to bring to completion (cf. v11) the 'act of grace' (v7) that they had begun the previous year. In that sense, by completing the collection, Titus is a model to the Corinthians of a believer who 'completes' the work that he has 'begun'.

The Corinthians are already 'overflowing' (cf. the Macedonians in v2) in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness (for Paul, 7.12), and in Paul's love for them (e.g. 6.11-12; 11.11; 12.15) – in other words they are excelling in activities that are local to and centred upon them, but, under pressure from the false teachers, and unlike the Macedonians (or indeed Jesus, v9), they are weak at serving those beyond their own borders. As they 'overflow' (it is a present indicative) in other graces, so now Paul urges them to 'overflow' in the grace of giving. Having given such a strong appeal, Paul acts quickly to clarify any potential misunderstandings. His appeal is:

- a litmus test not a command (v8-9): there is no doubt about Paul's love for them, but their love (for God and for other Christians) is in question. He does not command them to give therefore but says that their giving (or lack of it) will be indicative of their love (or lack of it). It is in this context that Paul cites the example of Christ. His self-giving was not coerced or reluctant but voluntary and motivated by love – he longed for His people to receive eternal riches. The Corinthians already know this about Jesus... and should therefore have an identical attitude to their own sacrifices for others.
- about actions not intentions (v10-11): a year ago, the Corinthians expressed the desire to help others... but good intentions do not alleviate poverty – it is time for concrete actions.
- about their readiness not their budget (v12): Paul does not want to induce guilt in those who are already struggling financially. His concern is for an attitude of readiness to give 'out of what you have', rather than to blame someone for 'what he does not have' – it is their willingness that makes their gift acceptable to God.

c) The aim of fairness (8.13-15)

The untranslated 'for' at the start of verse 13 links these verses back to what Paul has just said – they further explain why Paul does not want them to give out of what they do not have. His intention is not for the Corinthians to slip into poverty (the word translated 'burdened' in v13 is the same as the word translated 'afflicted' in v2) while the saints in Jerusalem climb up the social ladder to a life of ease – he simply wants 'fairness' (v13, 14). As the Corinthians give to the Jerusalemites, both parties will win: the Jerusalemites will benefit financially while the Corinthians receive the loving & prayerful fellowship of the Corinthians. Further, if the financial situation were ever reversed, the Jerusalemites would certainly help the Corinthians in the future.

'Fairness' is both the criterion (v13) and the goal (v14) of the collection. Paul is not suggesting that the worldwide church should pool their financial resources and live off their common purse in the manner of a cultic commune or an idealised Marxist society. Interestingly, the same word is used in Colossians 4.1 of the way that a master is to treat a slave – there is no suggestion in that context that 'exact equivalence' of lifestyle is envisaged. But that caveat should not obfuscate the challenge of these verses. Paul is clearly stating that for one believer to sit back in comfort while another is afflicted in poverty is inequitable and sub-Christian. Such is the unity and love that exists between all of God's people that there will be an equalisation of financial burdens and an equal supply of the necessities of life among us. John Calvin writes, 'I acknowledge indeed that we are not bound to such equality as would make it wrong for the rich to live more elegantly than the poor; but there must be such an equality that nobody starves and nobody hoards his abundance at another's expense.' Paul's quotation from Exodus 16.18 makes the same point. When God provided manna from heaven for His people, however much each one had gathered, no-one went hungry. Such will be the love that exists among God's people 'at the present time' (v14) – a reference to the whole 'day of salvation' between Christ's resurrection and His return.

2. The administration of the gift: the delegates & their credentials, 8.16-24

Having made his appeal to the Corinthians, having held up the example of the Lord Jesus and the Macedonians, and having clarified any potential misunderstandings that may have arisen, Paul now commends to the church Titus, his chief delegate (v16-17, 23), a brother already renowned among all the churches (v18-19), and a third

unnamed brother (v22). The money is going to be handled by trusted, earnest, proven gospel men.

At the same time, Paul takes the opportunity to defend himself from possible criticism and misunderstanding in regard to the collection (verses 19-21). The collection gives expression to Paul's goodwill for the saints and is intended 'for the glory of the Lord himself' (i.e. not Paul's, not the Macedonians', and not the Corinthians' either – cf. the attitude of the super-Apostles who love glory). Paul has also taken care to ensure that the administration of the gift will be above reproach in the eyes of God, and will be seen to be above reproach in the eyes of man (he is aware of Corinthian suspicions about his attitude to money in 4.2; 6.3; 7.2; 12.16-18, and knows that he cannot attack the super-Apostles for their money-grabbing hearts unless he himself is blameless).

Rather staggeringly, and almost in passing, Paul refers to the churches as 'the glory of Christ' in verse 23. No wonder it is so important to care for Christians in other churches – those churches are the means by which the radiance and beauty of Christ is reflected to the world. It is for that reason that Paul can call upon the Corinthians to 'give proof ... of [their] love' by giving financial aid to their needy brothers and sisters.

Application

1. A right attitude to God's people:

We live in one of the most individualistic cities in just about the most individualistic age of human history. We are encouraged everywhere to think of our own interests and to protect those who are closest to us. In this passage the Macedonians, Paul and Jesus all reflect a very different attitude, demonstrating enormous love and willingly enduring enormous sacrifice for the sake of others whom (presumably) they had never met. Is the grace of God equally evident in the way that we think of those in our own congregation? How about in our attitude to believers in other parts of the world? Are they out of sight and out of mind, or do we find ourselves begging for the privilege of alleviating their afflictions? This is a question of attitude, and therefore the application extends beyond donations, to prayer, and solidarity – are there other resources that we could share with our brothers and sisters around the world?

2. A right attitude to money:

The assumption that lies behind Paul's appeal to the Corinthians is that their money is not their own to dispose of as they please, but the Lord's and therefore they are to dispose of it as He pleases. Jesus Himself taught, 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matthew 6.21), and here Paul makes a similar point. What we do with our money will reveal what is really going on in our heart. If it is both my desire and my practice to use my money to alleviate the affliction of my brothers and sisters, it reveals that my love for others & for the Lord is genuine (v8). If, on the other hand, I hoard my money and have no concern for 'fairness', the converse is also true. Perhaps this is one area in which the world puts modern Christians to shame: think of the millions donated every year to causes like Comic Relief, and the generosity with which the world responds to those suffering from hurricanes, tsunamis or some other so-called natural disasters. When was the last time we gave money to help an impoverished Christian in another part of the country or the world?

3. A right concern for integrity:

It is striking that as well as appealing for the generosity of the Corinthians, Paul also assures them of the godly administration of the gift. Churches and Christian organisations are naïve to expect congregations to part with their money when they have put in place no safeguards against theft and dishonest gain.

Main point

In the light of God's grace to you in Christ and the example of other godly Christians, see that you excel in the grace of giving.

2 Corinthians 9

Context

The false teachers, who despised weakness, wanted both the allegiance and the money of the Corinthian Christians. Paul writes this letter to teach the Corinthians to renew their allegiance both to God and to himself, and to train them 'to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not what is in the heart' (5.12).

In chapters 8-9, he urges them to remember the grace of the Lord Jesus and to give expression to their love for their fellow Christians by completing the collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem that they had begun the previous year. Having appealed for their generosity (8.1-15) and begun to explain the administration of the gift (8.16-24), Paul now urges the Corinthians to be ready for his arrival (9.1-5) and expands upon the manner and results of the sort of generous giving in which he is encouraging the Corinthians to participate (9.6-15).

Structure of passage & section

8.1-15	The appeal for the gift: the need for generosity
8.1-5	The generosity of the Macedonians
8.6-12	The generosity of Christ & the exhortation to give
8.13-15	The aim of fairness
8.16-9.5	The administration of the gift
8.16-24	The delegates and their credentials
9.1-5	Paul's impending arrival & the need for readiness
9.6-15	The manner & results of generosity

Text notes

1. The administration of the gift: Paul's impending arrival and the need for readiness, 9.1-5

In one sense, Paul has no reason to write to the Corinthians about the collection. He has been 'boasting' (v2, 3, 4; cf. 8.24) of them to the Macedonian Christians, explaining that the Achaians (including the Corinthians) have been in a state of 'readiness' to support the collection for a year already. Indeed, Paul's reports of the Corinthians' zeal in this matter are part of the reason that the Macedonians themselves have proven so generous (v2).

