

2 Corinthians

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Introduction

THE SECOND EPISTLE to the Corinthians was evidently written not very long after the first. In the closing chapter of the first, Paul intimates that he wrote from Ephesus, where an effectual door of service had been opened to him of the Lord, and where adversaries abounded. In the opening chapter of the second he alludes to the great riot in the Ephesian theatre which closed his service of over two years in that great city; and later in the epistle he indicates some of his subsequent movements. It may be well to trace these at the outset as they throw light on some of the remarks he makes.

Before the riot occurred the purpose of the Apostle was to pass through Macedonia and Achaia on his way to Jerusalem, and later to go to Rome. Acts 19: 12, proves this, and there is confirmation of the first part of the plan in 1 Corinthians 16: 5, and in verses 15 and 16 of our chapter. However he had been diverted from what he had planned. First of all the riot led to a hurried departure for Macedonia. He got as far as Troas, where again the Lord opened a door before him (see 2 Cor. 2: 12, 13). As yet he was too disturbed in mind about the Corinthians, and the possible effect on them of his first epistle, so instead of passing by them into Macedonia (2 Cor. 1: 16) he sailed for Macedonia direct. When he got into Macedonia things were even more disquieting, but presently he was cheered by Titus with good tidings as regards the Corinthians. This gave him great relief and prompted the second epistle which we are now to consider.

2 Corinthians 1

DURING THE STAY at Ephesus, Timothy had been sent in advance into Macedonia (Acts 19: 22), which accounts probably for the omission of his name at the beginning of the first epistle. By the time the second was written both Paul and Timothy were in Macedonia, and hence his name appears.

The opening salutation given, the Apostle at once gives expression to the thankfulness and comfort and encouragement that filled his heart. He traces it all back to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. Comfort had been poured into the heart of Paul, and he returned it Godward in the form of blessing or thanksgiving.

This however was not the end of it, for it also flowed outward for the help of others. Having been through heavy tribulation and received abundant comfort from God, he turned it to account and traded with it for the comfort of those similarly suffering. This is, without a doubt, an important principle in the ways of God. Whatever spiritual favour we receive from God, whether comfort, or joy, or warning, or instruction, or anything else, we are not to treat it as though it were entirely personal to ourselves, but rather as something granted us to be shared with others. We are never to forget the oneness of the saints of God. Indeed, we believe that we really never possess things in their fulness until we do begin to pass them on to others. A Christian poet has said,

*For we must share if we would keep
That good thing from above;
Ceasing to give, we cease to have;
Such is the law of love.*

The poet's word is undoubtedly true. If we do not use what we have, we ultimately lose it. Again and again, does the Lord pass His servants through trying circumstances in order that they may learn valuable lessons and obtain the needed grace; and having done so, that thus qualified in an experimental way, they may become more efficient in helping others.

Another important principle comes to light in verse 5. God suits and proportions the consolation to the sufferings. If the sufferings are slight the consolation is slight. If the sufferings abound, the consolations abound. The sufferings, be it noted, are "of Christ." That is, they are not only endured for His sake, but they are of the same character as those which He endured because of His absolute identification with God and His interests. Such sufferings, the sufferings of Christ in His people, are always followed or accompanied by consolation, which is ministered *through* Christ.

In verses 3 to 7, one word occurs (in various forms) no less than ten times. It is translated six times by comfort, and four times by consolation. It indicates a "cheering and supporting influence," and in Darby's New Translation is rendered consistently by "encourage" or "encouragement." A slightly different form of the word is applied to the Holy Spirit by our Lord, and in John 14, 15, 16, is translated "Comforter." In the same verses the tribulation, the trouble, the afflictions, the suffering, are only mentioned seven times: so that even in these verses the encouragement over-abounds in comparison with the sufferings. Without a doubt, herein lay the supernatural fortitude of the martyrs. Called of God to face unusual suffering, they were carried through it on a wave of unusual encouragement. The cheering and supporting influence abounded in their cases.

There is very little persecution from the world today in the English-speaking regions. For a century and a half great quietude and toleration has prevailed without, and it has synchronized with a period of disintegration and doctrinal laxity within. The sufferings that characterize the saints are mainly of the order spoken of in the first epistle, "many are weak and sickly among you," or else troubles connected with trying circumstances, and the like. The sufferings of which Paul speaks in these verses are very largely unknown by us. The encouragement of which he speaks is also very largely unknown. The saint overflowing with encouragement in the midst of severe persecution is a sight but rarely seen. This we say to our shame, and our loss as well.

In verses 6 and 7 the Apostle links the Corinthians with himself in a very beautiful way. Carnal though they had been and feeble as to many things they yet had partaken in sufferings akin to those of the Apostle, and this fact in itself might yield them encouragement. Then in addition it was certain that in due season they would partake also of the encouragement.

This leads Paul to allude plainly to the special tribulation he had suffered in Ephesus, the capital of Asia. In Acts 19, the occasion is called, "no small stir," but his words in verse 8 reveal to us that it was even more critical and full of danger than we should deduce from Luke's account of it. Death evidently stared him in the face. Later in the epistle he recounts his experiences as a servant of the Lord, and speaks of being "in deaths oft." This was one of the times when he was in death.

The riotous mob in Ephesus put upon him the sentence of death, and did their best to execute it. The Apostle met the situation with the "sentence of death" in himself. Thereby he was brought to nothing as to any hope or trust in himself, or in any powers that he possessed. He was shut up to God and His power. The God whom he trusted is the God who raises the dead, and who therefore would undo all that the mob might have done, had they been permitted to do their worst.

God however had intervened and held them in check. Paul and his friends had been delivered on that day, and were still being delivered. The Apostle did not contemplate the danger ceasing. The rather he knew that it would continue throughout his course. So he anticipated that he yet would be delivered, and that the Corinthians would have the privilege of helping to this end with their prayers. Then indeed God's gracious answers would call forth a larger volume of thanksgiving. If many had joined in the request, many would join in the giving of thanks.

What gave him such boldness in requesting the prayers of the Corinthians was that he had a good conscience as to his whole manner of life. The simplicity and sincerity which are of God had marked him, and the wisdom which is of the flesh had been ruled out. This was true as to his general attitude in the world, but especially true as regards his course amongst the saints. He knew that in thus boasting he was only stating what the Corinthians themselves recognized right well. There had been those amongst the Corinthians who had aimed at defaming him, and at prejudicing them against him. The effect of this had by now been partly removed, for, as he says in verse 14, "Ye have acknowledged in part that we are your rejoicing." That is, they had acknowledged in part that he was their boasting, even as they were his, in the day of the Lord Jesus. They were thus in considerable measure in happy accord.

In this delicate way does he allude to the great improvement that had come over the feelings of the Corinthians towards himself since the dispatch of his first epistle. But let us take to heart the fact that he based his request for prayer upon the simplicity and godly sincerity of his life. We hear Christians pretty frequently asking prayer from one and another. Sometimes we ask for prayer ourselves. But can we always ask for it upon this basis? We fear not; and possibly this accounts for a good deal of prayer and intercession being unanswered. For our lives, and all the secret motives governing them, are perfectly open to the eye of God.

Even before, when writing the first epistle, Paul had confidence that the relations between himself and them, though for the moment imperilled would be of this happy order. Because of this he had proposed to visit them previously, even before he took his journey into Macedonia. However things had been ordered otherwise, and the projected visit had not taken place. Here let us pause a moment. Even an apostle, you see, had plans disarranged and upset, and was led of God to record that fact for us in Scripture. The change, as we shall see presently, though not exactly ordered of God was overruled of God for ultimate blessing. Guidance may reach the servant in many ways; and if he misses direct guidance he may yet find even his mistakes overruled for blessing. Our concern should be to

maintain that simplicity and godly sincerity of which verse 12 speaks.

Now those who were opponents used even this change of plans as a ground of attack. They insinuated that it indicated that Paul was a man of lightness, and shallowness of purpose: that he had no depth of character: that he would say one thing today and another thing tomorrow. The Apostle knew this and therefore he asked the question of verse 17. Was he a man swayed merely by fleshly impulse, so as to be pulled easily in this direction or that — saying yes today, and no tomorrow?

He answered this question by an appeal to his preaching when first, together with Sylvanus and Timotheus, he came amongst them. There had been nothing indefinite or contradictory about that. When he says, "Our word toward you was not yea and nay," he alludes apparently to the *manner* of his preaching. Then in the following verse he mentions the great *theme* of his preaching — Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In Him everything has been firmly established for God. In Him is eternal stability.

Having such a theme, Paul's preaching was marked by a rock-like definiteness and certainty. The same definiteness and certainty should mark all the preaching of the Word today. Modernistic preachers, in the very nature of things, can only preach ideas — ideas based upon the latest pronouncements of speculative science, which are for ever changing. Their word most emphatically is, "*yea and nay.*" The statements of today, strongly *affirmed*, will be *negated* before very many years have passed, just as the statements of not many years ago are negated today.

We need not be unduly perturbed by the modernists. Their little day will soon be over, their vacillating pronouncements silenced. Let us be careful to preach the unchanging Christ in an unchanging way.

There is a very definite contrast between the "yea and nay," of verse 19, and the "yea and . . . Amen," of the following verse. The former indicates that which is vacillating and contradictory: the latter that which is definitely affirmed, and then unswervingly confirmed in due season.

Man is fickle. With him it is frequently yes on one occasion and no the next. Moreover man is contradictory when it is a question of God and His will. Again and again does he break down, and consequently negative all that God desires for him. His reply to God's will is uniformly "Nay." The opposite of this is found in Christ, for "in Him was, yea." He said "Yes" to every purpose and desire of God.

And not only was the yea found in Him but the Amen also. He not only assents to all the will of God, expressed in His promises, but He proceeds to carry all out, and bring all to full and final completion. In Him the thing is done, and shall be done, until a great Amen can be put to all God's pleasure, so that God is glorified. And further, He obtains a people who become His servants for the carrying out of the Divine will: so that the two words, "by us," can be added at the end of verse 10. What glorious stability and security is here! What confidence, what repose garrisons the heart that rests in Christ!

The Son of God, preached by Paul among the Corinthians, bore this wonderful character. Hence the solidity and certainty of his preaching. Hence also the stability which characterized Paul himself, and which is properly the character of every true Christian. We have been established in Christ. And it is God who has done it. What man does, he may very likely undo at some subsequent period. What God does, He does for ever.

We are thus firmly established in Christ — the Christ in whom is established all the counsel of God — by an act of God. Let us lay hold of this fact, for it lifts the whole thing on to a plane immeasurably above man. We have received too, the anointing of the Spirit equally by an act of God.

Bear in mind that the significance of "Christ" is "the Anointed One." So verse 21 shows us that we are anointed as those who are established in the Anointed One. The Anointing reaches us as those who are connected with Him. When Aaron was anointed the "precious ointment" that was poured upon his head ran down even "to the skirts of his garments" (Ps. 133: 2). Which thing was a type or allegory; for the grace and power of our exalted Head has been carried down to us His members by the anointing of the Spirit. Thus it is — and only thus — that the promises of God can be carried into effect to the glory of God "by us." It is Christ Himself who will bring to perfect fruition the promises of God in the coming day; but He will do it by us. That is, He will carry things out in detail through His saints, who are His anointed members. If only our hearts lay hold of this, we shall be very much lifted above this present evil world.

But the Spirit of God is not only the Anointing; He is also the Seal and the Earnest. As the Anointing He connects us with Christ. As the Seal He marks us off as being wholly for God. We are the Divine possession and marked as such, just as the farmer, who purchases sheep, at once puts a mark upon them that they may be identified as his. In the book of Revelation we read how the coming "beasts" will cause all to "receive a mark" (Rev. 13: 16). Those who do receive that mark will have to face the fierce wrath of God, as the next chapter shows, and Rev. 7 reveals to us that God anticipates the wicked action of the beasts by putting "the seal of the living God" on His own.

God "hath also sealed us," and we may well rejoice in this blessed fact. But do we always bear in mind its serious implications? We cannot carry two marks, if the one mark, that has been placed upon us, is God's mark. He is a jealous God. The mark that is upon us is exclusive. If we attempt to carry also the world's mark — to say nothing of the devil's mark — we shall provoke Him to jealousy, and lay up much discipline and sorrow for ourselves. Take great care, O young Christian! for the world is ever seeking to put its unholy marks upon you, as though you belonged to it. You do not belong to it, you belong to God; so be careful not to wear the seals and badges it wishes to put upon you.

Then again, the Holy Spirit is the Earnest in our hearts. If, as the Anointing, we view Him in connection with Christ; and as the Seal, more in connection with God the Father, the Earnest indicates what He is in Himself. Presently, when the promises of God reach their fulfilment, we shall be in the full flood-tide energy of the Spirit of God. But today He is the Earnest of all this in our hearts. "In our *hearts*," notice: not merely in our bodies, or in our minds. Our bodies are indeed His temple. Our minds may happily be suffused with His light. But in the deepest affections of our hearts we have the earnest — the pledge and foretaste of the glory that is coming. By the Holy Ghost given to us, we may realize anticipatively something of all the good that shall be ours, when the promises of God are brought to fruition to His glory, and by us.

In these three verses (20-22) we have been conducted to a wonderful climax of blessedness; and it all springs out of the seemingly small matter of the Apostle being obliged to make it plain that he was not a man of light mind, promising things that he had no real intention of performing. He did not merely defend himself. He improved the occasion to some purpose.

Having done so, he returns in verse 23 to the more personal matter out of which it all sprang. Another thing had most evidently weighed with him, and helped to divert him for the moment from another visit to Corinth. He had no wish to come amongst them, only to find himself bound to act in severity by reason of sin and grave disorder still being found in their midst. Hence he had waited until he had news of the effect of the earlier epistle he had written to them. He hoped for better things. It was not that he assumed dominion over their faith, but rather that he was just a "helper," or "fellow-worker," to the end that they might be delivered and rejoice.

The chapter closes with the words, "by faith ye stand." This is a fact that we ought very much to lay to heart. If he had assumed dominion over their faith in any matter, their faith in that respect would have ceased to be. He would have merely ordered them to do certain things (quite right things, doubtless) and they would have done them, not as the fruit of the exercise of faith, but mechanically. There would then have been no faith in their actions, but just the mechanical action as a kind of outward shell. And then one day they would have scandalized everyone by collapsing; just as a hut in the tropics collapses suddenly, when all the insides of the supporting posts have been eaten away by the white ants.

There are plenty of Christian folk today who would much like to live their lives on somebody else's faith. They would like to be told what to do. Let somebody else have the exercise, and solve the problem, and issue orders as to what is the correct thing! They will be good and obedient and do as they are told. But it does not work, save disastrously. It is by faith we stand, not by somebody else's faith. By somebody else's faith we fall. And further, it is not good for the somebody else. Such forceful individuals begin to love having dominion over the faith of their brethren, and so becoming little popes. Consequently it ends disastrously for them.

2 Corinthians 2

THE APOSTLE HAD made up his mind that he would postpone his visit until it could be made under happier circumstances: and now, as he wrote this second letter, the heaviness was passing and brighter things coming into view. His first letter had made them sorry, as he intended it should, and their sorrow now made him glad, as verse 2 of chapter 2 shows. It had been sent ahead on its mission so that when he did come amongst them it might be with confidence established, and with joy.

In verse 4 we get a very touching and valuable glimpse of the manner and spirit of Paul's writing. Reading his earlier epistle we can discern its powerful and trenchant style: we can notice how calculated it was to humble them with its touches of holy irony. We should hardly have known however that he wrote it "out of much affliction and anguish of heart . . . with many tears," had he not told us this. But so it was. Foolish and carnal though they were, yet he loved them with a tender affection. Consequently the inspired Word of God flowed to them through the human channel of a loving and afflicted heart, and was mightily effective. Would to God that we were followers of Paul in this, and learned the holy art through him! How much more effective we should be.

What a deluge of controversial writings has flowed through the church's history! What polemics have been indulged in! And how little, comparatively speaking, has been accomplished by them. We venture to believe that if only one tenth had been written, but that tenth had been produced by men of God, writing with much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, because of that which made the writing needful, ten times as much would have been accomplished for the glory of God.

After all, love lies as the rock-bottom foundation of everything. Not cleverness, not ability, not sarcasm, not anger, but LOVE is God's way of blessing.

*"Out in the darkness, shadowed by sin
Souls are in bondage, souls we would win.
How can we win them? How show the way?
'Love never faileth,' Love is the way.
'Love never faileth,' Love is pure gold;*

*Love is what Jesus came to unfold,
Make us more loving, Master, we pray,
Help us remember, Love is Thy way."*

It might have seemed harsh of Paul to call the evil-doer at Corinth, "that wicked person," and to instruct that he be put away from their midst. But his loving heart caused his eyes to shed tears as he penned the words. Paul's words and tears were effective and the punishment was inflicted, as verse 6 states; and inflicted not by Paul merely, or by one or two of the more spiritual at Corinth, but by the whole mass of the saints. Thus the man was made to feel that they all abhorred and disowned his sin. His conscience was reached. He was brought to repentance.

This, of course, is the end that discipline is designed to reach. Erring believers are not disciplined merely for the sake of punishment, but that they may be brought to repentance and so restored, both in their souls, and to their place of fellowship amongst God's people. This happy end was reached in the case of the offender at Corinth.

How infrequently is it reached today! All too often the putting away is done in a hard judicial spirit. The anguish of heart, the tears are absent, and the offender becomes more occupied with the harsh manner of his brethren than with his own delinquencies. Hence his repentance is a long way off — to his loss and theirs.

The action taken at Corinth was so effective that the man was brought himself into much affliction and anguish of heart. Indeed the danger now was that the Corinthian assembly would in their zeal against his sin, overlook his sorrow, and not forgive him administratively by restoring him to his place in their midst. Now, therefore, Paul has to write to them urging them to do this, and thus confirm their love towards him. It was possible otherwise that he might be overwhelmed with overmuch sorrow. Sorrow for sin is good; yet there is a point where it may become excessive and harmful — a point where sorrow should cease and the joy of forgiveness be known. The joy of the Lord, and not sorrow for sin, is our strength.

Verse 10 shows that if the assembly at Corinth forgave the man, their forgiveness carried with it Paul's. And again, that if Paul forgave any, by reason of his apostolic authority, he did so for their sakes, and as acting on behalf of Christ. The forgiveness spoken of in this verse may be termed administrative forgiveness. It is the forgiveness of which the Lord spoke in such scriptures as Matthew 16: 19, where it is apostolic; Matthew 18: 18, where it is vested in the assembly; John 20: 23, where it is confirmed to the apostolic company by the Lord in His risen condition. In 1 Corinthians 5 we have a case in which the powers of "binding" or "retaining" were exercised. In our chapter we have an example of "loosing" or "remitting."

Paul wrote thus, not merely for the sake of the sorrowing brother, but for the sake of all, lest Satan should get an advantage over all of them. Note it well! The very devil himself in some cases likes to see believers righteous overmuch, at the expense of "the meekness and gentleness of Christ." The Apostle could add, "for we are not ignorant of his devices." Alas, that so often we cannot truthfully say that! We are ignorant of his devices, and though our intentions are good we fall into traps that he sets.

What wisdom we need to hold the balance evenly, in practical matters, between the claims of righteousness and love. How necessary to remember that all discipline is inflicted in righteousness, whether by God Himself or by men, in order that repentance may be produced: and that when it is produced love claims the right to hold sway. Let us not continue to smite in discipline a repentant soul, lest we come under Divinely inflicted discipline ourselves.

One remarkable feature about this epistle is the way in which historical details as to Paul's movements and experiences form a kind of framework, in the midst of which is set the unfolding of much important truth, which is introduced rather in the form of digressions — often lengthy ones. The epistle opened with his sufferings and trouble in Asia, and the consequent change in his plans, and this led to the important digression of 2 Cor. 1: 19-22. Then he picks up the thread as to his subsequent movements, only to digress further in chapter 2, as to the forgiveness of the repentant offender.

At verse 12 he again reverts to his movements. This brief visit to Troas must be distinguished from that recorded in Acts 20: 6. It apparently came between the departure from Ephesus and the arrival in Macedonia, as recorded in Acts 20: 1. Though an open door was set before him by the Lord he was unable to avail himself of it, owing to his great anxiety for news of the Corinthians. In this case his pastoral solicitude prevailed against his evangelistic fervour. If the servant is not at rest in his spirit he cannot effectively serve the Lord.

The apostle was evidently conscious that this was failure on his part. Yet looking back he was equally conscious that God had overruled it to the glory of Christ; and this led him to an outburst of thanksgiving to God. It also led him once more to digress from his account of his experiences, and we do not come back to them until 2 Cor. 7: 5, is reached. The long digression which starts with verse 14 of our chapter, contains the main teaching of the epistle.

As regards his service, one thing he knew: he really and truly set forth Christ. Many there were who dared to manipulate the Word of God to serve their own ends. He, on the other hand, spoke with all sincerity as of God, and as in the sight of God, and as representing Christ. Moreover Christ was his great theme. Hence God led him in triumph in Christ.

The language the Apostle uses seems to be based upon the custom of according a triumph to victorious generals, when sweet odours were burned, and some of the captives, who helped to augment the triumph, were appointed to die, and some to live. The triumph was Christ's; but Paul had a share in it as spreading abroad the sweet odour of Christ wherever he went — an odour so infinitely fragrant to God. This was so whether he were in Troas or whether in Macedonia.

He preached Christ as the One who died and rose again, whether men believed and were saved, or whether they believed not and perished. If they believed not and were perishing, then the tidings of the *death* of Christ simply meant *death* for them. If He died for sins, and they refused Him, they certainly must die in their sins. If some believed, then tidings of His *life* in resurrection brought the odour of *life* for them. Because He lived they should live also.

How solemn then is the effect of a true preaching of Christ! What eternal issues hang upon it! This is so, whether the lips that utter it be Paul's in the first century or ours in the twentieth. No wonder the question is raised, "Who is sufficient for these things?" It is raised, but, not answered immediately. It is answered however in verse 5 of the next chapter. The whole thing being of God there is no sufficiency but of God. Would that every servant of God always bore this in mind! What deep-toned earnestness it would produce in us: what dependence upon the power of God. How careful we should be not to adulterate the message, and not to carry out the work just as we like, or as we think best; but to serve according to the Word of God.

2 Corinthians 3

PAUL HAD JUST spoken of the way in which he preached the Word, but this did not mean that he wished to commend himself to the Corinthians, or that he needed others to commend him. The fact

was that they themselves were his "letter of commendation," being so evidently, in spite of their sad faults, the fruit of a genuine work of God through him. He speaks of them as an epistle in two ways. First as written in his own heart. In so saying, we believe he wished them to realize how deeply they were engraved, as it were, on his affections. They little realized the intensity of his love in Christ for them. But then they were an epistle of Christ in a more objective sense, and of this verse 3 speaks.

They were "the epistle of Christ" in a double sense, inasmuch as that which is written is, in one word, Christ, and also it is Christ Himself who is the great and effective Writer. True, He writes by the hand of His servant, and so we find the words, "ministered by us." Paul was *only* the minister, still he was the minister, and this sufficiently commended him.

Next we have a double contrast. The thoughts of the Apostle went back to the former ministry of the law through Moses. Then the Divine commandments were engraved on tables of stone, and apparently made the more visible by some kind of ink. Now it is not ink but the Spirit of the living God: not tables of stone but the tables of the heart. That was *dead*; this was living. The Gospel had indeed been to the Corinthians a savour of life unto life.

In this verse the work of God in the hearts of the Corinthians is viewed as being equally the fruit of the operation of Christ and of the Spirit of the living God. Christ and the Spirit are very closely linked together thus all through this remarkable passage, as we shall see.

This work of Christ and of the Spirit had been carried out through Paul. He had been the minister. Every servant of God who preaches the Gospel is in that position. Yet Paul had that place in a very special sense. He had no more sufficiency for it than we have, yet he had very specially been made "able" or a "competent" minister of the New Covenant which had found its basis and foundation in the death and resurrection of Christ. The New Covenant, of which Jeremiah prophesied is of course to be formally established in the future with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, but the basis of it has already been laid, and the Gospel preached today is of a new covenant order. The blessings promised in the New Covenant are found in it, as well as blessings that go beyond anything that the New Covenant contemplates.

Again in verse 6 the living character of the Gospel ministry is emphasized, whereas the law brought in death. We get the expression "the letter" twice in verse 6, and the same word (in a slightly different form) occurs in verse 7, where it is translated, "written." The New Translation renders it, "the ministry of death, in letters, graven in stones," which shows that in this passage the term, "letter," refers to the law. The law kills. Its ministry is unto death. The Spirit quickens.

What we have just pointed out is worth notice, for some have sought to deduce from this Scripture that the letter of Scripture kills! Under cover of this idea they feel free to disregard the letter of Scripture in favour of what they are pleased to declare is its spirit. What Scripture *says* is waved aside in order to introduce what it is *supposed* to mean. And if other passages be quoted which definitely contradict the alleged meaning, that matters not, for those other passages can be waved aside as also being but the letter which kills. Such people kill the letter because, they say, the letter kills. But it is all a mistake. There is no such idea in this verse.

We have been pointing out the digressions of this epistle. We now have to note that there is a big parenthesis in the midst of this lengthy digression, covering from verse 7 to verse 16 inclusive. Within this parenthesis the very striking contrast between the ministry of the Law and the New Covenant is developed, and the point is particularly made that the glory connected with the latter far outshines the glory connected with the former.

First, the law was but a ministry of death: the Gospel is a ministry of the life-giving Spirit. Yet there was a glory connected with the law: a glory so great that the children of Israel could not behold it, nor could they look at the reflection of it as seen in the face of Moses. That glory was to be done away, for presently it faded from the face of Moses, and the time came when the signs of the divine presence left Sinai's crest. So our verse states that the law system "began with glory," (N. Tr.) not merely that it "was glorious." It began, but it did not continue. Now comes the question, "How shall not rather the ministry of the Spirit subsist in glory?" (N. Tr.). The glory of the law began, but soon it was quenched in the ministry of death to all who came under it. When the ministry of the quickening Spirit comes in, it abides in glory.

Again the law was a ministry of condemnation, whereas the Gospel is a ministry of righteousness. That demanded righteousness from man, and, because he had none of it, utterly condemned him. This brings righteousness, and ministers it to man by means of faith. Without a question a ministry which confers righteousness, and thus enables sinful man to stand in the presence of God, greatly exceeds in glory a ministry which merely demands righteousness where it is non-existent, and as a result condemns.

There is a further contrast in verse 11. The law system and its glory is "done away" or "annulled" in Christ; whereas the glory introduced by Him abides. There has been introduced by the Lord Jesus that which remains to eternity; and the glory of that is so surpassing that it completely eclipses any glory that once existed in connection with the law, as verse 10 points out.

This then was the wonderful character of that ministry with which the Apostle was entrusted; and the character of it influenced the manner of its presentation. That which the Gospel ministry presents is not yet brought into full display, but it will be in due season. Hence he speaks here of having a *hope*, and *such* a hope. Having it, he was able to confront men with "great plainness of speech" or "boldness," and also with great openness and absence of reserve. There had to be reserve in connection with the law, for men could not stand in the presence of its glory.

Moses had to put a veil on his face when he had come down from the mount, to hide the glory from the children of Israel. That which has been annulled had an "end" which they did not see. "End" signifies not the finish or termination of the law, but the purpose of God in the law; which was Christ, as Romans 10: 4 tells us. The law provided man with a very thorny road for his feet, but it led to Christ; just as every other road laid down by God leads to Christ. The glory that shone in the face of Moses was really a faint reflection of Christ. But Israel could not see it. Had they seen it they would have condemned themselves and waited with eager expectancy for the advent of Christ, the Deliverer.

Alas, their minds were blinded. They used the law as though it were a kind of feather stuck in their cap, to give them a pre-eminent place among the nations; and it is as though the veil that once was upon the face of Moses had been transferred to their minds and hearts. There is of course an election of grace today from amongst Israel, nevertheless it is still true of them as a nation that they read the Old Testament with the veil on their hearts.

Still a moment is coming when the veil shall be removed. Verse 16 of our chapter is an allusion to Exodus 34: 33-35. Though Moses veiled his face when he dealt with the people, when he turned to the Lord and had to do with Him he removed the veil from his face. This is a kind of allegory as to what will happen with Israel. When at last they shall turn to the Lord in sincerity and repentance the veil will be lifted from their minds, and the glory of the Christ, whom once they crucified, will burst upon them.

Verse 16 completes the parenthesis which began at verse 7. With verse 17 we pick up the thread

from verse 6, where it was stated that the Spirit quickens. Here we find the Lord and the Spirit identified in a very remarkable way, the Spirit being the Spirit of the Lord, as also He is the Spirit of God. We are so accustomed to *distinguishing* between the Persons of the Godhead that we may easily fall into the error of *separating* between them. This we must not do. There is the related truth of the unity of the Godhead, and we must never lose sight of their essential *oneness*.

The Lord is the life-giving Spirit of the New Covenant, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty. *Life* and *liberty* go together, just as law and bondage are associated. The divine life is not to be hampered or entangled within legal restraints. There is no need that it should be. Legal restraints are necessary and suitable enough when the flesh or the world are in question. They are not effective, for the flesh and the world break through them and transgress. In another way the law is effective, for it curses and brings death in upon the transgressor. All is changed when once the Spirit has given life. Then liberty can be safely accorded, for the Spirit of the Lord holds sway.

Verse 18 brings in a third wonderful thing. In addition to life and liberty there is *transformation*. As we have it in the Authorized Version the words, "with open face," are a little vague, and would probably be read as applying to us. It is true of course that we have no veil upon us as Israel has; but the point seems to be that the glory of the Lord, upon which we gaze, has no veil upon it. There is no veil upon the face of our Lord as there was upon the face of Moses. Moreover the glory that shines in Him is not repellent as was the glory in the face of Moses, it is attractive: and not only attractive but transforming also. The more Christ in His glory is before our spiritual vision the more we gain His likeness.

This transformation is a gradual process, and not reached all at once. We are changed "from glory to glory," that is, from one degree of glory to another. It is a Divine work, "even as by the Spirit of the Lord." Here again the wording is remarkable. "Even as by [the] Lord [the] Spirit." (N. Tr.). The definite article "the" is omitted both times in the Greek. Our little plumb-line may utterly fail when let down into the depths of this statement; but at least we can see that both the Lord and the Spirit work together in this transformation process; the Lord as an Object before faith's vision, the Spirit as a power within us.

Oh, that we might be kept steady with the eye on Christ; kept as true to Him as the needle is true to the pole!