It is to be absolutely certain that there will be no embarrassment either for Paul, or for the Corinthians themselves (v4) that Paul has despatched Titus and the two brothers (v3) to co-ordinate the collection in advance of Paul's own arrival (v5). The Corinthians have already 'promised' (v5) the money, but Paul is worried that if he has to collect it in person upon his arrival, it will seem less like a voluntary donation and more like a tax.

Far from playing off the Macedonian and Corinthian churches against each other, Paul is seeking to preserve the reputation of the Corinthians lest they lose face and the loving bond that Paul has been endeavouring to create between the provinces be shattered.

2. The manner and results of generosity, 9.6-15

Having urged the Corinthians to spare him embarrassment, Paul now gives them six further spurs towards lavish generosity.

a) God honours bountiful generosity, v6

Paul's emphatic, 'The point is this:' serves to throw the spotlight on the general principle that follows. The agricultural metaphor (which runs all the way to verse 10 in various guises) would not have been lost on the Corinthians: there is a direct correlation between the amount of seed that a farmer sows and the amount of harvest that he reaps. No miserly farmer reaps a bumper harvest, but the one who sows generously reaps a great reward at harvest-time. The application to the Corinthians is clear: their freely-given, generous contribution to the collection will produce a bountiful yield.

b) God loves a cheerful giver, v7

The responsibility to respond to Paul's appeal falls at the level of the individual – each one is to determine how

he will respond, and according to the following principles: their gift should not be (literally) 'out of sorrow [or] out of coercion', but responsibly ('as he has made up his own mind') and 'cheerfully' (the Greek word is the source of our English word 'hilarious'). Paul's allusion to Proverbs 22.9 at the end of verse 7 is inspiring: as the Corinthians give of their excess for the sake of their impoverished brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, they will cause their Father in heaven to smile upon them.

c) God is no man's debtor, v8-9

Paul again anticipates an objection from those who fear that any contribution will leave them impoverished (cf. 8.12-14). As Paul Barnett puts it, 'God is greater than either their needs or their fears' – the verse literally begins, 'Able is God...' Thus God is able to make his grace 'overflow' (same word as 8.2, 7 and 9.12) to the Corinthians so that they in turn can 'overflow' in good works for Him (cf. the same principle in 1.3-11). Barnett captures it well once again, 'There are few evidences of God's power so impelling as the transformation from tight-fisted meanness to open-handed generosity.' Notice the comprehensiveness of Paul's language: God is able to make all grace abound so that having sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. Paul finds support for such exuberant thought in Psalm 112.9 – because they can be confident that God will prove himself faithful to them and will never abandon them, the Corinthians are liberated for extravagant generosity to others.

d) God turns money into righteousness, v10

In some ways this verse repeats the argument of verse 8; but Paul's use of the 'righteousness' language from his OT citation enables him to take his thought one stage further. The God who is sovereign over all things will take the money that He Himself enables the Corinthians to sow and turn it into a harvest of their own righteousness. That is, as they give generously, so they demonstrate or prove themselves (cf. 8.8 and 8.24) to be genuine followers of Christ and thereby better live out the forensic righteousness which is theirs in Christ (5.21). Their generosity does not earn them righteous brownie points before God, but it will be a means of their transformation into the righteous people that God has already made them to be.

e) God enriches the generous, v11, 14

Paul now specifies further the 'enrichment' that will come to the Corinthians themselves as a consequence of their generosity. They will be enriched 'in every way' (v11), as were the Macedonians in chapter 8: they were given grace in the midst of their affliction and poverty with the result that they overflowed in generosity. Paul seems to have at least a couple of things in mind: first, they will know that their gift results in God's praise (see sub-point (f) below); but second, the partnership that the Corinthians enjoy with their fellow Christians will be strengthened (v14) as those who hear of their generosity both love and pray for the Corinthians.

f) God will be praised because of you, v12b-13, 15

Perhaps the greatest of all motivations is saved to the end. As others see the grace of God at work in the Corinthians, not only will they love and pray for them personally, but much more significantly, they will abound in praise for the God whose grace overflowed to such dramatic effect in the lives of the dilatory Corinthians (cf. 8.19 where grace leads to glory). What greater motivation could exist for writing a cheque? The simple and free-willed stroke of my pen will result in the praise of my Father in heaven.

Application

1. The grace of God

From first to last, chapters 8 and 9 have been about the grace of God. It is the grace of God demonstrated in the Lord Jesus and in other generous Christians that spurs us on to give. It is the gracious character of God that calms our fears and thereby liberates us to give. It is the grace of God at work in us that enables us to give (as it enabled the Macedonians to abundant generosity in chapter 8). And the end result of our giving is that God is praised for His grace. There is a word here for the tight-fisted and also for the proud benefactor. If I hold my money tight and hoard it away, have I really grasped the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ? And if I pat myself on the back for my generosity to others, have I forgotten both the source of my money (Him) and the origin of my generosity (His grace)? Am I ever in danger of using my giving to claim for myself praise that belongs to God alone (9.15)?

2. The grace of giving

Paul has been writing to a particular group of Christians about a particular collection for impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. Modern readers of 2 Corinthians are not being asked to contribute to that collection – the Apostle Paul is not about to arrive in person with a collection bowl. However, many of the same principles and motivations apply directly to us. It is worth stopping to ask: is my giving zealous, bountiful, deliberate, hilarious and for God's praise?

Main point

The grace of God enables His people to support one another with cheerful and lavish generosity, resulting in their righteousness and His praise.

2 Corinthians 10.1-18

Context

This passage marks the beginning of the third and final major section of 2 Corinthians. Having defined and defended his own ministry in 2.14-7.2, and appealed to the Corinthians to complete their collection in support of the impoverished saints in Jerusalem (chapters 8-9), Paul's tone now becomes more strident. He rebukes the Corinthians for an assortment of vices (12.20-21) in the hope that he will not have to be severe with them when he visits (13.10). But his main focus is to chastise them for being hoodwinked by a different gospel about a different Jesus and led astray from their sincere devotion to Christ (11.2-4). They think they are wise; in reality they are accepting the teaching of fools (11.19).

The chapters are marked by some of the most passionate and personal language anywhere in the New Testament as Paul 'pulls out all the stops in trying to rally the Corinthians to his point of view and to reject these false teachers who have beguiled and badgered them' (Garland). He labels the false teachers as 'false apostles, deceitful workers, and ministers of Satan' (11.13-15) – they are characterised by 'illegitimacy and ignorant pretentiousness.'

Many commentators have noted the sharp change in tone between chapters 9 and 10, and presumed that chapters 10-13 were not originally a part of the letter – perhaps a later addition from a different author. But there is no good reason for denying the unity of the letter and many of the themes that we have noted in the letter thus far recur in this section. For example, as Paul 'appealed' to the Corinthians to be reconciled to God (5.20), so these chapters are a further extended 'appeal' (10.1-2) for their repentance. Then, as he rebutted foolish triumphalism earlier in the letter (2.14-16; 5.12), now he rejoices in the strength that comes from weakness (e.g. 12.8). Third, Paul continues to defend his own status as apostle. Fourth, the issue of 'commendation' resurfaces (e.g. 3.1; 4.2; 5.12; 6.4; 10.12; 10.18 and 12.11). Fifth, much of the material from chapter 1 resurfaces (e.g. boasting, according to the flesh, vacillation and inconsistency, abundance). And so we could go on (further arguments for the unity of the letter can be found in the commentaries by, for example, Garland and Barnett).

But even if 2 Corinthians is a single letter by a single author, a question remains. Given that Paul has already spent several chapters defending his ministry (2.14-7.2), why does he return to the same subject in chapters 10-13? It is one of the more puzzling questions in understanding 2 Corinthians. Some suggest that while 2.14-7.2 is primarily a defence of Paul's past ministry among the Corinthians (in person and by letter), chapters 10-13 serve primarily to prepare the Corinthians for his future visit (10.2, 6; 11.9; 12.14, 20, 21; 13.1, 2, 10). There might be some truth in the suggestion, but the categories don't appear to be quite so tightly defined within the letter itself.

Another suggestion (found, *inter alia*, in Don Carson's excellent little book on this section, 'From Triumphalism to Maturity') is that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians over a period of time. The argument runs that Paul wrote the very positive chapter 7 upon hearing Titus' report, thinking that the issues of chapters 2-7 had been resolved in Corinth. But then he received further alarming news (perhaps from a different source), informing him that the super-Apostles had recently gained new ground in Corinth. On this understanding, chapters 10-13 are a renewed appeal to the Corinthians necessitated by the deteriorating situation. Again, there may be some merit in the suggestion, and it certainly explains the change in tone from chapter 7 to chapter 10. Its major weakness is that there is no suggestion in the letter itself that Paul received new information.