2 Corinthians 4

THE NEW COVENANT ministry entrusted to the Apostle Paul is unfolded to us in chapter 3. As we open chapter 4, our thoughts are directed to the things that characterized him as the minister of it. And first of all he was marked by good courage. Since God had entrusted him with the ministry, He gave with it suitable mercy. So, whatever the opposition or difficulty he did not faint. The same thing holds good for us. The Lord never calls us to ministry of any kind without the needed mercy being available. "Ministry" of course is just "Service;" the kind of thing that any of us might render, though it is a word of wide meaning and covers things that many of us might not be called to do.

The second verse emphasizes the honesty and transparency that marked Paul in his service. He descended to none of the tricks that so commonly disfigure the world's propaganda. Many a zealot, religious as well as political, will stoop to a great deal of craft and falsification in order to gain his end. The end justifies the means, to his way of thinking. Paul was very conscious that he was proclaiming the "Word of God," and this must not be falsified, but rather made manifest in all its truth. His

transparent honesty in handling the truth was thus made manifest to every upright conscience.

And another thing also was gained. Things were brought to an issue in the case of those who did not receive his message. The word, "hid" which occurs twice in verse 3, is really, "veiled;" the same word (in a slightly different form) as occurs several times in the latter part of chapter 2. "If also our gospel is veiled, it is veiled in those that are lost." (N. Tr.). There was no veil on the Gospel, for Paul declared it in its purity and its clarity: but there was a veil upon the hearts and minds of the perishing who did not believe; a veil that had been dropped in their minds by the god of this world. Had Paul preached the word only partially, or in deceitful fashion the issue would not have been so clear.

What a word is this for those of us who preach the Gospel! Are we rightly affected by the awful solemnity of preaching the Word of God? Have we renounced every "hidden thing," whether of dishonesty, craft, deceit, or anything else unworthy? Do we make manifest the truth, and only the truth? These are tremendous questions. If we do not, the unbelief of our hearers may not be attributable to *their blindness*, but to *our unfaithfulness*.

However, even when the Gospel is preached as it should be preached there are found those who do not believe; and the explanation is that the devil has blinded their eyes. The sun in the heavens has not been eclipsed, but a very dark blind has been dropped over the window of their little room. The light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ shines, but it does not shine into them. The god of this age will use anything, no matter what, so long as it blots out the Gospel: not usually material things, but rather speculative notions and teachings of men. During the past three-quarters of a century he has very effectually blinded multitudes by the revival of a favourite speculation of the pagan world before Christ — evolution. The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ does not penetrate where the evolutionary blind has been securely dropped. The blinded soul may entertain miserable notions of man as the image of a monkey — or some other elementary creature — or of a monkey as the image of man. He cannot in the nature of things know Christ as "the Image of God," though he may talk about a Christ of his own imagination. There are many imaginary Christs: Christ, as men wish He had been. There is only one real Christ, the image of God; Christ as He was and is, the Christ of the Bible.

Christ Jesus was the great theme of the Apostle's preaching, and he emphasized His position as Lord. He kept himself out of sight as a mere bondman of others. Preaching Him as Lord, he of course presented Him in His present glory at the right hand of God; and so he could speak of his message as, "the glad tidings of the glory of the Christ" (ver. 4. N. Tr.). Elsewhere He speaks of preaching, "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20: 24). There are not two gospels, of course. The one Gospel of God has both the grace of God and the glory of Christ amongst its outstanding features, and so either may be presented as characterizing it. Here the glory of Christ is the prominent feature as befits the context, for he had been speaking of the passing glory of the Old Covenant which once shone in the face of Moses. We can declare that the glory of God now shines, and will for ever shine, in the face of Jesus Christ.

Verse 6 is very striking, for it clearly alludes first to God's act in creation, then to His act in Paul's own conversion, and lastly to the ministry to which he was called. Of old God said, "Let there be light," and light shone out of the darkness. That was in the material creation. But now there is a work of new creation proceeding, and something analogous takes place. Divine light — the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus — shines into dark hearts, as it did in such a pre-eminent fashion into Paul's on the road to Damascus, producing marvellous effects. It shines in that it may shine out. It is "for the shining forth of the knowledge" (N. Tr.). In that way the believer becomes luminous himself. He begins to shine, just as the moon shines in the light of the sun, save of course that the moon is a dead body merely reflecting light from its surface without being affected itself.

The fact we are dwelling on accounts for the wonderful character of Paul's ministry. He was not a mere preacher — a mere professional evangelist — throwing off so many sermons a week. He preached more than others indeed, but his preaching was the shining out of the light that was shining within, the telling forth of things that were thus wrought into every fibre of his being. No one knew better than he that every Divine excellence shines forth in Jesus, and that He dwells in light above the brightness of the sun, for he had seen it on the road to Damascus. That which he knew was as a precious treasure deposited within him.

We have not seen Christ in His glory as Paul did, yet by faith we do see him there; so that we too can speak of having a treasure. As with Paul so with us, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels." The allusion here is to our present mortal bodies, for as to his body "the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground" (Gen. 2: 7). As originally formed, man's body was perfect, and perfectly suited to his environment and his place in the scheme of creation. As fallen his body becomes marred, and so the earthen vessels in which the treasure is found are poor and feeble. But then that only makes more manifest the fact that the power at work is of God and not of man.

In the passage before us, extending to the early verses of 2 Cor. 5, we have many allusions to the body, and it is spoken of in various ways. In verse 10 it is clearly mentioned apart from figurative language as, "our body." In verse 11 it is, "our mortal flesh." In verse 16, "our outward man." And in the next chapter, verses 1 and 4, "our earthly house of this tabernacle," and "this tabernacle." The whole passage instructs us as to the dealings of God with Paul as regards his body, and it throws great light on many an event in our own histories.

All God's dealings with us, as regards the earthen vessel of the body, have as their object the better and more adequate shining forth of the treasure which He has placed within. There is an "excellency," or "surpassingness" of power about this treasure, which was very manifest in the case of Paul. By virtue of it not only was he sustained under unparalleled afflictions, but life worked in those to whom he ministered, as verse 12 shows. Now, as we know, there is truly a surpassingness about the power of natural life which is inexplicable by us. Seeds get buried under heavy flagstones, and lo, in the days to come tender green *shoots, filled with life*, manifest surprising energy sufficient to lift the stone and push it aside. Life of a spiritual sort manifests even more surprising powers.

Now this power was operating very energetically in a frail mortal man like Paul. Had he been sent into the world to serve, clothed in a splendid body of glory, he would have been viewed as a kind of superman, and the power largely attributed to him. As it was, the surpassing power that wrought in him and through him was obviously of God.

The trouble with us so often is that we rather want to wield power as though it were connected with ourselves. We are not content to be like an earthen vessel containing a power manifestly not its own. Hence very little power, or perhaps even complete absence of power, is what marks us. This indeed is the inveterate tendency of our poor human hearts.

And it was also the tendency of Paul's heart, for he was a man of like passions to ourselves. Verses 8 to 11 clearly show this. He was continually faced with seas of trouble and difficulty. On the other hand, he was continually maintained and carried through, and made a blessing to others by the power of God.

If we examine these verses carefully we see that what he had to face came upon him in a threefold way. First, there were adverse circumstances. These are mentioned in verses 8 and 9. Trouble, perplexity, persecution, castings down, all these came upon him. Verily he was "a man," as he told the Jews, (Acts 22: 3), and hence not beyond these things. He knew what it was to be perplexed and cast

down like the rest of us.

Second, there was the spiritual exercise and experience expressed in the words, "Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus." The dying of the Lord Jesus was abidingly impressed upon the mind of the Apostle, so that he bore it about with him continually. But these words seem to convey more than this, for as a consequence the dying of Jesus laid its finger, so to speak, upon every faculty and every member of his body, controlling all his ways. It laid its finger, for instance, upon his tongue, repressing many an utterance that would have been unworthy. The thing was not perfect with him, as we know. Yet it was characteristic with him, marking him normally, in spite of occasional deviations and failures.

Third, there was God's disciplinary action which he describes as being "alway delivered unto death for Jesus' sake." God permitted many a thing to come upon him, such as that episode at Ephesus, which he described in chapter 1 as "so great a death," by which he was delivered to death in his experiences amongst opposing men. In this way the inward and spiritual experience of which he speaks in 2 Cor. 1: 10, was supplemented by outward experiences, sent of God to further help him in his service. By these things he lived, and his light the more brightly shone.

We have only noticed so far one side of the matter. The other side is concerned with the wonderful results, with the way in which the surpassing excellence of the power of God was displayed in and by means of these things. Though circumstances were continually against him yet he was not distressed, not in despair, not forsaken, not destroyed. Obviously a sustaining power was working in him which counteracted all that was working against him. He was rather like one of those self-righting lifeboats, pounded by the stormy seas and even overturned, which nevertheless comes up, the right side up, when the thundering billows have passed. It was indeed the power of the divine life in Paul that accomplished this.

Again, whether the action of faith and love in his own experience, leading him to bear about in his body the dying of Jesus, be in question, or whether God's disciplinary actions in keeping with that experience be in question, the same end was achieved, and a wonderful end it was. The life of Jesus was made manifest in his body, his mortal flesh. In verse 2, referring to his service, he had spoken of the *manifestation* of the truth. Again in verse 6, still referring to his service, he had spoken of the *shining forth* of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Now we have something additional to this, for the *manifestation* of the life of Jesus is not just service. It is character. In his unconverted days Saul of Tarsus manifested *himself*, as a man of imperious energy and self-will, in his mortal flesh. Now all was changed. The dying of Jesus was so applied to him that the Saul character was effectually stilled in death, and *the life of Jesus* manifested.

Nothing less than this is true and proper Christian testimony. Behind preaching and service lies the life. Christ in His glory should be clearly manifested *in the preaching*, but that manifestation will only reach to its maximum of power and effect as Christ is manifested *in the life*. And this is as true in regard to ourselves today as it was for the Apostle Paul. Without a doubt here lies one of the main reasons for the ineffectiveness of so much modern preaching, even though the preaching itself is correct and sound.

Verse 10 and 11, then, show us that, as the result of death working in Paul, life wrought in him, and the life of Jesus was lived by him. Verse 12 shows that there was a further result — life wrought also in those to whom he ministered, and notably the Corinthians. Some years before life had worked to their conversion. Now he was rejoicing to see further evidence of life in their genuine repentance as regards their wrongdoing, and their affection for himself in spite of his rebukes. And lastly he looked

forward to the resurrection world where they together with him would be presented in due season. Verse 14 mentions this.

The words, "I believed, and therefore have I spoken," are quoted from Psalm 96: 10. If that Psalm be studied it will be seen that the circumstances of the Psalmist when he wrote were very similar to those of Paul. He had been confronted by death and tears and falling, but had been delivered; and now he had the confidence that he would "walk before the Lord in the land of the living;" that is, he had the resurrection world in view. Believing that, he was able to open his mouth in testimony. Now Paul was just like that. He had "the same spirit of faith." The resurrection world was full in view for him.

Is it fully in view for us? It should be. Life and incorruptibility have come to light by the Gospel: and that which was known partially to the Psalmist may be known in full measure by us. It is only as we live in the light of resurrection that we can be content to bear about in our bodies the dying of Jesus; and only as we do that is the life of Jesus manifested in our bodies, and does life work in others whom we may serve.

Paul's ministry and service are still in view in verse 15, and the "all things" of that verse refer to the treasure with which he had been entrusted, the mercy that carried him in triumph through the persecution and discipline, the resurrection world which lay at the end. All these things were not matters purely personal to Paul, but through him were for the sake of the whole church of God. Consequently the Corinthians had an interest and a share in it all, and could add their thanksgivings to Paul's to the greater glory of God. We too may join in the thanksgiving though nearly nineteen centuries have passed; for what great blessing has reached us through his inspired epistles which sprang out of these experiences, written for our sakes as well as for the Corinthians. We too shall be presented with Paul and the Corinthians in the resurrection world.

There is nothing like having the resurrection full in view as an antidote against fainting. That glorious hope sustained the Apostle and it will sustain us. In the last verse of 1 Corinthians 15, we see how it inspires to active labour in the work of the Lord. Here, we discover how it sustains and encourages under the severest trials which threaten the perishing of the outward man: that is, the dissolution of the body in death.

And not only is there resurrection in the future but also a work of renewal in the present. "Our outward man" is the material body with which we are clothed. "The inward man" is not material but spiritual — that spiritual entity that we each possess, and which (since we are believers) has become the subject of God's new creation work. The current usage of this phrase in the world is a total misapplication of it. A man speaks of paying attention to "the demands of the inner man" when he means having a good meal to satisfy his stomach; and thus even the inner man is turned into a part of the anatomy of the outward man. This of course is symptomatic of the fact that the spiritual does not come within the range of the natural man.

The outward man is subject to all kinds of buffetings and wear and tear, yet it *may* in the mercy of God receive a certain amount of renewal, which may stave off for a time that ultimate perishing which we call death. The inward man IS renewed day by day. This renewal is doubtless produced by the gracious ministry of the Spirit of God, who indwells us.

What an extraordinary and inspiring picture is presented to our mental vision by this passage. Here is the Apostle; he has years of strenuous and dangerous labours behind him. He is continually being troubled and persecuted and battered by men, and again and again "delivered unto death" in the providential dealings of God. Yet he is pressing forward with undaunted courage, with the light of the future glory of resurrection before his eyes; and though he is worn as to his body, and signs of decay

are appearing, he is being renewed daily in his spirit so that he goes forward with unabated or even increased spiritual vigour. He felt all the trouble that came upon him, yet he dismisses it as "our light affliction."

The affliction is not only light but also only "for a moment." In Paul's case it lasted from the days shortly after his conversion, when the Jews of Damascus took counsel to kill him, to the day when he suffered martyrdom: a period covering thirty years or more. This period is only a moment to him because his mind is set on an eternity of glory. What tremendous contrasts we have here! The coming glory is weighty and not light: for eternity and not merely for a moment: and it is this in a "far more exceeding" way. It might have seemed enough to say it was exceeding. To say it is "*more* exceeding" seems almost superfluous. But, "*far more* exceeding!" Paul piles on the words. It is something excessively surpassing! He knew it, for fourteen years before he had been caught up into the third heaven and had glimpses of it. He wishes us to know it too.

The secret of the Apostle's wonderful career is found in the last verse of the chapter. The "look" of which he speaks is, of course, the look of faith. He was passing through the scenes and circumstances of earth, which were very visible, yet he was not looking at them. He was looking at the eternal things, which are not visible to mortal eyes. Here doubtless is discovered to us where much of our weakness lies. Our faith is weak like Peter's was when he essayed to walk on the waters to go to Jesus. He looked at the raging waves which were so very visible, and he began to sink. If, like Paul, we had our eyes upon Christ, upon resurrection, upon glory, we should be upheld by divine power and inwardly be renewed day by day.

2 Corinthians 5

THERE IS NO real break between chapters 4 and 5, for he passes on to show that if our outward man does perish, and so our earthly tabernacle house be dissolved, we are to have a house of another order which shall be eternal. The thought of what is *eternal* links these verses together. Eternal things are brought within the sight of our faith. An eternal weight of glory awaits us. And we shall need a resurrection body, which shall be eternal, in order to sustain that eternal weight of glory without being crushed by it. It is absolutely certain that such a resurrection body shall be ours. "*We know*," he says. He had established that fact in the fifteenth chapter of his first epistle; so that they knew it as well as he.

Our bodies are spoken of as houses in which we dwell, and very appropriately so. Our present bodies are only "tabernacle" or "tent" houses, comparatively flimsy structures and easily taken down. Our future bodies in the resurrection world will be of a different order, as 1 Corinthians 15 has shown us. Here we learn that they will be "not made with hands;" that is, spiritual, and not of an earthly or human order. They will be eternal, for in them we shall enter into eternal scenes. Also they will be heavenly. Our present bodies are natural and earthly and abide but for a time.

In these opening verses of chapter 5 we read of being "clothed," and being "unclothed;" of being "clothed upon," and of being "naked." We dwell at present in an earthly tent, clothed in bodies of humiliation. Presently we shall be clothed in glorified bodies of a spiritual, eternal and heavenly order. All the dead will be raised; even the wicked will appear before their Judge clothed in bodies. But though clothed they will be found spiritually naked before that great white throne. If we are true Christians we shall never be found naked thus, though we may be unclothed, for that word denotes the state of those saints who are "absent from the body" (verse 5) in the presence of the Lord. Paul himself, and myriads more beside, are unclothed at the present moment, but that unclothed state, blessed though it is, is not the great object of our desire. What we do long for, while we groan in our present weakness,

is this clothing upon with our house from heaven.

All those who are raised will be "clothed," but only the saints will be "clothed upon," for the reference here is to that which will take place at the coming of the Lord. The term is perhaps particularly appropriate as regards those who are alive and remain to the coming of the Lord. Such will all be changed, and so enter the resurrection state. They will in the twinkling of an eye be invested with their glorified bodies, and so clothed upon with their house from heaven. Thus in a moment mortality — which is attached to our present bodies — will be swallowed up of life.

Let us not read the two expressions, "in the heavens," and "from heaven," in a materialistic sense, as some have done. We must not conceive of our future glorified bodies as though they were a new and improved suit of clothes, already existing somewhere in heaven, and coming to us straight out of heaven. So thinking, we should find ourselves in collision with 1 Corinthians 15: 42-44, where a certain identity is preserved between the body of humiliation which is put down into the ground and the body of glory that is raised up. Those expressions indicate character rather than place. Heaven is our destiny, and we shall enter there in bodies which are heavenly in their origin and character.

We have the happy assurance of these things, and can say, "we know," because God has *spoken* and revealed them to us. But not only so, He has *acted* in keeping with what He has revealed. He has already "wrought us" for this very thing. This alludes to that spiritual work wrought in us and with us by the Holy Ghost. God by His Spirit has been the Potter, and we have been the clay. This clothing upon, of which we have just been speaking, is described in Romans 8 as the quickening of our mortal bodies. Our mortal bodies *shall be* quickened, but already God *has* wrought a quickening work as regards our souls, and this present work is in anticipation of the work that is yet to be done as regards our bodies. Moreover He has already given us His Spirit, as the Earnest of what is to come.

What God has wrought by His Spirit must be distinguished from the Spirit Himself, given to those who are subjects of His work. The order in this fifth verse is first, the work of the Spirit: second, the indwelling of the Spirit as the Earnest; the one preparatory to the other.

Hence the Apostle can say, "we are always confident." How could it be otherwise? We have the plain revelation of God as to it. We have the work of God in keeping with it. We have the gift of God — even His Holy Spirit — as the pledge and foretaste of it. Could anything be more certain and secure? Difficulties may throng around us, as they did around Paul. We too may groan, as burdened in our mortal bodies. But that which lies before us in resurrection is perfectly clear and sure. We too may be always confident: as confident when our sky is filled with black thunder clouds as when it is for the moment wholly blue.

For the moment we are at home in the body and absent from the Lord, left here to walk not by sight but by faith. Paul's confidence was such that he was willing — even more than willing, *pleased* — to be absent from the body and present with the Lord. This is his portion today, and the portion of all those who have died in the faith of Christ. They are absent from their bodies which have been laid in the grave, waiting the moment when they shall be clothed in bodies of glory. But even now they are present with the Lord, and in all the conscious blessedness of His presence, as the opening verses of 2 Cor. 12 bear witness.

There are those who assert that assurance and confidence as to one's future is bound to have a disastrous effect on one's behaviour. That idea however is definitely negated by verse 9. Were it a true idea we should read, "We are confident, I say . . . wherefore we" — take our ease and are indifferent and careless. The exact opposite is what it does say — "wherefore we labour . . ." The word here is not the usual one for "work." It has the sense of "being zealous," or even "ambitious." The very

confidence we have stirs us to an earnest zeal; and this is our ambition that come what may, whether life or death, we may be "accepted of Him," or, "agreeable to Him." We are "accepted in the Beloved" as Ephesians 1 tells us. Now we want to be agreeable, or well-pleasing, to Him.

This desire to please the Lord is surely an instinctive one in every heart that loves Him; yet all too often it does not burn as it should. So the Apostle now brings in another fact that is calculated to stir it to greater vehemence. When He comes Christ will set up His judgment seat. It will not be like a criminal court: that is reserved for the occasion when the great white throne is established, as we see in Revelation 20. It will be more like a naval prize court, when the judges sit to adjudicate as to captures during naval warfare, and the actions of officers and men come up for review, and prize money is awarded in many cases.

Before that judgment seat we must all appear; that is, we must all be manifested. Everything must come into the light in the presence of our Lord. Would we wish it to be otherwise? If there were left episodes of our lives, some of them marked by failure and shame, as to which the Lord had never had anything to say to us, would there not be a sense of reserve? Would not our otherwise bright eternity be clouded over in part by the feeling that some day they might be dragged into the light? Solemn though that judgment seat must be, it is yet a matter for rejoicing that it is to stand at the very threshold of the eternity of glory that awaits us. Before it we ourselves are to be manifested, and consequently all that we have been and done will come under the scrutiny of our Lord. That will mean seeing everything as through His eyes, and getting His verdict. It will mean the unravelling of every mysterious episode that has marked our way; the discovery of the why and wherefore of innumerable trying experiences; together with a full understanding of the amazing grace of our God, and the efficacy of the Priesthood and Advocacy of Christ.

It will also mean reward or loss, according to what has been done "in the body;" that is, in the whole of our lives of responsibility here. This is what we see also in 1 Corinthians 3: 14, 15; only there it is distinctly a question of the character of our work as servants of the Lord. Here it is more general and comprehensive, being a question of all our actions and ways.

The thought of that judgment seat evidently carried the mind of the Apostle on to the fact that before the Lord Jesus ultimately all men will stand, whether saved or unsaved. And as he thought of these latter, and recognized what the terror of it would be for them, he was moved to warn and persuade them. He was moved also in another direction more personal to himself and the Corinthians: moved to live in such a way as to be manifested to God, and also in the consciences of his fellow-Christians.

The word for "manifest" really occurs three times in these two verses, but at the beginning of verse 10 it is translated, "appear." Substitute "be manifested", there, and the connection becomes plain. If we live our lives in the remembrance of the certainty of being manifested before the judgment seat, we shall be careful to maintain open, honest, manifested dealings with God now. When we sin we shall at once humble ourselves in confession before Him, and attempt to conceal or palliate nothing. Further we shall, like Paul, not attempt to appear other than we are in the eyes of our fellow-believers. We shall be open and transparent in all our dealings with them, and not desire or seek a cheap reputation for a devotedness or sanctity which we do not possess. There were some in Paul's day who were doing this, as verse 12 bears witness.

Are we living in the light of the judgment seat? A great question this! Let each answer it in his own conscience before God. Depend upon it, if we are we shall be characterized by lives of devotedness, unworldliness and zeal. We shall be transparent before both God and man. And we shall

be keen to persuade men as Paul was. We shall earnestly seek the salvation of souls to the glory of God.

The Apostle Paul was marked by a very fervent zeal. It produced within him a great desire to be acceptable to the Lord, to be open and transparent with his brethren, and to persuade men in view of the coming judgment. His zeal was such that sometimes it carried him clean outside himself, and men labelled him as fanatical, as Festus did when he called out, "Paul, thou art beside thyself." But Paul was no fanatic, for when thus beside himself it was "to God;" that is, God was the Object before him; he was outside himself because God was so truly inside — "he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (1 John 4: 16).

We may find it difficult to understand this being "beside ourselves," and still more difficult to explain it. That may be because it is an experience almost, if not entirely, unknown to us. Very possibly we move in circles where zeal of the Pauline stamp would be looked upon as fleshly energy from the spiritual standpoint, and quite bad form from the social point of view. How great then is our loss!

But Paul was not always in an ecstasy Godward. He also knew well how to look out with sober-minded wisdom upon the interests of his Lord. Then he cared in a calculating way for the people of God, the Corinthians among them. And in this, as much as in the other, the love of Christ was the power that wrought within him and constrained him. That love had been expressed in His death, and it exerted its pressure on Paul, both in his affections toward God and His saints, and also as guiding his judgment. Constrained by the love, he was able to judge aright as to the significance of the death in which the love was expressed.

Christ "died for all." Here we have His death stated in its widest extent. He did not die for the Jew merely nor for any lesser circle than "all." This is a fact in which we may well rejoice, but what does it imply? This, that all were in a state of spiritual death: all were but dead men before God. This was the *implication* of His death.

But what was the *purpose* of His death? Its purpose was to provide a way of life for at least some, and to alter the whole character of life for these living ones.

Verse 15, you notice, begins with His death and ends with His resurrection. The intervening words set forth the design and purpose connected with those two great facts. They were in order that those who have been quickened into life might find in the risen Christ the Object and End of the new life they live. In our unconverted days we each of us had ourselves as the object and end of our lives. Everything was made to revolve around and contribute to self. Now things are to be entirely different with us, and everything in life is to revolve around and contribute to the interest and glory of Christ. Such at least is the Divine purpose and intention for us.

Verse 16 springs out of this, as the first word, "Wherefore," bears witness. Because Christ is no longer among us in the life of this world, and because we also now live in connection with Him, a new order of things has come in. Even Christ Himself is known by us in a new way. Paul had not been amongst those who knew Christ "according to flesh" in the days of His flesh. But even if he had been, he would have known Him thus no longer. But also we know no man after the flesh. That is not because men are not in the old condition according to flesh; for the great mass of them are. It is because of the subjective change wrought in ourselves. The Christian learns to look at men in a new way, not because of what has been wrought in them but because of what has been wrought in himself.

What has been wrought is stated in verse 17 — a work of new creation in Christ. As newly created in Christ we find ourselves in a new world. We are not there yet as regards our bodies. That

awaits the coming of the Lord. But we are there as regards our minds and spirits. Even today our spirits move amid things totally new, things utterly unknown in our unconverted days; also even the old things of this present creation, amongst which we move, are viewed by us in a new way.

This truth needs to be thoroughly digested by all of us. How much difficulty arises amongst Christians because they know and have dealings with one another according to flesh, that is, on the old basis and after the manner of the world. Then it is the easiest and most natural thing possible to drop into parties and cliques, to have our likes and dislikes, to be tremendously friendly with this or that fellow-believer until some disagreement arises, when an equally tremendous antagonism breaks out. All that kind of thing, even the friendship and the pleasantries and the apparent concord, rests on a wrong basis. It is according to flesh, and not according to new creation and the Spirit of God. If all saints knew one another upon the new basis what a transformation would come over the aspect of things that at present prevails in the church of God.

Verse 18 adds a further fact. We are reconciled to God by Jesus Christ, as well as being a new creation in Christ. Now reconciliation involves the removal of all that is offensive to God in us and about us, including that enmity of heart that kept us away from Him. As the fruit of reconciliation God can look down upon us with joy and complacency, and we can look up to Him with confidence and responsive love.

When Christ was here, God was in Him with reconciliation in view for the whole world. He came to bring men to God, not to arraign them before God, bringing them to book as regards their sins. This we see strikingly exemplified in John 8: 11. But God's overtures to men in Christ, with reconciliation in view, were rejected and He was put to death. It is one of the chief wonders of the Gospel that notwithstanding this His death became the basis of the reconciliation that is being announced today.

We believers are now reconciled to God; and as reconciled ourselves we have a part in the ministry of reconciliation. When the Apostle wrote, "We are ambassadors for Christ," he probably was thinking of himself and his fellow-labourers and the other apostles, for they were in a special sense put in trust with the Gospel; yet his words have an application to every believer. The church of God is like a divine embassy in the hostile world, and each of us has to remember that we are a part of that embassy, and that our attitude towards men has to be in keeping with the word of reconciliation that we carry. At the end of verse 20 we get as in a nutshell what the word of reconciliation is. The words, "you," "you," and "ye," are not in the original. "God as it were beseeching by us, we entreat for Christ, Be reconciled to God" (N. Tr.).

And if, when we thus entreat men, they turn to us asking on what basis such a reconciliation is possible, we can answer in the words of the last verse. The basis lies in God's own act, accomplished in the death of Christ.

There is a profound depth in verse 21 that defies all our feeble attempts at explanation. That God should make Christ to be a sacrifice for sin might be explained in terms of those Old Testament sacrifices that furnish a type of His sacrifice. But that God should make Him, who knew no sin, TO BE SIN for us baffles all explanation. Again, we might offer some explanation of how we are justified, of how righteousness is imputed to those who believe. But how we may in Him be MADE THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD is beyond us. Sin wholly characterized us, and all that we were He was made when He died on the cross. Righteousness wholly characterizes God, and that which He is we are made in Christ.

On the one hand then, all that we were is removed, and all that God is has been established, and we established in it. Here evidently is a perfect and unchallengeable basis for the reconciliation that we

enjoy, and that we are privileged to proclaim to others.

Let us pause at this point to observe how the Apostle has been led through a considerable digression, from about 2 Cor. 4: 7, springing out of the reference there made to the circumstances pressing in upon himself as a minister of the new covenant and the vessel of the light. The digression is completed at the end of 2 Cor. 5, and again we see him as a minister, but this time of the word of reconciliation. The word of reconciliation doubtless goes beyond the terms of the ministry of the new covenant, and it is helpful to distinguish the one from the other. Yet we must not divide them as though there were two gospels. The one gospel of God is so great and comprehensive that it may be considered in these varied ways.

2 Corinthians 6

AS WE OPEN chapter 6, we find Paul making a personal application and an appeal to the Corinthians concerning these things. Paul and his companions were fellow-workers in connection with the ministry (the words, "with Him," are to be omitted); and they had faithfully brought the word whether of new covenant grace or of reconciliation, to the Corinthians. Now their beseeching was that the grace of the Gospel should not be received in vain by them. Grace is received in vain if it does not work out to its legitimate end and effect. In the epistle to Titus we are told how grace teaches us to live in a sober, righteous and godly way, and the Corinthians were very defective in these things; so the exhortation was needed by them, as also it is needed by us.

Verse 2 is parenthetical and in brackets. The first part of it is a quotation from Isaiah 49: 8. The words quoted are addressed prophetically to the Messiah, who was to be rejected, and yet become a light to the Gentiles and salvation to the end of the earth. In spite of His rejection He should be heard and helped of Jehovah; and the hour when He should be heard and helped would be the time accepted and the day of salvation. The latter part of the verse points out that we are living in that very hour. He has been heard in resurrection, and with His resurrection the day of salvation has begun. It will continue until the day of Judgment supervenes. That of course is the reason why grace has visited us at all. We are not to receive it in vain.