Whatever the precise background, these last chapters highlight again the contrast between genuine spiritual power and empty triumphalism; between the boasting in Christ and boasting in self; between a weak-looking ministry that is of God, and an impressive-looking ministry that is of the devil. As we study them, our allegiance to Paul and to God will again be searched. May we pass the test (13.5-6).

Structure of passage

10.1-11	Paul's plea not to have to be bold when he comes
10.12-18	Proper commendation and appropriate boasting

Text notes

1. Paul's plea not to have to be bold when he comes, 10.1-11

Most of the sub-sections of text in chapters 10-13 are framed by an 'inclusio' – a word that occurs at both the beginning and the end of the unit. In this case, the idea of Paul's differing manner when 'face to face' or 'present' and 'absent' or 'away' frame the passage (vv.'s 1, 10 and 11).

He is accused by the super-Apostles of being 'humble' and 'weak' in person, an insignificant orator who only manages to be 'bold', 'weighty' and 'strong' when hiding behind a letter – his critics even dare to say that it is he who 'walks according to the flesh' (v2). In the light of these accusations, Paul 'entreats' and even 'begs' (this is an emotive appeal, reminiscent of 5.20-6.2) the Corinthians to renew their allegiance to him in advance of his visit to them. Ironically, he appeals to them in a letter on the basis of the 'meekness and gentleness of Christ' lest he have to be forceful with them in person. In the light of Christ's own 'meekness and gentleness' Paul is not too concerned with a charge of being humble (v1)!

However, although Paul is weak (in that sense, he does 'walk according to the flesh' v3, cf. 4.10-12), his ministry is not of the flesh (cf. 1.12 where 'earthly wisdom' is literally 'fleshly wisdom'), but of the Spirit, for the gospel has made him competent (3.6). As he proclaims Christ Jesus as Lord and himself as a servant (Paul's ministry was defined for us in these terms earlier in the letter; see 4.5), he engages in a ministry which has divine power to overcome those who oppose the true knowledge of God. Paul is speaking specifically about the discipline that he will enact (if necessary) against those who accuse him of walking according to the flesh and more generally about his wider ministry. As he proclaims the gospel, and as he applies the gospel in church discipline, so God works to subdue his enemies – the military metaphor is taken from a siege: strongholds are destroyed; captives are taken and offenders are punished. Although only 'some' speak against Paul, it is 'every' thought that will be taken captive – this could suggest again that although the majority in Corinth were not explicitly opposing Paul, they were tolerating those who did. Either way, Paul will not be afraid to punish his critics when he arrives (v6 – the power of such discipline was confirmed by the success of his earlier severe letter; cf. chapter 7 again), but his prior concern is for the obedient allegiance of the wider Corinthian church.

Verses 7-11 begin with a direct appeal to the Corinthians to face facts. Although some pride themselves on their relationship to Christ and question Paul's, Paul wants the Corinthians to remember his standing as a disciple and Apostle of Christ – evidenced in part by the fruit of his ministry in Corinth itself. Paul has been given authority from the Lord Jesus and he has been given it for the express purpose of building up the saints and not for destroying them (cf. 13.10; see also 1 Cor 3.10-17). In other words, although Paul's ministry carries with it divine power to destroy strongholds (v4 – same word), his purpose is never to destroy, but to build up God's people. He will not be afraid to exercise his full authority when he gets to Corinth if he has to, verses 9-11, but that is not his desire – rather he writes now, speaking freely of his authority, in the hope that they will wise up and put matters right before his arrival (13.10 again). In that sense, the threat or warning of church discipline is itself a means of building up the church in Corinth.

2. Proper commendation and appropriate boasting, 10.12-18

As chapter 10 progresses, the super-Apostles come ever more into Paul's firing line: his doubter in v2 is within the church for he is a potential recipient of church discipline); the 'anyone' in verse 7 could be either inside or outside the church; but by the time we get to verse 12, Paul is speaking about the super-Apostles in particular. They remain central to his argument all the way to 12.13.

Paul (laced with irony) declares that he lacks the courage to compare himself with the self-commending super-Apostles (v12). In reality, their self-commendation is empty: i) while they judge themselves by no higher standard than themselves, Paul's authority comes straight from Christ (v8); ii) while they overextend themselves and boast well beyond the limits of their true spiritual influence (v13-14), Paul boasts only of the work that God has already done through him (i.e. bringing the gospel to Corinth and establishing the church there); iii) while their ambition is to demonstrate their own superiority for their own ends (cf. 11.20; they wanted to prove their superiority especially with reference to their rhetoric (11.5-6) and visions (12.1)), Paul's ambition is to garner loyalty from the Corinthians (for their sake and so that he can preach the gospel in lands beyond, v16 – note that Paul again uses the ideas of 'abundance' and 'overflow' to express how the true gospel message works and to contrast his own ministry with the

destructive methods and message of the false teachers); and iv) while they have no approval from God, Paul does (v18).

Thus, while stating that he will not compare himself with the super-Apostles, Paul has begun to do precisely that. But his aim is not to boast in himself (v17), but rather, by pointing to his own weakness (e.g. 11.16ff), to boast in the Lord.

Application

1. Whole-hearted allegiance to Paul

Alarm bells are ringing in Paul's head about the Corinthians. Some of them are explicitly questioning his authority as an Apostle and accusing him of being tough on paper and weak in person. He wants them to acknowledge the source, scope and purpose of his authority, and to be in no doubt that he will exercise discipline against those who question him. It is once again striking that doubting Paul's authority is such a serious crime (verses 4-6). Is our allegiance to Paul unreserved? What about the allegiance of our Christian friends? How would you defend Paul against the charge of being 'over-bearing' and 'extremist'? What would Paul write to us if he were about to visit St Helens? It is worth noting that a concern for gospel growth seems to be the necessary outcome of allegiance to Paul (v15-16).

On a secondary level, as Paul reintroduces to us the big themes of 'commendation' and 'boasting', we are again asked whether we evaluate Christian ministries and speak about them in the same way that Paul does. How much of our evaluation of Christian ministers / ministries is done horizontally, by comparing the work with another? Have we ever been guilty of taking credit for the work of another like false teachers do?

2. The power & purpose of ministry

In an age when Christian leaders parade around like indestructible machines, glorying in the size of their congregations and the number of churches they have planted, it is striking that for Paul, the weakness of the Christian minister is a given. He walks in the flesh; in and of himself he has no power at all to do anything for God. But that does not make him impotent, for in His grace, God gave to Paul (and to all those who remain faithful to the apostolic word today) the authority to preach the gospel of Christ. Such word ministry is not weak and ineffectual but is an unleashing of divine power to overcome God's enemies – either by conversion, or by church discipline. Various questions follow: do we share Paul's conviction about the weakness of man? And do we share his conviction about the power of proclaiming Christ? If so, how does that effect the way that we pray for Christian leaders? Then, do we share Paul's convictions about Christian growth? Paul's hope in verses 15-16 is for the Corinthians to grow in order that they might partner with him in fresh gospel outreach. Do we have that sort of big vision for those with whom we are working, or do we suffer from stunted spiritual ambition?

But for all his military language, Paul cannot be accused of being unnecessarily pugilistic. He recognises that Christ gave him his apostolic authority to build people up and not to tear them down. Even when he is warning a believer about potential church discipline, he aims for their correction and restoration. Is that the tone of your leadership of your small group? Is it the tone of your Christian friendships? Is it the tone of your parenting (if you have children)?

Main point

Evaluate correctly those who claim to speak for Christ; acknowledge the authority and power of authentic gospel ministry and be unswerving in your loyalty to it.

2 Corinthians 11.1-15

Context

Chapters 10-13 of this great letter are Paul's emotionally charged warning to the Corinthians to put matters right in advance of his visit so that he will not have to deal with them himself upon his arrival. Different groups in Corinth come more clearly into view as the section proceeds – those who regard Paul as spiritually powerless (10.1-11), the super-Apostles (10.12-12.13) and the morally wayward (12.14-13.3), but Paul's primary concern continues to be the Corinthians themselves. In the face of the differing challenges of these 3 groups inside and outside of the congregation, how will the quiet majority in the church respond? Will they put things right before Paul's arrival (13.10)? Or will they be 'led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (11.3)?