Having exhorted us thus, the Apostle does not for the moment carry his beseechings further (he does this, we believe, from verse 11 onwards) but again turns aside to speak of the features that had characterized himself and his companions. He had said a good deal as to these in chapter 4, and one may be tempted to wonder why he should be led to recur to the matter here. We cannot but think that the reason is that the character, the behaviour, the whole spirit of those who are God's ministers is of the utmost importance. It has an effect upon their ministry which is simply incalculable by us. Reading the Acts of the Apostles, we see what exceptional power marked the ministry of Paul. It was of a type that either brought very great blessing or stirred up the fiercest opposition: it could not be ignored. The power of God was with him; that was the explanation. But why was the power of God with him in this exceptional degree? because he was characterized by the features mentioned in verses 3 to 10 of our chapter.

First there was the studied avoidance of all that would give offence, for he knew well that any blemish discernible in the servant would be put down as a black mark against his service. The great adversary is continually striking blows against the work of God, first by enticing the workmen into offences, and then by giving the offences wide publicity so as to discredit his work. Sometimes, sad to say, Christians play into his hands by acting as his publicity agents. They noise abroad their brother's failure to the blame of the ministry of the Gospel.

It is not enough however to avoid offence. There must be the commendation which flows from good. This was found very abundantly with the Apostle, for he was marked by much patience, or endurance, and that in the presence of a whole host of adverse and trying circumstances, which he summarizes under nine heads. Most of these nine things are clearly specified in the history of the Acts — such as afflictions, stripes, prisons, tumults, labours. The rest were not absent, as we can see reading between the lines. Through all these things he went with endurance, pursuing the ministry of grace.

And then he himself was marked by grace, in keeping with the grace he proclaimed. Verses 6 and 7 speak of this. Again we find the matter summarized under nine heads, beginning with pureness and ending with the armour of righteousness on the right hand and the left. Purity and righteousness stand like sentinels, right and left, before and behind; and protected thus, knowledge, longsuffering, love, truth, are found in the energy of the Spirit, and in the power of God. What a beautiful blending of spiritual graces is found here. The servant of God who is armed with righteousness, and yet is full of longsuffering and kindness and love unfeigned, must be like a polished sword in the hand of the Holy Ghost.

We have in these verses then, first, the negative virtue seen in the absence of offence. Then, the commendation springing from endurance under all kinds of opposing forces. Third, the positive virtues connected with both righteousness and love. And now lastly, the paradoxical state of affairs that resulted from the contradiction found between his state as to outward appearance and his state in inward reality. Once more we find nine heads under which the paradox is set forth.

If one looked merely on the surface appearance of things from a worldly standpoint, that which would have met the eye would have been dishonour. Here was a man who had thrown away all his brilliant prospects. Evil reports continually circulated about him. He appeared to be a deceiver, unknown and unrecognized by the men of religious repute. His life appeared to be a living death. Even God seemed to chasten him. Sorrow continually surged around him. He was poor, and possessed practically nothing. What a story!

There was another side to the story however. There was honour, and a good report from God. Sometimes there may have been a good report from his converts; but that was a small matter compared with his joining the company of those others who obtained "a good report through faith," as Hebrews 11, tells us. He was a true man, and well known on high. He was entering into that which is really life. He was inwardly always rejoicing. He was so serving as to enrich a great multitude. He was like a man rolling in spiritual riches, for he possessed all things. Again we say, What a story! Only this time there is another tone in our voice.

This amazing servant of God was the leader of that little band of men who were spoken of as, "These that have turned the world upside down," (Acts 17: 6) — and no wonder! The ingredients of spiritual power are found in the verses we have just considered. Let us inwardly digest them very well, and may they be a blessing to us in this day of abounding evil in **the** world, and small faith and devotedness amongst the people of God.

Twice already had the Apostle spoken of the ministry of exhortation which was his, "beseeching" men (2 Cor. 5: 20, 2 Cor. 6: 1). These exhortations were of a more general nature; but in verse 11 he comes to one of a very personal sort, addressing the Corinthians in direct fashion. It is evident that at this point he found his mouth opened and his heart free to bring them plainly face to face with the error which lay at the root of so much that was wrong in their midst. They had not realized that if they remained yoked with unbelievers they would of necessity be dragged into much of their evil ways.

Paul did not bluntly bring them to book on this point directly he opened his first epistle. Whence

came the tendency to split into parties and schools of opinion? Whence the immorality, the love of litigation, the carelessness about idolatry, the disorder in their meetings, the speculative errors as to the resurrection? From the flesh doubtless; but also as imported from the world around them, for Corinth was full of things of that kind. We may learn a valuable lesson from Paul's wise action. In his first epistle he contented himself with meeting the errors which lay on the surface, waiting until that letter had had its effect before he exposed the underlying causes. Now however, a suitable spiritual atmosphere had been produced. He had been able to direct their thoughts to the ministry of reconciliation. God and the world are in the sharpest possible antagonism, and therefore *reconciliation* with the One must involve *separation* from the other. Hence the opportune moment to speak plainly on this point had arrived.

The Apostle Paul was the man of large heart. The Corinthians were saints of narrow affections. "Straightened," means narrowed, and "bowels," signifies affections. Quite remarkable — do you think not? The average man of the world would assess matters just the other way round, and not a few Christians would agree with him. They would dub the separate Christian as, the "narrow-minded man," and praise the easygoing one of worldly type, as the large-hearted man. But, as a matter of fact it is the separate believer who finds his centre in Christ, and so enters into the largeness of His interests. The worldly believer is limited by this little world and narrowed down to selfish interests. Paul exhorted the Corinthians to be *enlarged by separation* from the world.

Verse 14 contains an allusion to Deuteronomy 22: 10. The word literally is "diversely yoked" though of course if two, of diverse nature and form, such as the ox and the ass, were put together the resultant yoke would prove to be unequal. Any yoking together of the believer and the unbeliever must be unequal because they are *diverse* in their very nature and character — the one, born of God, a child of light; the other still in the Adamic nature, a child of darkness. The yoking together of two, so wholly diverse, must prove disastrous.

It is a question, be it noted, of a *yoke*. The believer is left in the world, and comes into contact with all sorts, as is indicated in 1 Corinthians 5: 9, 10. While mixing thus with all sorts he is to be careful to avoid being yoked with any. The most intimate and permanent yoke that the world knows is that of marriage. A believer may yoke himself with an unbeliever by a business partnership. Before he is through with it he may suffer much spiritual loss and the Lord's Name be dishonoured; since he has to share in the responsibility of evil things wrought by the unconverted partner. But at least he can get out of it in process of time, even if at financial loss to himself. But marriage he cannot get out of save by death — his own or his partner's. And there are many other yokes besides those in marriage and in business, though not so strong and enduring. We are to shun *all* of them.

Consider what the believer stands for — righteousness, light, Christ, the temple of God. The unbeliever stands for unrighteousness (or lawlessness), darkness, Belial, idols. Now what possible yoke, or fellowship, or agreement, can there be between the two? None whatever. Then why take up a position which involves an attempt to bring together things which are as the poles asunder? The unbeliever cannot possibly fit in with the things which are the very life of the believer. *He has not got the life which would enable him to do so.* The believer can entangle and damage himself with the things of unrighteousness which occupy the unbeliever, for though born of God *he still has the flesh within him.* Yoke the two together, and what must be the upshot?

No deep understanding is needed to answer that question. The one can only travel in *one* direction: the other can travel in *either* direction. The way of the unbeliever prevails, though the believer may be dragged very unwillingly, and hence act as a kind of brake on the wheels.

The exhortation then is that we come out from among the unbelievers and be separate, not even touching what is unclean. The believer cannot be too careful to avoid every kind of connection and complicity with what is evil; and that because of what he is in his individual character as a child of light, and also what he is collectively with other believers as the temple of the living God. Being the living God, He not only dwells in the midst of His people but He walks in their midst, observing all their ways. And holiness becomes his house for ever.

Some of us may say to ourselves, "Yes, but if I obey this injunction and consequently break these or those links, I shall suffer a great deal of loss and be in a very difficult position." That is very possible. But such a contingency is foreseen. The world may cast you out, but God will receive you, and be a Father to you. The last verse of our chapter does not refer to proper Christian relationship which is established in Christ, which is expounded by the Apostle in Galatians 3: 26 to 4: 7; but rather to that practical "fathering" of the believer which he needs when suffering from the world. If we may so put it, with all reverence, God Himself will play the part of Father to him. Hence we are said to be His sons and daughters. When it is a question of proper Christian relationship we all, whether male or female, are His sons.

And notice this; the One who is pledged to play the Father's part is the Lord, Almighty. Here then we have brought together His three great Names — Father, Jehovah, Almighty. He is Jehovah, the unchanging One, faithful to His word. He wields all power. And the value of both Names He brings into His fatherly care. We need not be afraid to cut all links with the world, cost what it may.

An interesting and encouraging contrast between this verse and Ephesians 6: 12 may be pointed out. There are "the rulers of the darkness of this world," or, more literally, "the world-rulers of this darkness" — Satanic authorities and powers, no doubt, who dominate this world of darkness. We might well fear them were it not that we are under the protection of the Lord Almighty. The word translated, Almighty, is literally the All-ruler. The *world-rulers* may be great, but they are as nothing in the presence of the *All-ruler*; just as this world, though great to us, is very small when compared with all things — the mighty universe of God.

2 Corinthians 7

WE HAVE THEN these striking promises from the lips of God. If we are separate from the world, and face whatever loss that may involve, we shall find God acting as Father toward us, and we shall enter consciously into the good and sweetness of the relationship in which we are set. Now having such promises we are exhorted (as we open chapter 7) to purify ourselves, and thus perfect holiness in the fear of God. Notice that it says, "from *all* filthiness of the flesh and spirit." This is a very important word, and very sweeping. Our attention has just been directed to the necessity of a purification from all fellowship with the world in outward things. Yet if we merely practised separation in outward things, confining ourselves to that, we should just become Pharisees; a most undesirable thing. The separation we are to practice goes much deeper. All filthiness or pollution of the flesh is to be avoided, and all filthiness of the spirit too.

Both forms of separation are called for; the inward and the outward too. The outward without the inward is just hypocrisy. The inward without the outward is at best a very defective thing. At the worst it descends to the plight in which Lot was found in Sodom, though not himself descending to the shocking morals of that city. Abraham was in the happy path of God's will; clean outside the place as well as free from the evil. There are the pollutions of the world: the pollutions of the flesh: the pollutions of the spirit: the last of the three the most subtle of all, because the most refined form of sin.

May God awaken us to great carefulness as to it. Holiness when carried to its perfection covers all three. But we are to be carrying it on towards its perfection even now. May God help us to do so.

The Apostle had delivered his soul thus as to the Corinthians, and was conscious that the threatened breach between himself and them had been averted in the mercy of God; and those from outside, who had fomented trouble and had been his detractors, had lost something of their power. The Corinthians, under the influence of these men, had been inclined to turn their backs on Paul. Things however were now changed, and he can say simply, "Receive us." They knew the integrity that had ever characterized him, and the fervent love towards them that was in his heart; he was identified with them in his affections whether in life or in death. Moreover, confident now as to their affection for him, he was filled with encouragement and joy. He could tell them now of the happy experience that was his, when tidings of the effect of his first epistle reached him.

Verse 5 picks up the threads of happenings from 2 Cor. 2: 13. One can read from one verse to the other as though nothing came between them. He had left Troas, in spite of the door for the Gospel opened of the Lord, because he had no rest in his spirit as to the Corinthians; yet when he got into Macedonia conditions were even worse. There were not only fears within but also fightings without. One can imagine a little perhaps of what he felt as he plunged deeply, and yet more deeply, into sorrows and troubles. Suddenly however Titus appeared, bringing good news as to the effect of his first epistle, which ministered to him great comfort. He had the companionship of Titus, and the assurance that God had intervened in His mercy.

His first epistle had been used to effect two things: first, a thoroughgoing repentance as to the evils he had denounced; second, a revival of their affection for himself. There was of course a very distinct connection between them. As they realized the error of their ways so they saw that his plain and faithful remonstrances were actuated by love; and responsive love was kindled in their hearts towards him. For a time he had been tempted to regret that he ever wrote the letter, but now that its good effect had been manifested he could only rejoice.

This scripture shows us very clearly what genuine repentance really is. It is not exactly sorrow for sin, though godly sorrow of that sort is an ingredient of it. Verse 11 shows what repentance involved in their case, and with what zeal and fear they cleared themselves. Repentance of a right sort is repentance to salvation; that is, it means deliverance from the thing repented of. Mere sorrow for sin, when confronted with its consequences, is the kind of which the world is capable, and it only works death and not salvation. Judas Iscariot is a sad example of this.

One great thing, then, that had come out of all the troubles at Corinth and the sending of the first epistle had been a mutual expression of love as between Paul and the saints there. Verse 7 mentions, "your fervent mind toward me;" and verse 12, "our care for you in the sight of God." It was no small thing to put things right as between the one who did the injury and the one who was injured, but it was even greater to bring into display that love which is the fruit of the Divine nature in the saints.

A striking feature of this chapter, from verse 5 and onwards, is the way in which all these happenings are traced to the hand of God. Having sent his first epistle, Paul was agitated and cast down in spirit to the point of regretting that he had written it — even though, as we know, it was a letter inspired of God. Then at last, when things seemed at their lowest, Titus appeared with good news as to its effect upon the Corinthians. This was the mercy of God intervening to comfort the downcast Apostle, as also it had been the mercy of God effecting a godly repentance in the hearts of the Corinthians. The word, "godly," occurring three times (verses 9, 10, 11), is really in each case, "according to God." God had intervened, and this was the real basis and cause of Paul's comfort and

joy.

Moreover Titus had come back thoroughly refreshed and joyful. This evidently had far exceeded Paul's hopes. There had been much anxiety as to them, and many things to blame, as the first epistle shows; and yet the way in which they had received him had gone beyond his expectations. True he had boasted of them to Titus. He had spoken of them with warmth of affection and with assurance of their reality. And now all had been found as he had said. The Apostle's distress had been turned into exultant joy and thankfulness.

In all this we see how God delights to lift up and encourage His tried servants. The God who thus acted with Paul is just the same today. Why are we not filled with greater and more implicit confidence in Him?

The Corinthians had received Titus "with fear and trembling;" they had been marked by obedience. Paul's letter had come to them with an authority that was Divine. In it he had called upon them to recognize that the things he wrote to them were "the commandments of the Lord." Being the inspired Word of God, it had authenticated itself as such in their consciences, and it commanded their obedience. Nowadays some would like to persuade us that we have no logical reason for accepting any given scripture as the Word of God unless we are prepared to receive it as authenticated by "the Church," unless it carries the imprimatur of pope and cardinals. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It was not so at the beginning, and is not so today. The Word of God is self-authenticating in the hearts and consciences of those who are born of Him.

The obedience of the Corinthians to the Word of the Lord gave the Apostle full confidence as to them. He could say with joy, "I have confidence in you in all things." Are we inclined to look upon this as a rather exuberant overestimate on his part, the fruit of the revulsion of feeling he had undergone? It was not so at all. It was the expression of a sober judgment. Saints may be very defective and blameworthy as to many things, but if they recognize the Word of God when they hear it, and yield obedience to its instructions, one need have no fear as to them. All will be well.

It was not that they had any fear of Titus, or that Paul's letters, though weighty and powerful, put the fear of Paul upon their spirits. It was rather that in spite of all their errors they did tremble at the Word of the Lord, when they heard it.

Are we equal to the Corinthians in this respect? Our day is peculiarly marked by disrespect for the Word of God. In many quarters, professedly Christian, the Bible is looked upon as subject matter for criticism. Let us beware lest we catch the infection of it. Would Paul have confidence in us as to all things? Only if he saw that we too were marked by subjection and obedience to the Word of God.

2 Corinthians 8

HAVING OPENED HIS HEART to the Corinthians, both as to his own experiences and as to their need of separation from the world of unbelievers, and having expressed his joy in their obedience to the Word of God, and the confidence as to them which this gave him, Paul now felt ready to write to them more particularly concerning the collection then being made amongst the various Gentile assemblies for the benefit of poor saints in Jerusalem. He had alluded to it briefly in the closing chapter of his first epistle. He now refers to it at length in chapters 8 and 9 of this epistle; and in urging the Corinthians to liberality he brings out some very important instruction.

There has been a very remarkable display of the grace of God in the assemblies of Macedonia, and it has been put permanently on record, so that not only the Corinthians but ourselves might be

stirred up by it. Some of us might be inclined to think that a recital of the devotedness of others, with a view to stirring up sluggish saints, would be an appeal to rather low-down motives and not a worthy proceeding. Here however we find the Spirit inspiring the Apostle to do this very thing. So we never need be afraid of telling how the grace of God has wrought in others. Such recitals not only reveal the grace of God to us as a real and practical thing, but also they serve to convict us of our own shortcomings: and both these results are much to be desired.

The giving of the Macedonian believers was remarkable. Paul himself could bear witness that they gave according to their power. This in itself was a big thing. It means that having righteously discharged all their proper living expenses, they then gave up to the limit of their ability. They did more than this however. They gave beyond their power; that is, they denied themselves what might be considered proper living expenses in order to give to the Lord and His people. And this they did in the most willing-hearted way, begging Paul to accept the money and undertake the responsibility of having it distributed to the saints. They had caught the spirit that was exemplified when the tabernacle was to be made, and it was reported to Moses, "The people bring much more than enough for the service of the work, which the Lord commanded to make" (Exodus 36: 5).

And there is more even than this; for they exceeded Paul's expectations in another direction. They began their giving at the right point by first giving themselves to the Lord. Yielding themselves to the Lord, they necessarily yielded to Him all that they had. Thus their possessions they regarded as the Lord's, to be used at His direction; and consequently they carried out the will of God in placing themselves and their possessions in the hands of Paul.

This, without a doubt, is the only true way to look at this matter of giving. God does not merely claim our superfluity but *all that we have*, because He claims us. When we see this, we at once become conscious how far our standard of giving falls below the standard set by the Macedonians. They were characterized by a liberality that was enhanced by their deep poverty and the fact that they were in the midst of a time of much affliction. What moved them to their liberality was the abundance of their spiritual joy. They had by faith so real and joyous a grasp of the things of heaven, that they could afford to be liberal with the things of earth.

Is liberality in giving a characteristic feature of modern Christian life? We fear there can be only one answer to that question. What devices are resorted to in many quarters in order to raise funds! What advertisements and appeals are issued! What lamentable stories as to shortness of funds! Doubtless a great deal of the trouble arises from people taking up causes and launching enterprises to which they were never called by God. Still, it also indicates that many a believer is withholding more than is meet, and it tends to spiritual poverty — to themselves as well as others. There are exceptions no doubt, in the cases of some who acknowledge their stewardship and give largely according to their means, and of some very few who have given with a liberality that is astonishing. But they are the exception, and not the rule.

We are more like the Corinthians than the Macedonians, and we need to be stirred up, as they did, by this shining example. So Paul had begged Titus during his recent visit to carry the matter to completion. Giving is spoken of as a *grace*, you notice, and this indeed it is, if rightly considered and carried out. It becomes a potent method of expressing the working of the grace of God in blessing. If our own hearts are filled to overflowing with blessing from God, we are bound to overflow ourselves in giving to others. Verse 7 is a very gentle and tactful rebuke to the Corinthians — and we believe, to ourselves also. Whether we can be said to abound in faith and in all diligence may be doubted, but we evidently do in utterance and knowledge. Is it not true that we know in our heads, and we utter with our

lips, a good deal more than we express in the form of large-hearted giving?

Verse 8 shows that the Apostle did not wish to be understood as issuing a command on the subject. If we gave only because we were commanded of God to do so, our giving could no longer be spoken of as grace. It would be done under the compulsion of law. No, the forwardness and zeal of the Macedonians was to be a stimulus merely, and the giving for which he asked was to be an expression and proof of the sincerity and genuineness of their love. Love always delights to give.

The working of the grace of God in other Christians may act as a *stimulus* to us, but nothing short of the supreme working of the grace of God in Christ can supply us with the mainspring and *motive* we need, if we are to be characterized by the grace of generous giving. To that mainspring we come in verse 9.

How often verses which are like sparkling gems lie embedded in the discussion of matters which seem very ordinary and even common-place! This is a case in point. The Corinthians had been quite ready to consider the making of this collection. They had willingly taken up the idea a whole year before, and yet they had so far failed to bring it to completion, and actually give the money. What would bring them to the point? What, but the fresh sense of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ?

This marvellous verse is an epitome of the New Testament. "Though He was rich," carries us back into the depths of His Godhead glory before His incarnation; the glory that is unfolded in the opening verses of John's Gospel and elsewhere. "Yet for your sakes He became poor," opens out into the wonderful story of His life, sufferings and death, as recorded in all four Gospels. "That ye through His poverty might be rich," indicates the wealth of blessing and glory into which we are introduced by Him and in Him, as unfolded in the Epistles and the Revelation. And the whole story is the supreme expression of GRACE; which consists in the down-stooping of Divine love to meet man's need, not merely according to the need that is met, but according to the love that meets it.

Having used this grace as a powerful lever to move and uplift the hearts of the Corinthians, the Apostle turned to enunciate a few important principles that are to govern the Christian in his giving. In the first place, we are to give out of that which *we have*; not that which we used to have, or that which we hope to have in the future. We are to live and act in the present, trusting in God as regards the future.

For, in the second place, he did not contemplate the Corinthians being always, or in every matter, in the position of givers. The time would come when they would be receivers, and the flow of gifts would be toward them instead of out from them. Indeed, if Romans 15: 25-27 be read, it will be evident that there had already been a rich flow of spiritual giving from Jerusalem to Corinth. Now there was to be a flow of giving in material things from Corinth to Jerusalem. The thought of God is that among His people there should never be a vacuum, but rather a *flow of supply* according to the need.

Verse 15 quotes Exodus 16: 18, in support of this. Reading Exodus, one might suppose that the verse simply meant that each gatherer of the manna was able to rightly gauge his appetite and gather accordingly. The way the verse is quoted here shows however that there is more in it than that, since it is cited in support of the principle of sharing with others what God may have entrusted us with.

Verses 16 to 24 are occupied with details concerning the administration of the funds collected, which was to be in the hands of Titus and two other brethren. Though the circumstances then existing have passed away, there are points of abiding interest which we ought to notice. Paul had exhorted Titus to take up this service, and he on his part did so with willingness and alacrity. He did not count a service of this kind as beneath him. Nor did the unnamed brother who was a gifted evangelist; nor the

second unnamed brother, of verse 22, who was a man of diligent zeal in many things, though not perhaps a man of gift in the gospel, nor an apostolic delegate like Titus. All three evidently recognized that to be bearers and administrators of funds, which were given as an expression of Divine love working in the hearts of saints, was no mean service.

Again, it is evident from verse 19 that the churches that gave the money chose the man who was to have the handling of the money on their behalf. This is in accord with the choosing of the seven men of honest report to "serve tables," as recorded in Acts 6. So long as men provide the wherewithal, it is within their competency to select those who shall administer their bounty. In contrast to this, we do not read of saints selecting those who are to fill the office of elder, bishop, or overseer. But that is because such are called to exercise their spiritual functions on God's behalf, not man's. Hence God and not man must choose. We read of those whom the Holy Ghost had made overseers. The most that man can do is to recognize those whom the Holy Ghost has appointed.

Further, everything had to be done honestly as before God, and also in the sight of men. It is not enough that the thing shall be handled in a way that is right before the God who knows all things. It must also be obviously right before the eyes of men who only see a very little way, but who are often very critical of what they do see. Verses 20 and 21 show this. So these men were marked by carefulness that all should be so handled as to be to the glory of the Lord, remembering that they were messengers of the churches, which are spoken of as "the glory of Christ." Let us remember that this is the proper character of every true assembly. We shall not think lightly of such, if we do remember it.

2 Corinthians 9

IN THE PART FIVE verses of chapter 9, Paul renews his appeal to the Corinthian saints. They had been so very forward a year before, when the matter had been started, that he had even boasted of them to the Macedonians, who had now out-stripped them altogether in actual performance. Let them now really act, and act at once, so that their contribution might be seen to be a gift of the heart, and not something extracted from them almost as a matter of extortion. This fresh appeal is followed from some fresh considerations calculated to back it up. More important principles connected with the matter of giving are brought to light.

For instance, giving is *sowing*, hence the laws of sowing and reaping apply to it. If seed be scattered with a sparing hand there is a scanty harvest: if with a bountiful hand, a bountiful harvest. It cannot be otherwise whether in nature or in connection with the things of God. In giving to others we are sowing *grace*; and the Apostle reminded them, "God is able to make *all grace abound* toward you" (verse 8). Verses 10 and 11 also speak of the harvest of blessing that will be reaped especially in things spiritual.

But the giving to be really pleasing to God must be *cheerful giving*. If done grudgingly, or because one is pushed into it, there is not much value in it in the sight of God. Every man will purpose in his heart according to the state of his heart. If our hearts are right, and enlarged by dwelling in the love of God, we shall give not only bountifully but cheerfully also. We shall give after the style of God Himself; and God loves those who are like Himself.

As we give we are sowing not only grace but *righteousness* also. Psalm 112: 9 is quoted, in which the man is described who is characterized as "good," and "upright," and "that feareth the Lord." Such a one disperses of his substance and gives to those in need, and his kind giving is not spoken of as grace but as righteousness that will remain for ever. Are we accustomed to look upon giving in this

light? We have received so much from God that it is only right that we should take the place of givers, if God has entrusted us with a supply of either material or spiritual things. If we do not give, but rather hoard up or expend upon ourselves and our pleasures what is given to us, we are positively unrighteous. Let us take time to mark, learn, and inwardly digest this fact, so that our lives may be ordered in keeping with it.

Moreover the results of large-hearted and cheerful giving are so very blessed. There is the supplying of "the need of the saints." This in itself is a very good thing. Who, that has seen the comfort and joy of some poor saint, when relief has reached them through the liberality of their brethren, could doubt it. Beyond this, however, God is glorified. The action "is abundant also by many thanksgivings to God." The saint, who has been helped and relieved, gives thanks to God again and again for the gift and those who ministered it to him. Presently too those who gave find themselves so blessed and enlarged of God that they begin to give thanks that they were ever privileged to give. We have, you will remember, the very best authority for saying that, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." And finally the poor saints, who have nothing to give in return, do repay what is given by an answering affection and by earnest prayer. The givers reap the blessing which flows from the love and prayers of those whom they have helped.

What a marvellous train of happy results is attached to giving! No wonder it is enumerated amongst the "gifts" of Romans 12, or that elsewhere we read, "To do good and to communicate forget not." What spiritual enlargement flows out of it! And conversely, how often is spiritual poverty the direct result of the neglect of it! If believers are stingy in their handling of material things, the holy government of God will leave them poor and straightened in spiritual things.

All giving by the Christian flows from that which has been given to him from God. Hence the Apostle cannot close his exhortation on this theme without leading our thoughts to God's supreme gift from which all our giving flows. It is so great a gift as to be beyond all our powers of expression or description. We can only utter thanks for it.

God has given "His only-begotten Son." We read also of "the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey Him;" and again that, "the gift of God is eternal life." And other such-like verses there are. We believe that here in the mind of the Spirit all these great gifts are treated as *one gift*, which demands eternal thanksgiving from us.

As we add our hearty, Amen, to the thanksgiving, let us see to it that we have such a lively sense of the greatness of the gift that we diligently practise the grace of giving ourselves.

2 Corinthians 10

THE LAST FOUR CHAPTERS of this epistle are mainly concerned with matters of a more personal sort, that lay between Paul and the Corinthians. To write so much of such matters may appear to be egotism on the part of Paul. Paul himself speaks of it as his "folly" (2 Cor. 11: 1). Still what he wrote is as much inspired as the rest of the epistle, and as full of profit also. Much that is of deep importance for all saints, and for all time, is embedded in these chapters; and we gain immensely by having it presented to us, not from a theoretical standpoint, but as a matter of actual practice, worked out as between the Apostle and some of his fellow-believers.

During Paul's absence from them, the Corinthians had been influenced and sadly misled by other workers who had visited them. Some of these may have been true but ill-instructed believers of Judaizing tendencies; but others were "deceitful workers" (2 Cor. 11: 13), real agents of Satan. Anyway

they had done their best to discredit Paul, making all kinds of charges and insinuations against him. They said, for instance, that though he might be able to write "weighty and powerful" letters, when he appeared on the scene he was weak and insignificant in appearance and his speech was uncultured and contemptible. From this they deduced that he possessed no particular authority, and his instructions might be disregarded. This particular insinuation Paul takes up and meets at the beginning of Chapter 10.

He pleads guilty, with the utmost frankness, to being "base" or "mean" in his outward appearance. He was quite undistinguished to look at: when converted he took the name Paul, which means "Little." Now he was absent from them, and he was bold toward them. But further he expected presently to visit them, and he besought them so to carry themselves that he need not come amongst them with bold and powerful discipline which might be to their discomfiture. This he besought them by "the meekness and gentleness of Christ" — a very delicate yet powerful lever!

Meekness is not weakness, neither is gentleness that pliable softness that can be twisted in any direction. Meekness and self-assertiveness stand in contrast to each other: so do gentleness and harshness. Meekness is a matter of *character* — the Lord Jesus said, "I am meek and lowly *in heart*" — and so it comes first. Gentleness is more a question of one's *manner*. He who is meek in character will be gentle in manner. He who is self-assertive in character will be harsh in manner. Supreme meekness and supreme gentleness were found in Christ; and yet no one was bolder than He, when it was a question of maintaining the right or opposing the evil. In a very large measure the Apostle was following His steps, and hence boldness as well as meekness and gentleness were found in him.

True to this character, Paul beseeches the Corinthians rather than issuing peremptory commands to them. There were some however who thought of him as though he were a man who walked according to the flesh. This led him to give us the important statement that follows as to the character of both his walk and warfare. Verse 3 is instructive, inasmuch as both senses in which the *word flesh* is used are brought together in it. We walk *in* the flesh; that is, in the bodies of flesh which we have derived from Adam. But we do not war *after* the flesh; that is, according to the Adamic nature which is connected with our bodies.

In so saying Paul of course referred to himself and his co-workers, and also he stated what normally should be true of every Christian. But is it true of us? Do we recognize the true character of the flesh — that is, of the Adamic nature — and treat it as a condemned thing? It is normal for Christians to walk "after the Spirit" (Rom. 8: 4), but that is not mentioned here, only inferred.