At the end of chapter 10, Paul attacked his opponents for 'their self-praise and their pointless comparisons and identified the difference between illegitimate and legitimate boasting. To speak pridefully of oneself is improper; to speak proudly about the Lord is commendable' (Harris). All of which makes Paul's famous 'Fool's speech' from 11.1-12.13 rather surprising as he adopts (temporarily and ironically) the very tactics of his opponents. In the speech Paul will boast 'as a fool' (11.17-18; 12.11) – i.e. according to the flesh; he will engage in 'unadulterated self-eulogising, speaking of his own pedigree, achievements, and privileges in comparison with the lineage and accomplishments of the rival missionaries in Corinth' (Harris again). He does so to pull the rug out from under his opponents' feet and as a prime biblical example of 'answering a fool according to his folly' (Prov 26.4-5). He is in a difficult position: if he refuses to engage in these tactics, he risks losing the Corinthians (11.4-5); but if he adopts the methods of his opponents, he risks being misunderstood. His solution is brilliant – to announce (11.1, 18; 12.11) that he is speaking as a fool and then to boast, not in his own strength, but in his weakness! His aim is not to win the super-Apostles themselves, but once again to guard the Corinthians against falling for their lies (see 5.12 yet again; note also that Paul addresses similar themes in 1 Corinthians 1-2).

Structure of passage

- 11.1-4 A single-minded concern
- 11.5-12 A strident defence
- 11.13-15 A stinging attack

Text notes

1. A single-minded concern, 11.1-4

Before beginning his 'foolish boasting' in earnest (11.21b), Paul asks the Corinthians to humour him in his unpleasant but necessary style of argument. This opening paragraph explains why Paul felt it necessary to resort to such measures as he reveals his agenda (v2), his concern (v3) and the evidence that lies behind it (v4).

a) Paul's agenda in Corinth, v2

Notice Paul's passionate possessiveness to present people perfect at the Parousia! Or without the alliteration, notice his big agenda for the Corinthians and, by extension, all those among whom he ministered (see 1.14 where Paul's concern was for the Corinthians to be devoted to him on the last day for to be devoted to Paul is to be devoted to Christ; cf. also Colossians 1.28-29). His concern is not short-term – that he might win their allegiance in this particular battle with his opponents as an end in itself; his concern is eschatological – that the Corinthians might be ready to meet Christ, their bridegroom, on the last day.

Elsewhere in the Corinthian correspondence Paul refers to those who have been converted through his ministry as his 'children' (e.g. 1 Cor 4.14; 2 Cor 6.13) and himself as their 'father in Christ Jesus' (e.g. 1 Cor 4.15). Here in verse 2, he views himself as the father of the bride because his desire to present the church to her heavenly bridegroom as a 'pure virgin' corresponds to a father's obligation to protect the virginity of his daughter between betrothal and marriage (see Deuteronomy 22.13-21). Throughout the Bible (e.g. Genesis 2; Isaiah 62; Hosea; John 2; Ephesians 5; Revelation 21), bride-bridegroom language describes the relationship between God and His people. Here, Paul feels a deeply jealous desire to protect the Corinthians from making the same whorish mistakes as Israel (e.g. Jeremiah 3.1-21; Hosea 2.2; 4.12). His thought here suggests that he views the prior conversion of the Corinthians as being equivalent to betrothal or engagement; his evangelistic work, in

that sense, is done, but his pastoral work will remain incomplete until the great wedding day to come. In the meantime, he aims 'to preserve the virginity of the infant church right up to her wedding day (v2), to maintain her exclusive devotion to Christ (cf. v3), and to counter the efforts of foreign lovers (such as his rivals at Corinth) to entice her away from her one and only husband (cf. v4)' (Harris).

b) Paul's concern for the Corinthians, vv.'s 3-4

This short paragraph goes a long way to explaining the severity with which Paul viewed the situation in Corinth. His daughter is engaged to be married but a dubious impostor has arrived on the scene and seeks to defile her. What is worse, there is evidence that she is being tempted by his lies (v4) – no wonder Paul is willing to do anything – even to boast like a fool – to protect her. He fears that she might not know what is good for her, and that just like Eve before her, she will be deceived into error.

Two things are worth noting. First, although many today think that 'false teaching' is either a null set or nothing very much to be worried about, Paul equates it with the work of the devil. Second, Paul draws a close link between a believer's 'mind' and his or her 'devotion' to Christ. He is anxious that false teaching will seduce the 'thoughts' of the Corinthians church and that her 'sincere and pure' devotion to Christ will be corrupted. For Paul then, there is no chasm between the 'beliefs' that a believer has about Christ and the 'love' that a believer has for Christ.

Paul had good reason to be concerned, for there was already some evidence of the Corinthians' seduction into lies. The message of the super-Apostles was alarmingly similar to Paul's own: they spoke of Jesus, the Spirit and the gospel. What some of the Corinthians (perhaps those of Jewish origin?), and many today, had failed to notice was that the message they were beginning to embrace was in fact of a different Jesus, a different Spirit, and a different gospel. The Corinthians were 'bearing with' (ESV translation: 'put up with', v4; cf. vv.'s 19-20) the super-Apostles – Paul's foolish speech calls them to 'bear with' (v1) him instead.

2. A strident defence, 11.5-12

The choice facing the Corinthians is simple: will they side with the super-Apostles, or will they remain loyal to their weak Apostle. The super-Apostles (and perhaps some of their 'hosts' in Corinth) thought Paul to be an 'inferior' class of Apostle. His speech was 'unskilled', and what is more, he had refused to accept money from the Corinthians at every turn (Paul's financial independence had been a sore point throughout his ministry in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 9.12-18)). In these verses Paul defends himself against these 2 charges before saying what he really thinks about the super-Apostles in 11.13ff.

a) I am not inferior, 11.5-6

Throughout this speech Paul is happy to concede his own weakness but he never once yields ground to the super-Apostles on issues of truth or authenticity. Here, he acknowledges that even if (as they suggest) he is unskilled in the art of worldly oratory (cf. 10.10; 1 Cor 2.1-4), the content of his message is unimpeachable. Paul has true 'knowledge' – the context suggests not just knowledge of Jesus, the gospel and the Spirit (11.4) but more broadly 'the knowledge of God' (10.5). Indeed, he has spent the last 6 or 7 years demonstrating his knowledge to them in every way (in person, as a preacher during his 2 visits to them, and also in writing – this is now his fourth letter to them). The super-Apostles can make no such claim.

b) I love you, 11.7-12

The super-Apostles are very shrewd in attacking Paul on the issue of money, especially in Corinth. They want the validation that would come from saying that they work on the same terms as Paul (v12). The problem is that they do not, for while they charge for their services (they are the peddlers of God's word that we met in 2.17), Paul has never received a penny from the Corinthians (10.7-9). The super-apostles are attempting, therefore, to stir up the pre-existing tensions that exist between Paul and the Corinthians on the subject of money in the hope that Paul will be persuaded to accept some Corinthian money. As soon as he does so, the superlative Apostles will be free to charge whatever they like for their 'superior' ministry.

The super-Apostles therefore accuse Paul of 2 financial failings: i) he has 'sinned against' the Corinthians by refusing to accept their support which (in their mind) shows that he does not love the Corinthians; ii) by contrast, he has accepted support from the impoverished Macedonians (tantamount to stealing from the poor

in their mind) which shows that he favours the Macedonians over the Corinthians. The Corinthians have begun to think, 'If Paul really loved us, he would gladly accept our financial support.' (In reality, although Paul does not want their money for himself, he covets it for the poor Christians in Judea, cf. chapters 8-9, and to facilitate gospel ministry further afield (10.16 may have some financial implications)).

In response, Paul refuses to change his practice (in fact, he will continue to boast of his financial independence all over Achaia – much to the chagrin of the super-Apostles, no doubt!) and appeals to God as his witness that his love for the Corinthians is genuine. His aim in so doing is to undermine the claims of the super-Apostles.

3. A stinging attack, 11.13-15

If verses 3-5 are a slightly-veiled attack on the super-Apostles, Paul pulls no punches in verses 13-15 as he questions even their salvation. As Satan pretends to be an angel of light (to Eve in the garden?), so too these super-Apostles pretend to be 'servants of righteousness' – making much of the Mosaic covenant and much of 'glory' (cf. chapter 3-4). But even if the Corinthians are fooled (v4), Paul is not, and neither is God. These men are in fact 'false apostles' (the word is pseudo-Apostles – their very nature is deceit), 'deceitful workmen' (the true minister is meant to do his best to present himself as an 'approved workman' by handling the word of truth correctly, 2 Timothy 2.15); they are mere masqueraders. They will however meet the eternal end that their deeds deserve.