The point here is not exactly our walk, but rather our warfare. Is the believer then called to warfare? He is: and to warfare of a very aggressive sort. His weapons however like the warfare are not fleshly but spiritual.

Every servant of Christ gets involved in warfare. All evangelistic labour has that character, for the Gospel is preached that it may overthrow human pride and bring men to the feet of Christ. All the teaching imparted within the assembly has to overthrow merely human thoughts. And, evil teaching having invaded the Christian profession, there must of necessity be contention for the faith, which partakes of the character of warfare. All warfare however tests us, for it is very easy to slip into the use of purely natural and fleshly weapons. The practiced political speaker, who wants to swing men round to his point of view, has many weapons in his armoury — argument, ridicule, graphic exaggeration, and the like. But he contends merely with other human beings, and upon equal terms.

Our warfare is upon another plane altogether. With us there are "strongholds" to be overthrown. Who holds these strongholds? The great adversary himself. He it is who has entrenched himself in

human hearts, so that they are filled with "imagination" or "reasonings," so that they exalt themselves on high against the knowledge of God, and are filled with lawlessness. All these lofty thoughts have to be brought low into captivity to Christ, so that lawlessness is exchanged for obedience to Him. What weapons are sufficient to produce that result?

Merely human weapons must be perfectly futile. Fleshly weapons can no more subdue flesh than Satan can cast out Satan. Spiritual weapons alone can prevail; and they must be used in a way that is according to God, if they are to be effectual.

What spiritual weapons are at our disposal? In this passage the Apostle does not pause to specify, though the succeeding verses seem to show that he was specially thinking of those powers of discipline which were vested in him as an Apostle, powers peculiar to himself. There are however, spiritual weapons which all may use: those for instance, which were mentioned by the Apostles in Jerusalem when they said, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6: 4). Every saint can pray, and every saint can in some way speak forth the Word.

The Apostles recognised the extreme value of both these weapons, and refused to allow anything, however good in itself, to divert them from wielding them. Again and again have servants of God found themselves face to face with some human fortress of pride and unbelief like unto Jericho. And yet when encircled by prayers of faith a moment has come when the Word of God has been sounded out as from a ram's horn, and the walls of unbelief have crashed, the stronghold has been overthrown. The Lord Himself indicated another spiritual weapon when He spoke of a certain kind of demon which only could be cast out by prayer and fasting. Fasting is a weapon but very little used in these days.

Would to God that we all were alive to these things! Take for instance the preaching of the Gospel. Do we recognize that the work involves conflict of this order? If we did we should simply flock to the prayer meetings for the Gospel — that is, if we have any heart for the glory of Christ, any love for the perishing souls of men. As things are, a tiny group of two or three, or perhaps half a dozen, usually turn up for the prayer meeting, and the majority of those who attend the preaching do so in the spirit of those who have come to hear a nice address, which they expect to "enjoy," as if the enjoyment of saints were the chief end of the Gospel service. If once we caught the spirit that breathes in the verses before us, our prayer meetings, our Gospel meetings, and many other meetings, would speedily be transformed.

The Apostle made a very personal application of these things to the Corinthians. The discipline that he was empowered to exercise was, as we have said, a spiritual weapon, and they might very soon be feeling its sharp edge. The word translated, "destruction" in verse 8, is the same as that translated "pulling down" in verse 4. The word "overthrowing" is possibly better in both places. There is the power of God to overthrow strongholds of unbelief, and the same power can, if the sad necessity arises, overthrow carnal and disobedient believers. Yet the normal and proper use of that power is for the edification, or building up of the saints.

The Apostle had authority, given to him of the Lord, and power in keeping with that authority. The Corinthians, not being very spiritual were inclined to concern themselves a good deal with outward appearance (see verse 1, margin). Paul might be mean to look at, but let them remember that he was Christ's, and that at least as much as those who were his opponents and detractors, and he had an authority which they had not. Let them know too that when present amongst them they would find him to be just what his letters evidently were — weighty and powerful. Here we have, thrown in by the way, a tribute to the effect that his inspired writings had upon the people of his own day. They were the Word of God, and they authenticated themselves to be such in the hearts of those who had any spiritual

sensibilities. They do just the same today. We recognize them as far too weighty and powerful to be the mere word of man.

In speaking thus of his authority Paul was not for one moment entering into a kind of competition with those who opposed him. They were anxious to commend themselves, and so get a footing with the Corinthians; and in doing this a spirit of competition got among them, and they began "measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves," which was a very unwise proceeding. In so doing they got no higher than themselves. It was all self. One man might be distinguished by this feature, another by that; but in comparing themselves with one another they never rose up to God, and to the measure which He had ordained.

In verse 13 Paul continues to use the word, "measure," but with a rather different significance, coupling it with the word "rule" which occurs again in verse 15, and also in verse 16, where it is translated "line." It almost looks as if he were alluding to God's work in creation, as stated in Job 38: 5, where God Himself asks, of the earth, "Who laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?" He is a God who works by measure and by line, whether in creation or in the administration connected with His grace. Now God had measured things out and appointed a line or rule in connection with Paul's apostolic service.

From other scriptures we know what the measure and rule of Paul's service was. He could say, "I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle . . . a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity" (1 Tim. 2: 7). The line allotted to him was a very extensive one. The whole Gentile world was within the circumference of his measure. Of course then he had not stretched beyond his measure in coming to the Corinthians; his measure reached even to them. They came well within the scope of his apostolic commission.

Indeed, Paul's eye of evangelistic zeal looked beyond Corinth to more distant regions beyond them, where he expected yet more abundantly to preach the Gospel. In the epistle to the Romans he speaks of having fully preached the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem round about unto Illyricum, the district we now know as Albania, on the shores of the Adriatic; and ultimately he went to Rome. The true evangelist always has his eye on "the regions beyond."

We must not fail to notice the short clause in verse 15, "when your faith is increased." There was a connection between the increasing of their faith and the enlargement of Paul's own service, at all events as regards the geographical spread of it. As long as they were feeble in faith their whole state would be feeble, and this would have its effect upon Paul's activities and service. When he saw them strong in faith he would be the more free to push on from them into the regions beyond. In this way the state of the saints affects the activities of the servant of God. We are members one of another, and not even an apostle can be wholly unaffected by the state of others. This fully applies to us today, of course. God help us each to diligently and conscientiously enquire as in His presence whether we are helping to enlarge or to contract the work of His servants. One or the other it must be.

Several of the remarks which the Apostle makes in these verses were intended to point out that the men opposing him, and endeavouring to turn the Corinthians from him, were working on very different lines. They were boasting of things without their measure. They held no commission from the risen Lord, as he did. They were not pushing out into the regions beyond, and suffering the privations and persecutions that were involved in such labour. They were "boasting . . . of other men's labours" for they were meddling with his work; or as he puts it in verse 16, "boasting in another man's line of things made ready" to their hands.

It is very noticeable how false religious cults often have this feature strongly marking them. They

find their happy hunting ground amongst other people's converts. They boast in that which after all is the work of others.

The boasting of the Apostle was not in man, nor even in work. As in the first epistle, so here he declares, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." If the Lord gives the measure and the rule it is well. If the Lord prospers the work so that men are brought to faith in Christ, and in due course their faith is increased, again it is well. But even so our only boasting must be in the Lord, whose servants we are.

And, on the other hand, the commendation which comes from the Lord is the only commendation worth having. Men may push themselves forward, and commend themselves, as Paul's opponents were doing, but it is all worthless. It is very natural for us to "receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only" (John 5: 44), but it is very fatal. To have the Lord's commendation when the great day of the judgment seat arrives, is worth everything. Let us live our lives as those who have their eyes upon that day.

2 Corinthians 11

IN THE LIGHT of the coming day, when the Lord will commend His servants, the commendation of oneself in the presence of one's fellows appears to be but folly. Paul acknowledges this in the first verse of our chapter. He had been speaking about himself in the previous chapter, and he goes on to do so more fully in the chapter before us, but all with a view to assuring the Corinthians of the reality and genuineness of his apostolic mission. He pleads guilty to this "folly" and asks them to bear with him in it.

There was indeed a very good reason for it. His detractors brought their charges and insinuations against him not merely out of opposition to himself. There was an ulterior motive. They depreciated Paul because they aimed thereby at undermining, in the minds of the Corinthians, the truth of the Gospel that he had brought them. They would overthrow Paul's credit as a preliminary step towards overthrowing the Gospel that he preached, and that accomplished, Christ would lose His pre-eminent place in their hearts.

The thought of this stirred the Apostle very deeply. Elijah had been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts in his day, and here we find Paul jealous with a jealousy which was of God on behalf of Christ. When the Gospel he preached is truly received, it fairly wins the heart of the convert for Christ, so really so that he could say, "I have espoused you . . . that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." This is figurative language but it is quite transparent as to its meaning. Paul so preached, and we all ought so to preach, that the hearts of those who believe are wholly captivated by Christ. But that is only the beginning.

We should also make it our aim, as Paul did, that each convert might retain this single-eyed devotedness to Christ all through life until the moment arrives for presentation to Christ in glory. Each believing heart should wear the "chaste virgin" character, untouched and unsullied by any other master-passion or absorbing love. Alas! how few of us bear that character in any measure. How many there are who are easily diverted from Him, and spend much of their energy in pursuit of other loves! It is possible to turn from Him to pursue things which are really quite opposed to Him; but to turn from Him to pursue things subsidiary to Him, and therefore quite good in their way, is an even greater snare. May God help us to beware of it.

Verse 3 is very important as exposing before us the way in which the great adversary lays the

snare for our feet. In 2 Cor. 4 we were instructed as to the way in which he blinds the minds of those who believe not. Here we find that when some have believed, and so as to them his blinding tactics have failed, he is still pertinaciously active and aims at beguiling them, as once he beguiled Eve. When he acts with subtilty as the serpent he is more dangerous than when he opposes as a roaring lion.

The devil in the guise of a serpent deceived Eve in a very subtil and crafty way. Step by step he corrupted her mind as to God, and led her to act apart from and independently of her husband. In similar fashion he works today. He aims at diverting us from simplicity and from true subjection to Christ. The rendering of the New Translation is, "your thoughts should be corrupted from simplicity as to the Christ."

The words, "corrupted from simplicity," are very suggestive, and worth pondering deeply. In man's world things proceed from the simple to the complex. The earliest printing machines, for instance, were very simple affairs. In the course of several centuries they have become marvellous machines of great complexity. So in the ordinary way, confining ourselves to the affairs of men, we should speak of things being developed and improved from their original simplicity. But here we are dealing with what is extraordinary and outside the affairs of men. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are His ways our ways. It is well to get this firmly settled in our souls.

The works and ways of God are marked by simplicity. His simplicity is perfect. We cannot improve upon it. We may attempt to alter it, but then we only corrupt it. The Gospel is the essence of simplicity. It sets Christ before us as the One who is the expression of all that God has to say to us, as also He is the One who has wrought the necessary work of redemption, and in whom we now stand before God. It brings us into complete subjection to Him. But Satan is a master of craft and subtilty. Using these men who were the opponents of Paul, he did not totally deny the Christ whom Paul preached. Verse 4 is clear evidence of this. If they could have come with another gospel, announcing another Jesus, and conferring another spirit, there might have been something to say on their behalf, especially if it could have been an improvement on what they had already received.

Instead of denying Christ they came under the pretence of adding something to Christ. A fuller idea of their position may be gleaned from the epistle to the Galatians, where we find them adding the law to Christ: teaching that, though we may be justified by Him, we are put under the law in order that holiness may be promoted. That Christ should be made righteousness to us they were prepared to admit, but that He should also be made sanctification seemed to them much too simple.

It is not otherwise today. The tendency to hanker after the elaborate, the abstruse, the complicated, the far-fetched is always with us. The intellectual men of the world find the Gospel far too simple, and they stumble at it. The trouble is however that believers, whose strong point is their intellect, always have a tendency in the same direction, unless they walk in the spirit of self-judgment as regards intellectualism. If they do not maintain self-judgment, all their elaborations, their deep and abstruse thoughts, only eventuate in something that corrupts from simplicity as to the Christ.

The mind is a very important part of a man, and Satan's acutest beguilements are aimed at it. It is far from being the whole of a man: his affections and his conscience have a very large place. The trouble is that the intellectual person is very apt to give a much larger place to his mind than Scripture gives to it, and to forget that God reveals His truth to us, not for our intellectual enjoyment, but that it may command our hearts, appeal to our consciences and govern our lives. Let that be properly realized, and we at once find plenty to occupy our spiritual energies in the profound simplicities of the truth, and any itching desire we ever had for mere complexities and novelties and obscurities forsakes us.

"Simplicity as to the Christ!" That is what we need. To know Him: to love Him, as united in heart

to Him: to adore Him: to serve Him: that is it! If our minds are thus stayed upon Him in uncorrupted simplicity, all else will be added unto us, and we shall be maintained in the fervour of "first love." It was just at this point that decline set in, as witnessed in Revelation 2: 4. So here: Paul knew well that if Satan succeeded in his beguilings at this point, he would succeed all along the line.

So, once more, in defending his Gospel from the subtle attack of Satan through men who were, however unwittingly, serving him, he had to make plain the reality and power of his apostleship in contrast to features that marked them. He was indeed an apostle, and not in the least inferior to those who were most prominent among the twelve.

From verses 6 to 9 we gather that the Apostle had been belittled not only because his speech was not highly polished but because he had taken no monetary help from the Corinthians whilst amongst them. In alluding to this his language was tinged with irony. He had abased himself in order to exalt them. Was this an offence, a sin? He had accepted help from other churches, notably the Macedonian, and he speaks of this as robbing, or spoiling, them — still the language of irony, of course. He had done the Corinthians the greatest possible service without the least cost to themselves. And he boasted thus, not in the spirit of emulation as though he did not love them, but just because he did love them, and he desired to deliver them from the fascination which the opposers exercised over them by reason of the foolish boasting in which they indulged so freely.

This leads the Apostle to speak with great plainness about the opposers. They were false apostles, for they never had been sent of the Lord as the true apostles were. They were workers right enough, but deceitful ones, since they transformed themselves into what they were not. In this they partook of the character of him whom they served, and according to their deceitful works will be their end.

It is very important that we should remember that Satan so commonly transforms himself into an angel of light, and his servants into servants of righteousness. That being so, we must expect sin and error to frequently present themselves in a pleasing and delightful guise. Again and again we find the advocates of error to be quite nice men. It is unsafe to receive the message because the man who brings it appears so good, so charming, so eloquent, so like an angel of light. The only safe test is, Does he bring the doctrine of Christ, the true Gospel? If he does, receive it by all means, even if he is a bit uncouth, a poor speaker, or of ugly appearance. "Prince Charming" is all too often a servant of Satan in plain clothes.

Such was the character of some — if not all — of those who were opposing Paul. Hitherto he had not said much as to them, but now the time had come to stand up to them and expose them, and this he does very effectually here. They were always boasting concerning themselves, and they did it with a view to self-exaltation. They were marked by a spirit which was the exact opposite of Paul's. He abased himself in order to exalt those whose blessing he sought (verse 7): they exalted themselves and did not scruple to exploit those whom they professed to serve. They brought them into bondage, they devoured them by getting their money, they even smote them on the face. Very possibly smiting on the face was not literal but in the sense of being rude to them in haughty fashion, or, as we should say, browbeating them. The Corinthians being carnally-minded had evidently been impressed with their domineering manner. Had they been more spiritual they would have seen through it.