Application

As Paul builds towards his fool's speech (11.21bff), he again reiterates the nature of his commitment to the Corinthians and the integrity of his own ministry in distinction from those who teach a different Jesus. His primary aim is to undermine his opponents and to secure the allegiance of the Corinthians. What is unique about chapter 11, however, is Paul's underlining of the eternal perspective that drives his ministry of truth-proclamation and error-refutation.

1. The goal of true gospel ministry.

Paul is not parochial – his concern is not for his own empire and sphere of influence; his concern is for the Corinthians and especially for what will become of them if they continue to be seduced by the super-Apostles. As we observe his example, it not only teaches us to have confidence in him as our Apostle but also to imitate him in our own ministry. We can very easily be selfish in our dealings with those in our group, desiring their allegiance because we like having influence over them and because it makes us feel more important. Again, we can be impatient with them, forcing the pace at which God is at work in them, pressurising them to conform to the standards of our particular Christian sub-culture. Alternatively we can be careless with those that God has entrusted to us at some point, regretting their movement away from Christ or into false teaching, but doing very little to help.

Paul's concern was not for himself but for the Corinthians themselves – he was selfless; his concern was not next week or even next year but eternal – he was patient; and he was not negligent towards the Corinthians – he was filled with jealous love for them and their spiritual well-being. Give thanks for Paul, and think specifically about how each of the characteristics that Paul demonstrates here might better be reflected in your own ministry.

2. The seriousness of false gospel ministry.

Reflect on the following sentence (only slightly adapted from something said to me the day before I wrote these notes), 'I dislike denominational barriers – it doesn't matter whether we are Anglican, Baptist, Catholic or Mormon – it just matters that we believe in Jesus.' How would you respond in the light of 2 Cor 11.1-15?

We live in a society that 'listens with its eyes and thinks with its feelings.' Truth does not matter very much. What matters is appearance and emotion. If a Christian leader looks good, sounds impressive, engages well, and uses all the right buzz-words, we accept him readily enough, even if we know that he might be a 'bit funny' on a few bits of doctrine here and there. It is no doubt right that we should be generous to other Christian leaders; a witch-hunt, anathematising everyone mentality can easily grow up in a church. But truth matters. If someone teaches a different Jesus, a different means by which we receive 'righteousness' from God, he is not merely proffering a different opinion, he is a servant of Satan. It is not enough that someone uses the right biblical language, the question is, 'What does he mean when he uses words like 'gospel' and 'Spirit'? Is the Jesus of which he speaks the Jesus of the

Bible, or a different Jesus altogether? As a believer, beware the impostor, he can damage your soul. As a teacher, make sure that your message is the right one!

Main point

Don't be deceived by false teachers – they are servants of Satan; instead, have confidence in Paul's message and his love for God's people, and remain steadfast in your mind, devoted to Christ until the last day.

2 Corinthians 11.16-33

Context

Paul's aim in this letter is to give his Corinthian readers 'cause to boast about him so that they may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart' (5.12). Chapters 10-13 fit that overall aim perfectly as Paul launches his most specific attack yet on his externally-minded opponents the super-Apostles, and once again gives his readers good reason to boast in him. The dilemma facing Paul as he does so is simple: if your audience are already beginning to adopt the standards of your self-magnifying opponents, how do you win them back? His solution is to engage in a little boasting of his own.

In 10.12-18 Paul identified two types of boasting, the improper (boasting about oneself, as typified by his opponents) and the proper (boasting about the Lord, as typified by Paul). But in 11.1 he asked his readers to allow him to indulge in a little 'foolishness' as he began to play the super-Apostles at their own game – the desperate times in Corinth call for desperate measures.

In this passage we learn the nature of the 'foolishness' in which Paul will engage – he will boast like a fool in an effort to wake his readers up to the abusive folly of his opponents.

Structure of passage

11.16-21a Who is the real fool?

11.21b-33 Paul's foolish boast: equal heritage and superior suffering

Text notes

1. Who is the real fool? 11.16-21a

If you were giving out an award for 'foolishness' in verses 16-21a, to whom would you give it? There are 3 candidates: Paul, the super-Apostles and the Corinthians.

a) Paul

Although Paul decides, for the sake of the church in Corinth, to play his opponents at their own game and to debate according to their rules (for a time), he does so reluctantly. The section is laced with almost apologetic explanations for the tactic. He is having to speak (temporarily and necessarily) in a way that is not condoned by the Lord (v17), that is 'according to the flesh' (v18), and that is not really profitable (12.1). But he has no choice – the Corinthians have forced him into it (12.11). As Harris puts it, 'Paul's wearing of a fool's mask was the result, not of disinterested experimentation on his part, but of the Corinthians' immaturity in being dazzled by the bare-faced bragging of the intruders.' He adopts his opponents' tactics to win back the affection and allegiance of his Corinthian converts. Paul then is no fool; rather, his 'fool's speech' is an example of his pastoral flexibility (1 Cor 9.22) – he is willing to become like a fool to win those who have been seduced by fools!

b) The super-Apostles

The super-Apostles 'boast according to the flesh', evaluating themselves and others from a purely worldly point of view, priding themselves on their ancestry and heritage (11.22ff), and ignoring the commendation of the only one who really matters (cf. 10.18). They are fools (11.19a), serious contenders for the award.

c) The Corinthians

I think, however, that I might give the award to the Corinthians themselves. They pride themselves on being wise (v19b has echoes of 1 Corinthians), but their lives are marked by folly. They 'bear with' (the same word occurs in v1, 4, 19, 20 and frames Paul's introduction to his 'foolish speech') not only the doctrine of the super-Apostles (v4), but their abuse as well (v20). Paul gives 5 examples of this abuse:

i) Enslavement: The gospel liberates, but the super-Apostles it seems were re-introducing the Mosaic law in Corinth (cf. 3.1-18), reducing the Corinthians once again to servitude.

ii) Exploitation: The super-Apostles were also 'devouring' the Corinthians (as the scribes had 'devoured'

widows' houses before them, Mark 12.40), living as parasites off the church, eating them out of house and home, demanding payment for every service (cf. the false shepherds of Ezek 34.3-4, 8 and the thieves of John 10.10).

iii) Entrapment: In 12.20 Paul is accused of 'entrapping' (same word) the Corinthians by trickery. The reality is different – it was the super-Apostles who had ensnared the Corinthians (the word can be used in contexts of fishing / hunting) and taken control of them... and the Corinthians had let them.

iv) Self-exaltation: The intruders did not just exalt themselves or 'put on airs'; they exalted themselves over the Corinthians – looking down on them, and treating them with arrogant dismissiveness.

v) Injury: A blow to the cheek, especially the right cheek, was a means of humiliation. Here it may be figurative, referring to no more than verbal attack. But a literal referent is not unlikely – it was quite common for a religious leader to bully a subordinate, which might be why an elder must not be 'violent' or 'given to blows' in 1 Tim 3.3 & Titus 1.7.

The super-Apostles could not have been more different from Paul – they made themselves 'lord' over the Corinthians while Paul made himself their 'slave' (4.5; cf. 1.24), refusing to take their money (11.7-12), and protecting them from spiritual harm (11.1). If his refusal to engage in this fivefold form of abuse renders Paul open to the charge of weakness, it is a charge that he will gladly bear, for he loves them (11.21a).

2. Paul's foolish boast: equal heritage & superior suffering, 11.21b-33

Although Paul censured his rivals for indulging in pointless comparison (10.12) and boasting (10.13, 15-16), he now begins his 'Fool's Speech' (11.21b-12.13) in an effort to win back the allegiance of the Corinthians in advance of his visit (13.10). His gnawing reluctance to engage in boasting is again evinced, this time by 2 caveats: 'I am speaking as a fool' (v21b) and 'I am talking like a madman' (v23). Nevertheless, Paul highlights two general areas of equality between him and the Corinthians and then an extended description of his 'better' service of Christ.

a) Equality in bold boasting, v21b

He knows it is folly (he castigated his rivals for this boasting in 10.12 and described it as fleshly in 11.18), but Paul is determined to match his opponents in the art of boasting (specifically about heritage and servanthood).

b) Equality in heritage, v22

Apparently the super-Apostles prided themselves on their 'Jewishness' – they came from the right stock. Perhaps they were simply magnifying their own credentials in a bid for authority, or perhaps they were accusing Paul specifically of being a slightly inferior 'Hellenistic Jew' (even though he had Jewish parents, he was born in Tarsus which lay beyond the borders of Israel). Either way, Paul is their ancestral equal: a Hebrew (probably meaning that he is not just Aramaic speaking but that he is descended from a Palestinian family), an Israelite ('Jew' could be a derogatory term, and referred to anyone who adhered to Jewish ancestral customs, but an Israelite was necessarily descended from Jacob (Gen 32.28, 32)), the offspring of Abraham (an heir of the promises made to Abraham). Thus the list of 3 designations seems to have a slight progression: from nationality to theocracy to messianic blessing.

Paul knows that his authenticity is not based on his ancestry but on his knowledge of God, his message, the fruit of his ministry and upon his love for the Corinthians, but for the sake of his foolish Corinthian friends, he emphasises his ancestry in the hope that they will listen to his warning.

c) Superiority as a servant, vv.'s 23-29

The super-Apostles proclaimed themselves to be authentic servants of Jesus Christ – but were in fact servants of Satan (11.15), heralds of a different Jesus (11.4). Paul here claims not mere equality with his opponents but clear superiority as he begins the third and longest of the four lists of suffering in the letter (4.8-9; 6.4b-5, 8-10 and 12.10 are the others). To prove his point he cites four examples of general suffering (v23); five ways in which he was repeatedly exposed to death (v24-25); eight dangers particularly associated with his travelling ministry (v26); five examples of physical deprivation (v27), and an insight into the anxiety he felt for all the churches with which he had been associated (v28-29). Specifically, Paul empathised with the weakness felt by

individual believers and felt an intense and jealous protection of their spiritual welfare (as this chapter demonstrates so well, cf. v2).

Thus, the 26 hardships listed in 'verses 23-29 are an avalanche of hardships that sweeps the reader along in dazed disbelief' (Harris). The Corinthians may have been surprised that Paul would seek to demonstrate his superiority by pointing not to his successful church planting ministry but to his weakness and suffering, but we should not be. He has told us already that his afflictions commend him as a true worker of Christ (6.4), and that the life of Jesus is manifested because of them (4.12), that he is no more than a 'jar of clay' and that all of the power in his ministry comes from the 'treasure' within – the gospel that saves (4.7).

d) Boasting in weakness, vv.'s 30-33

The paragraph is transitional. Having mentioned his weakness in 11.29, Paul now tells us of his desire to 'boast of the things that show [his] weakness'. It is a theme that will dominate until 12.10. Here in particular, having called God Himself as his witness (v31; cf. 5.11; 11.10) he mentions his shameful escape from Damascus as evidence of his personal weakness. It is not altogether clear exactly why he chooses this episode. Perhaps because the incident in Damascus, right at the start of his ministry, shows that his ministry has always been like this; perhaps because it was the first attempt on his life (Acts 9.23-25); perhaps because it was cited by his opponents as proof, par excellence, of Paul's cowardice (cf. 10.1, 10); or perhaps as well because it was such a good example of Christ's power operating (to preserve his chosen instrument of getting the gospel to the Gentiles, 9.15) in the midst of human weakness (12.9-10).

Application

Paul wants us to boast in him and his ministry and also to be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance, and not what is on the heart (5.12). In the first instance, these verses therefore test our definition of success in ministry – do we share Paul's values, or those of the super-Apostles? In a secondary way, they cause us to question our commitment to our own gospel ministry – are we daily taking up our cross to follow Christ, or is our life governed by a desire for ease?

1. Success or suffering?

You are at a dinner party having one of those awkward conversations in which you are trying to persuade your church going friend to leave their local, very liberal church and come to St Helens with you. At one point they ask, 'So you obviously think that St Helens is better than our (local, liberal) church, what makes it superior?' You probably do not like the idea of 'superiority', and you certainly do not feel easy about 'boasting' about your church, but you are really concerned for your friend's spiritual welfare, so what do you say? You might talk about a commitment to teaching God's word, but what else would you say? Would you point to the number of young people that come to our church? Maybe you point to the number of church plants we have established over the last 10 years, or to our commitment to training? Perhaps you would mention in passing the books that have been published by our staff or those that are in demand as conference speakers? Maybe you would mention our media strategy to demonstrate our contemporary attitude? Or would you boast in the things that 'show our weakness'? Paul would have done. What would it sound like in practice for you to do the same?

We are often reluctant to admit our weaknesses. We apologise for them and seek to cover them up. To the extent that we do so, we have already succumbed to the values and beliefs of the super-Apostles.

2. Security or suffering?

At a secondary level of application, this passage gives us a deep insight into the life and mind of the Apostle Paul. He lists here far more detail concerning his suffering than we find, for example, in the book of Acts. We know already why he is willing to boast about his sufferings, but we can learn too from his willingness to endure such sufferings in the first place. His love for the Lord and his love for people were such that he was willing to undergo the greatest of personal trial in order that others might hear the gospel. Indeed, he knowingly made life decisions that increased his suffering and discomfort rather than minimising it. Have you ever done that? When was the last time?

Perhaps most striking of all as we read through the list is the breadth and multiplicity of Paul's suffering. This was

no one-off unavoidable encounter with trial, this was a settled and daily decision to deny self completely, and take up his cross willingly in service of God – how does your commitment to the Christians that you know manifest itself in your life? Our culture prizes security and leisure and lifestyle – we feather our nests and those of our family. Remind yourself of the motivations that drove Paul (he has already revealed a good number in 2 Corinthians, e.g. 4.1, 5.8, 11, 14), and ask God to use the same motivations to inspire you to a similarly radical gospel life, whatever that might look like in your own individual context (it won't, of course, look the same as Paul's).

Main point

The true gospel worker is not a selfish overlord but a humble servant who boasts of things that highlight his own weakness. Don't be seduced by externals, but boast in weakness.

2 Corinthians 12.1-13

Context

Paul has a profound and jealous affection for the Corinthians (11.2). He is indignant (11.29) that some who masquerade as servants of righteousness but are in fact servants of Satan (11.13-15) have begun to bewitch the Corinthians with a different gospel (11.4). He is writing this section of his letter (chapters 10-13) to persuade them to take the initiative and put matters right themselves (13.10) before he arrives in town and has to wield his full apostolic authority against some of them (10.6).

To address the urgent situation, Paul adopts (albeit reluctantly) the boastful tactics of his opponents. First he explained his reasons (11.1-21a) and then he began an extended bout of 'foolish boasting' (which runs from 11.21b-12.13), emphasising that he could match the super-Apostle's claims to spiritual ancestry (11.22), and far outstrip their claims to be servants of Christ (11.23-33). The key thing that distinguished Paul's service of Christ was his suffering and weakness. In our passage, weakness remains in the foreground of Paul's argument as he continues his foolish boast.

Structure of passage

12.1-10	Boasting in God's power, made perfect in weakness
1-6	Visions & pride
7-10	Visions & pain
12.11-13	Foolish boasting by a true Apostle

Text notes

1. Boasting in God's power, made perfect in weakness, 12.1-10

In 11.30 Paul announced his intention to boast of things that show him to be weak. He did so in 11.31-33 by relating the story of his ignominious exit from Damascus. He continues to do so in this paragraph (12.1) by telling of his constant travelling companion, a 'thorn in the flesh', deliberately given to him by God to keep him from becoming 'too elated'. The 'thorn' was necessary in the wake of a remarkable spiritual experience which befell Paul some 14 years earlier. The paragraph highlights another point of contrast between Paul and his super-Apostolic opponents.

The super-Apostles, it seems, claimed authenticity not just because of their spiritual heritage (11.22), and their 'service' of Christ (11.23-29) but also because of 'visions and revelations of the Lord' that they had received. It is of such 'heavenly' experiences that the super-Apostles boasted (implicit in v6) as they sought to win a following in Corinth.

Paul knows that boasting of such visions is of no value at all (v1), but will do so in an attempt to wake up the Corinthians to their own danger. Verses 2-10 depict a fascinating sequence of events:

i) Paul's 'vision and revelation', verses 2-6

a) Who

Noticeably, Paul does not initially claim the experience for himself, saying merely, 'I know a man in Christ who...' His reluctance is explained in part by humility, and in part by a determination to make sure that (unlike the super-Apostles) he does not present himself as a special class of Christian – the experience happened to him as a 'man of Christ' rather than an apostle.

b) When

The vision happened 14 years before 2 Corinthians was written, probably therefore in AD43. This makes it unlikely that Paul is referring either to his conversion (AD33) or any of the other visions of which the NT informs us (references and estimated dates: Gal 2.2 = AD46; Acts 11.25-26 = AD46; Acts 16.9-10 = AD49; Acts 18.9-10 = AD51; Acts 22.17-21 = AD35). He tells us the date not just to highlight its historicity but also to demonstrate for how long he has remained silent on the subject. He could never be accused, unlike some, of talking up his experiences!

c) Circumstances

Paul was 'caught up' in the vision (as he had previously been 'let down' in a basket from Damascus). In other words, this was something that God did (the verb is passive) and not something that Paul generated within himself. Nonetheless, Paul did not know (note that he is unembarrassed of his ignorance – he certainly did not need to mention it twice!) whether his body had been physically transported to heaven, or whether his experience was a 'mere vision'. Was he carried to heaven, or was heaven disclosed to him? He did not know. He was sure, however, of where he had 'been'.

d) Destination

Paul was taken to the 'third heaven'. Much has been written about Paul's cosmology. Jews commonly believed in 7 heavens, but it is unlikely that Paul did. Some Rabbis had concluded, following a reference in 1 Kings 8.27 to 'heaven and the heaven of heavens' that there were 3 heavens. It is likely that Paul borrows such an understanding here (we cannot be sure whether he understood it literally or metaphorically) to connote the idea that his vision took him as high as he could go – that is 'into the immediate presence of God'. Whatever claims the super-Apostles were making to spiritual experience, Paul has just played a trump card.

ii) Paul's reluctance to boast about his experiences

Paul has truth on his side (v6a), but he will not boast of his experience for at least 3 reasons: i. there is nothing to be gained by it (v1); ii. he is not allowed to tell anyone what he saw (v4) – thus rendering the experience useless as a mark of authenticity!; and iii. he does not want people to think of him more highly than they ought (v6) – which they surely would if they knew what he had seen. How different to his opponents – the only boast that Paul will utter is of his weakness (12.5b).

iii) God's deliberate humbling of Paul, verses 7-10

These verses are not only the climax of Paul's 'boasting in weakness' argument, they are revolutionary – truly life-changing. They teach us that God's greatest agenda was not His Apostle's greatest happiness. Rather, to 'keep him from being too elated' (literally, 'lest I exalt myself') by the glorious revelations (the noun is plural: were there other experiences, still unmentioned?) that he had received, God worked (immediately?) to give to him a 'thorn in the flesh' (most likely a physical or psychological ailment – there is no suggestion he got married!). Whereas his first illustration of weakness (the exit from Damascus) referred to a unique event, this example was of a permanent ailment capable of humiliating Paul at any moment – comparable to receiving vicious blows about the face. Weakness was now integral to his existence. The thorn in Paul's flesh was at one and the same time a gift of God (to deflate pride) and a tool of Satan (to inflict suffering).

The sequence of events that follows is equally remarkable. The Apostle prayed fervently and repeatedly for the thorn's removal (perhaps not yet seeing the spiritual benefit that the thorn would bring him), but his request was unambiguously refused. He received instead a much greater gift – the assurance of the risen Christ's grace and power to cope with every weakness.

What an assurance it is! Paul experienced a remarkable catalogue of insult, injury and anxiety in his ministry (cf. 11.23-29; 12.10), all of which served to remind him of his frailty. Here was a promise that insofar and as much as he acknowledged that weakness, he would know the gracious, enabling power of the Lord Jesus.

The direct result of Christ's assurance is that Paul wanted to boast all the more in his weakness in order that he might experience the greater power of the Lord Jesus resting upon him (v9b), for in reliance upon Christ, there is true strength. Is that how you view weakness?

2. Foolish boasting by a true Apostle, 12.11-13

It should not have been necessary for Paul to speak in such terms; the Corinthians already had access to all the information that they needed about Paul's authenticity. He had performed among them numerous signs, wonders and mighty works and had done so 'with utmost patience', i.e. with great endurance in the face of the opposition detailed in Acts 18.6-10. His super-Apostle opponents could make no such claim – there was 'no way at all' in which Paul was their inferior. That is not to say that Paul was getting proud; he freely admits that he was 'nothing' –

clearly he thinks his devil-serving opponents were 'less than nothing'!

Paul therefore chides the Corinthians for failing to champion him against the intruders and for forcing him to use the disagreeable tactic of boasting like a fool in an effort to re-establish his authority among them. The only thing for which he needs their forgiveness (said very tongue in cheek) is his failure to charge them money for his services!

Application

1. Weakness & power

These verses teach us revolutionary truths about God, and also about the Christian life. Many think of God as little more than a benign grand-parent – doing whatever he can to secure the happiness of his little ones. But our sovereign God at times chooses deliberately to introduce affliction to the life of his children to humble them and guard their soul. At the same time, many think of God as an impotent grand-parent – unable to help his little ones in moments of trial and affliction. But our sovereign God delights to grant his boundless power to those of his children who seek it. There is no weakness or adversity that is too great for him – his power is made perfect in weakness.

The challenge is obvious. How will I regard the evidences of my frailty as I meet them in life? Of course I will pray for suffering to be taken away, but will I be content in the midst of my weakness (v10), and even boast in it (v9b)? Will I turn away from God for allowing me to suffer, or will I turn to Him, and avail myself of his power?

Imagine that a Christian friend is diagnosed with a long-term illness. Talk about how over the course of the next 6 months, you might encourage them (without sounding glib) to share Paul's perspective.

2. Experience & pride

In a very experience-oriented society it is no surprise that a thirst for direct, unmediated encounters with God pervades the church. Paul's perspective on such experiences challenges both those who over-emphasise such experiences and those who reject the possibility of them altogether. Paul is not dismissive of his own experiences, but neither will he boast of his experiences in such a way that suggests him to be a higher class of Christian than anyone else. He has kept silence about this one for 14 years, and even now does not disclose the details. In a context where Paul's authority was in question, he could have made much of the experience, but he recognises that such experiences provide no validation at all of his spirituality. Privately, no doubt, he remains grateful for the experience (cf. 5.13), but it is just that to him – a private experience.

In our contemporary church therefore, we would do well to be wary of those who speak of their experiences as a means of validating their credibility, and also of those who encourage us to seek experience as a means of personal assurance. Whenever much is made of experience, you can be sure that there is much pride not very far beneath the surface. Paul was very different, boasting not in his experience nor even of his many miracles but of his weakness – he shunned anything that might make people think much of him (v6), his only desire that people might make much of Christ and His grace. His is the authentic voice on matters of Christian experience, for He is the Lord's true Apostle.

Main point

Receive Paul as God's true Apostle, and boast with him in human weakness so that the gracious power of Christ might rest upon you.

2 Corinthians 12.14-13.14

Context

Since 10.1 Paul has been addressing his major concern about the spiritual well-being of the Corinthians in advance of his third visit to them. Their loyalty to Paul is once again in question, for they are embracing the teaching of some who, although using the right language and claiming to be servants of Christ, are in fact teaching a different gospel and serving Satan. In an effort to awake the Corinthians to their danger, he resorted to the extraordinary tactic of boasting like a fool (11.21b-12.13) in an attempt to underline his own authority and to refute the claims to authority of his 'super-Apostle' opponents. Thus the whole concluding section fits with Paul's key aim for the whole letter, chapter 5, verse 12: 'We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.'

As the section (and with it the letter) comes to a close, he refers with increasing regularity and urgency to this next visit (see 12.14, 20-21; 13.1-2, 10). From 12.14-13.10 we learn that some of the Corinthians needed to repent in advance of Paul's arrival (12.20-21; 13.2) and that all the Corinthians needed to examine themselves (13.1, 5, 11, especially v5) so that Paul would not have to exercise severe discipline among them (13.2, 10). As Paul warns them, not to tear them down but to build them up (12.19; 13.10) he assures them of his prayers for their restoration (13.9) and asks them to labour to the same end (13.11).

It is entirely fitting that his closing sentence be a prayer asking God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to give to the Corinthians the resources that they need to heed the message of his letter.

Structure of passage

- 12.14-13.10 The return of the Apostle
 - 12.14-18 When I come I will not burden you...
 - 12.19-21 ... but I do fear for you...
 - 13.1-4 ... and I will discipline you if I have to...
 - 13.5-10 ... so test yourselves before I come.
- 13.11-14 Conclusion

Text notes

1. The return of the Apostle, 12.14-13.10

Paul's third trip to Corinth has been in view since 10.2, 6, but now he addresses the subject directly (12.14; 13.1). His agenda throughout has not been selfish or parochial but to build up the Corinthians (12.19; 13.10) so that he will not have to exercise church discipline when he arrives. As he closes the letter, Paul again assures them of his own generosity of Spirit (12.14-18), shares his concerns about them (12.19-21), warns them of future discipline (13.1-4), and urges them to test themselves before he gets there (13.5-10).

a) When I come, I will not burden you... (12.14-18)

The subject of money has been bubbling away throughout the Corinthian correspondence. Even though Paul has never accepted any money from the Corinthians, accusations of financial improbity persist – this time with the twist that he used his co-workers and emissaries to deceive the Corinthians out of money (12.16-18). As Paul refutes the baseless accusation, he assures them that he will not change his practice on his upcoming visit – he will not be a financial burden to them this time either (v14). The rule of v14b is not absolute (there are other occasions when Paul welcomes money from churches that he has planted), but in Corinth, Paul was in a no win situation: when he refuses their money, he is accused of not loving them (e.g. v15b); even though he has never accepted their money, he is accused of selfish gain (v16). In view of the history, there is no way that Paul could now accept their money.

By contrast, Paul undertakes to continue his practice of selfless devotion to the Corinthians' souls. Indeed, verse 15 gives us as clear an insight into the depths of Paul's love as we find anywhere in the New Testament. Despite everything that they have put him through (the list was growing by the day!), and without even a hint of reluctance (as Paul was 'most glad' to boast in his weakness in 12.9, so here also he is 'most glad'), Paul promises that as their spiritual father he will labour with abandoned and sacrificial devotion for the Corinthians' spiritual well-being. He

will give his energies, his resources and even his life for the sake of their souls. We may feel that Paul's commitment to his friends exposes new depths in our own self-interest – you can be sure that he aimed to expose the self-serving super-Apostles as well.

b) ... but I do fear for you ... (12.19-21)

With his upcoming visit very much in his mind, Paul denies the accusation that his reason for writing to the Corinthians was merely to defend himself against his accusers. In reality, he has been aware, as he was throughout his ministry (cf. 2.17) that the only judge and jury that really matters is not in Corinth, but in heaven. His true goal throughout the letter, therefore, has been to build the Corinthians up in their faith (defending his status, authority and affection for them was a necessary means to that end). The letter has been necessary because of a threefold fear that Paul has about what might happen upon his arrival in town:

- i) A fear of mutual disappointment (v20a) – expanded in the subsequent verses
- ii) A fear of division and disharmony in the church (v20b)
- iii) A fear of personal humiliation caused by an unrepentant minority (v21)

c) ... and I will discipline you if I have to ... (13.1-4)

If verse 20b expands upon what Paul fears he might find in Corinth (from v20a), then verses 1-4 expand upon what he thinks they will be disappointed to discover about him – namely that he is willing to administer whatever discipline is necessary in the church. Paul 'will not spare' the impenitent and will thereby prove to the Corinthians that he has dominical authority (v3a). There is a further link between Christ and Paul: as Christ was crucified in weakness but now lives by the power of God, so too Paul (in his life and in his ministry, including church discipline) shares both the weakness of Christ's death and the power of his resurrection (the thought is not dissimilar to 4.7-12).

d) ... so test yourselves before I come (13.5-10)

As has been the case through much of 2 Corinthians, Paul in this paragraph oscillates between hope and fear for the Corinthians. He fears that he will have to be 'severe' in the use of his authority in Corinth (v10). He hopes that they will realise that Paul has not 'failed the test' (v6) – that he is not only a Christian but also the spokesman of Christ (v3a). Paul knows that he always acts and speaks in accordance with the truth (v8), and so he commands the Corinthians (twice) to test themselves to see whether they are in the faith – the clear implication being that they should spend less time worrying about Paul's spiritual condition (v3a) and more time worrying about their own! He wants them to assess whether they are continuing with the true gospel (cf. 11.4) and with a way of life that is in accord with that gospel (12.20-21). Motivation for them so to continue in the faith is found in Christ's presence in them (individually) and among them (corporately). In the final analysis, Paul remains confident that his friends will pass the test (the question in v5b expects the answer 'yes') and so he prays for their restoration (v9). He would be delighted to be able to behave in a way that his opponents label 'weak' (v9a) when he gets to Corinth, for it would show that his beloved church is 'strong' in faith and has passed the test of v5. It would also show that his letter has achieved the purpose for which it was sent (v10).

2. Conclusion, 13.11-14

To end his letter Paul issues a list of 5 exhortations (v11), passes on greetings (v13) and prays for God's blessing upon them (v14). The exhortations are all in the present – here is their ongoing homework until his arrival. They are to rejoice in the Lord, to work towards the restoration for which Paul has prayed (i.e. putting themselves right before God), to heed his appeals (6.1; 6.14-7.1; this translation, as in the ESV footnote is preferable to 'comfort one another' (even though ideas of 'comfort' have been prevalent in the letter, especially in chapters 1 & 7) and forms an inclusion with 10.1), and for all of them to share the mind of Christ in order that they might live in peace with one another and not as in 12.20b.

His concluding wish reflects the content of the letter perfectly, as we might expect. He longs for them to come again to the grace of the Lord Jesus (the fundamental of the faith, in contrast to the law of the super-Apostles, to which the Corinthians needed to be restored, cf. 6.1; 13.5, 9) in order that they might experience the love of their Father in heaven (rather than his condemnation, cf. v11) and be thus empowered to live in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with one another (in chapters 8-9 the same 'fellowship' word was used of Christians who give to others further afield, cf. 8.4; 9.13 – the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is worked out in very tangible and practical ways in a local congregation).

Application

1. Self-examination

We can perhaps imagine the atmosphere in the church in Corinth as the one charged with reading this letter out in public reached the last line. One thought would have been left ringing in their ears – we need to put things right before Paul returns, and quickly! The contemporary church need not prepare itself for the return of the Apostle, but the challenge of these verses is nonetheless urgent, for one greater than the Apostle will one day soon return.

To read 2 Corinthians and presume that we are 'in the clear' without first heeding Paul's commanding to 'examine ourselves' would be the height of arrogance. Is the Jesus in which I am believing the same Jesus as Paul's, or different? Is the experience of the Spirit which I am seeking the same as the ministry of the Spirit in 2 Corinthians (look back to 3.7-18)? Is the gospel of my heart a gospel of grace alone (cf. 5.21), or have I reintroduced works / law as a co-means of salvation? Where is righteousness found? At the same time as examining my doctrine, I need to examine my living: am I claiming to be Christ's while at the same time engaging in quarrelling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit and disorder? Am I claiming to be Christ's while at the same time refusing to repent of impurity, sexual immorality and sensuality? We do not have an Apostolic visit that might 'put us right' before Christ returns; this letter is our chance. If we pass the test, we can be confident not only of our presence with God at the end, but of His presence with us now while we wait (v11b).

2. Self-sacrifice

Once again, Paul's example of pastoral commitment challenges our limited understanding of what it means to love our fellow Christians (12.15). Is my service of them sometimes grudging, reluctant and carried out within predefined boundaries to ensure that my own comfort is not disturbed, or is it glad? Am I willing to give my money for their spiritual welfare? Am I willing to give my life? It is hard to define exactly what it would look like in practice, as a small group leader at St Helens, to 'be spent' in service of our groups – but I suspect that at the very least it would look like careful (rather than rushed) preparation of my studies; like thoughtful (rather than reactive) practical service of the group; like sharing my life in ways that go beyond the formal; and like personal (rather than generic) prayer for them. It would certainly be willing to write them a letter or meet up for coffee in order that I might build them up in the faith – for that is why God appointed me to this role.

Then, in light of Paul's wish that the 'fellowship of the Holy Spirit' (which was defined in the broadest terms in chapters 8-9) might be evident in his readers, I need also to ask, am I also willing to extend this fellowship beyond the boundaries of my group? Are there other believers in other parts of the world for whom I might pray and to whom I might give?

Who is equal to such a task? Praise God that the gospel has made us competent for it and that, as we cast ourselves on Him admitting our weakness and failure, the grace of the Lord Jesus is sufficient even for us. For His power is made perfect in our weakness. Why not end by praying earnestly for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to be with us all.

Main point

Test yourself to see whether in doctrine and conduct you are in the faith as taught by Paul, God's true Apostle.