Still as these men acted in this way Paul felt that he should take up their challenge. If they wished to institute a kind of competition as to who had the highest credentials, he would speak somewhat further as to his. This boasting was all foolishness, but since they had started it he would speak, and again in verse 19 he uses irony. The Corinthians were enriched in all knowledge and so took the place of being wise, and seemed to suffer gladly the fools who boasted so much; for, he says, you do indeed

suffer when these boasting men domineer over you and brow-beat you as they have been doing.

The boastings of these men apparently centred around two points: first, their natural origin as true-blooded Hebrews and Israelites, the seed of Abraham according to the flesh; second, their dignity as servants of Christ, which they claimed to be. As to the former matter, for what it is worth, Paul was not one whit behind them. He could say, "So am I" without the least hesitation.

But when it comes to the second matter he does not say, "So am I," but rather, "I am more," for he completely outshone them. The phrase he uses has been translated "I above measure so," for there was really no comparison between them: and he proceeds to speak, not of the triumphs he had won, but of the sufferings he had endured.

Let us take time to really digest the significance of this. Had we been in Paul's shoes, should we not almost for a certainty have proceeded to talk of the mighty power of God that had been manifested in our service? We should have had much to say about the mighty signs and wonders that had been manifested, the striking conversions, the wonderful transformations of life and character that had been recorded. Would it have occurred to us to recount the buffetings, the troubles, the sufferings, we had endured? We think not. To tell the truth there would have been hardly anything of that sort to tell.

We are not saying that the servant of Christ should never speak of that which the Lord may have done through him in the way of blessing. There are times when he may profitably do so, as we see by reading Acts 14: 27, and Acts 15: 12. We do say however that when it is a question of one's credentials, of producing facts which prove beyond all question that one is a genuine servant of Christ, then the record of one's sufferings is far more convincing. Signs and wonders may be produced by a power other than that of the Spirit of God: nothing but absolute devotion to the Lord will enable one to serve with patient persistence through years of toil and suffering.

There are modern religious movements whose main stock-in-trade is the recounting of the wonders they can produce, either in healings, or in tongues, or in the realm of habits and character — "life-changing" as it is called. Of fidelity to Christ, and of suffering for His Name, they have little if anything to say, for it seems non-existent in their scheme of things. They often know quite a lot about high-pressure meetings, and even first-class hotels, but nothing about the labours and perils and infirmities that marked Paul. And as for the rest of us, who do not wish to recount our own doings, successful or otherwise, how little are we like to him.

He was more than a servant of Christ, as he tells us in verse 23. He was an apostle of Christ and actively engaged in filling up "that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh" (Col. 1: 24). As far as the record given to us in Scripture is concerned, he stands alone amongst the people of God in his sufferings. An Abraham, a Moses, a David, a Daniel, each had their own special and distinctive characteristics which marked them out as pleasing God, but not one of them approached Paul in this. Labours, stripes, prisons, deaths, journeyings, perils of all descriptions, weariness, painfulness, watchings, hunger, thirst, fastings, cold, nakedness, care — what a list! It covers pretty well the whole range of human suffering, whether of body or mind.

From the Acts of the Apostles we can identify a few of the experiences of which he speaks. For instance, "once was I stoned," that was as recorded in chapter 14. He speaks of being "in deaths oft," and one occasion was in the riot in the Ephesian theatre, recorded in chapter 19, for he speaks of this as "so great a death," in the first chapter of our epistle. But on the other hand we must remember that when he penned this list his experiences were not over. He had been shipwrecked thrice, one of the occasions involving a night and a day in the deep; being washed about in the waters of the Mediterranean, we suppose that means; but as yet the shipwreck recorded in Acts 27 had not taken

place. That must consequently have been number four, at least.

The most wearing sufferings of all were, we venture to think, those that he speaks of last — the care of all the churches. To bear with the feebleness of the weak, to listen again and again to the complaints of the offended, to correct the foolishness of saints, and contend for the truth against false brethren, all this must have been the most testing thing of all. Yet he did it.

The incident with which he closes the chapter seems symbolic of the whole drift of his life of service. He was "let down," and that in a very undignified way. If secular history is to be trusted the lettings-down never ceased until he knelt by the headsman's block outside the imperial city Rome. But it was just these lettings-down and the sufferings they involved which put upon him the brands of the Lord Jesus, and marked him out as a servant of Christ in surpassing measure.

2 Corinthians 12

THE REMARK WITH which the Apostle opens chapter 12 again indicates that this speaking about himself was repugnant to him, though he found himself impelled to do it. The New Translation renders it, "Well, it is not of profit to me to boast," so his thought may have been that what he had to say about himself brought no profit or credit to him. The beatings, the perils, the hunger, the thirst, the nakedness, the infirmities, of which he had just spoken were not the kind of experiences which are considered profitable, according to the standards of the world. And now that he proceeds to speak of what he had received of the Lord, in the form of visions and revelations, there was still no credit to him; for it was not exactly as an apostle that he received them, and much less as a man in the flesh, but as "a man in Christ."

In making this distinction we are not splitting hairs, for Paul himself makes it, and lays very definite stress upon it. Note how verses 2-5 carry on the thought, "A man in Christ . . . such an one . . . such a man . . . such an one . . ." These heavenly revelations were given to *such a man as that*. Who and what then is this "man in Christ"?

Without any question Paul was alluding to a marvellous experience in his own history, but he carefully eliminates the personal element from his story in order to impress us with the fact that the experience was only possible for him inasmuch as he was "such a man" as "a man in Christ." Eliminating the personal element he was able thus to abstract in his mind that which he was in the very essence of his being by the work of God in new creation. Elsewhere he has told us that, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph. 2: 10); and in our own epistle he has already said, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature" (v. 17). It is evident therefore that every true believer in the Lord Jesus is "a man in Christ." Consequently every one of us ought to be very eager to take in its significance.

By natural birth we are men in Adam: that is, we enter upon his life, and are of his race and order, inheriting his sinful characteristics; though in different individuals they come out in different ways and degrees. By the grace of God in new creation the believer enters upon the life of the risen Christ, and is of His race and order. The new life he has received has its own characteristics, even those which in all their perfect beauty were seen in Christ Himself. True, in various individual believers these characteristics are only seen in differing ways and degrees, and only partially in the best.

But that is because each individual believer, while under observation in this world, still has the flesh in him, and *that*, whenever permitted to operate, obscures and contradicts the features of the life of Christ. Still our many failures must not be allowed to obscure the fact that a "man in Christ" is what

each of us is; and that by an act of God.

When the Lord comes, and we are "clothed upon with our house which is from heaven," the last link that we have with the first Adam will have disappeared. Our very bodies then will be of a new creation order. There will be nothing about us which is not new creation, and hence all need for abstract thinking in connection with this matter will have passed away. We shall no longer have to differentiate and speak of "such an one," for there will be no other kind of "one" entering into the question. How glorious that will be!

Still at present we have to speak as Paul speaks here; and how delightful it is to find that a man in Christ can be caught up into Paradise, even the third heaven, and yet feel at home there and receive communications from God, of a character beyond anything that could possibly be known in this world. How great a contrast for the Apostle between such an experience as this and all those experiences he endured in his life of service, of which we have just been hearing. In them he was "let down," and that in the most undignified way. In this he was "caught up," and that to Paradise. Such an experience must have been in itself a big recompense for his sufferings, and it was only a foretaste of greater things and eternal, which were to come. No wonder he spoke to us, in chapter 4, of the "far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," which awaits us.

That glory awaits us when we too are caught up as predicted in 1 Thessalonians 4: 17. When all the saints are thus caught up — the Apostle Paul amongst them — they will be clothed in bodies of glory; there is no shadow of uncertainty as to that. There was uncertainty about this experience of Paul's as he tells us twice over. He did not know whether it was supernatural experience, in the nature of a vision, granted to him while still in the body; that is, still a living man in this world: or whether he was out of the body; that is, that he died, his spirit passing into the presence of the Lord, and then subsequently he was brought back to life here. This remark of his, coupled with the date he gives us, makes it quite possible that the experience was granted to him when he suffered the stoning recorded in Acts 14. He must have been in an insensible condition for some time; since all thought him dead, and his apparent lifeless body was dragged out of the town.

The wonderful experience was his, though he was uncertain what exactly was his condition when he had it. Incidentally this shows us that the "falling asleep" of a saint does not mean the sleep of the soul. If the death of a saint involves his total unconsciousness until the coming of the Lord, then the Apostle would have been in no uncertainty. He would have said, "I must have been in the body for I was conscious: had I been out of the body I should have had no consciousness at all."

This man in Christ was caught up to the third heaven; that is, the immediate presence of God, of which the holiest in the tabernacle was a type. We have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, and Paul found that as a man in Christ he had free access into the third heaven, which he identifies with Paradise, into which the thief went with Christ. During his sojourn there he found himself in touch with a range of things entirely outside anything known in this world. He heard, "unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

This does not mean that he heard mysterious utterances quite unintelligible to him, but that the things he heard, and doubtless understood in some degree, were so exalted as to be beyond us in our present condition. The things spoken about in the third heaven cannot be communicated to us. We have no language in which they can be expressed. And further, if it were possible to convey to us a little of that "eternal weight of glory" it would only crush us in our present condition of weakness. Hence Paul was not allowed to utter the things he heard, even if he could have found words in which to clothe the things revealed. This vision and revelation from the Lord was a special privilege conferred upon him,

and for his own illumination and strengthening.

In all this there was nothing in which Paul could boast, as he makes so plain in verse 5. Circumstances had been permitted to push him into a position where he was constrained to speak of this wonderful experience, as to which he had kept silence for fourteen years, yet even so, though there was much that he might mention keeping strictly within the bounds of truth (which was more than his opponents always did), he would say nothing except as to his infirmities.

This leads him to reveal the fact that when he resumed his active life in this world he came under a special disciplinary dealing on God's part, of a kind that was designed to deliver him from dangers that threatened. The flesh in Paul was unchanged as to its evil tendencies even after such an experience as this. How easy for him to be lifted up with pride and self-exaltation, and thus invite a sorrowful fall. So the thorn in flesh was given to act as a kind of counterpoise. Paradise and its unspeakable words on the one hand, but the thorn and its buffetings on the other.

It is said that "thorn" hardly gives in any adequate way the sense, and that "stake" would be better. We do not think much of thorns and easily extricate them, but a stake in the flesh is a far more serious thing and thoroughly crippling in its effects. What in particular Paul alluded to we do not know, though a good deal of discussion has centred round the point. Probably it is purposely left vague in order that all our thought may be concentrated on the fact that any affliction, even of the most damaging kind, may be turned into an occasion of spiritual preservation and gain.

The thorn, whatever it was, affected his body for the good of his soul. Its action is described as a "buffeting." It came from Satan, for it is described as "a messenger," or "an angel" of Satan, and it is his mode of attack when a devoted and faithful saint is in question. He blinds the minds of the unbelieving as we were told in chapter 4. He aims at corrupting the simple and unestablished, as 2 Cor. 11 showed. But for Paul who had been caught up into the third heaven a different line of attack was followed, and the devil dealt him heavy blows that fell upon his body.

We should have said rather that the devil was permitted to deal him heavy blows, for all that happened was beneath the hand of God. It was with Paul as it had been long before with Job: three causes are discernible. The third causes were fire from heaven, whirlwind, evil men, in the case of Job, and the thorn in the flesh in the case of Paul. Behind these in each case lay the power and animus of Satan; but behind him as the first cause there was the hand of God. Job's safety and blessing lay in his turning away from the third causes, and even from the second cause, that he might accept all from the hand of God; and so too it was with Paul.

Very naturally Paul betook himself to prayer. It was *intense* prayer: he not only requested but besought. It was *repeated*, for he besought the Lord thrice. Yet for all that his desire was not granted. Instead of having the thorn removed he received the assurance of abundant grace; such grace that the thorn would become an asset rather than a liability, a means of blessing rather than a hindrance. The Lord answered his prayer, but not according to his thought. He gave him rather that which was better. The grace bestowed more than counterbalanced the thorn.

We must lay great stress in our minds upon the little word, "MY." The thorn was a messenger of Satan, but the grace was Christ's. The Lord's reply to Paul was, "My grace is sufficient for thee." The Lord and His grace are infinite, sufficient for ten thousand times ten thousand of His saints — surely then sufficient for Paul, or for any one of us, no matter what we may have to face. But He added, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." If the thorn served to augment and emphasize Paul's weakness it thereby opened the way for a fuller and more perfect display of the grace of the Lord.

Without a question all this is right in the teeth of our natural thoughts. We should connect the thought of power and strength with every kind of mental and bodily fitness. We should say — I will glory in my fitness that the power of Christ may rest upon me. When I am tuned up to concert pitch then I am strong. Our thoughts however are wrong: the Divine way is right. We may wish to present ourselves to the Lord for service saying, "Just as I am; young, strong, and free . . ." Paul has to learn to come saying, "Just as I am; old, battered, weak . . ." It is very certain that the Lord accomplished a great deal more through Paul than He is ever going to do through you or me.

The thorn in the flesh, then, worked good in two ways. First, it checked that tendency to pride that otherwise might have overcome Paul and wrought such mischief. Second, it cast him so fully upon the Lord that it became a medium through which abundant supplies of grace were received by him.

This being so, the Apostle had learned to take pleasure in these various forms of adversity. In Romans 5 he tells us how he boasted in tribulations because he knew what they were designed to effect in the sphere of Christian character. Here he takes pleasure in tribulations because he had discovered them to be the way by which the power of Christ became operative through him in service. The very weakness into which he was plunged made him a suitable medium for the outflow of that power.

And in this, as well as in other things, Paul was a pattern to us who follow him. This was God's way at the beginning of the dispensation, and it is still His way at the end. Fashions and customs and many other things which lie upon the surface of affairs do indeed vary, but the underlying facts and principles do not vary. Consequently there is no other way of power for us. Does not this fact go a long way to explain the lack of power so sadly evident, and so often deplored, today?

Having let us into the secret, as to the revelations he had from the Lord on the one hand, and the discipline which came upon him from the Lord on the other, the Apostle utters his closing appeal. He ought really to have been commended of the Corinthians seeing they were his converts, instead of which he was forced into defending his apostleship before them. Though nothing in himself, he was behind the very chiefest apostles in nothing. As to this he could appeal to his whole career, and more particularly to his life and service when amongst them.

Paul's estimate of himself was — I am nothing. Let us be instructed by this. We sometimes sing,

"O keep us, love divine, near Thee,

That we our nothingness may know."

The desire is a good one. We never do realize our nothingness more effectively than when we are filled with divine love. In the passage before us the confession "I am nothing," follows the setting forth of the all-sufficient grace of Christ.

Yet this man who was nothing had been called to apostleship in surpassing measure, and the signs of it were very evident; not only in wonders and mighty deeds but also and firstly in patience — a patience which he was now displaying in abundant measure in his dealings with the Corinthians. When he was in their midst he carefully abstained from being in any way a financial burden to them, though he had taken help from other churches. He speaks again with a tinge of irony in saying, "forgive me this wrong." He purposed to continue on the same lines. Inasmuch as he was their spiritual father he proposed to provide for them, rather than counting upon their providing for him.

Verse 15 is very beautiful. Paul was indeed a father in Christ, his heart well saturated with divine love, hence he could love the unloving, even as God does. The natural tendency of our hearts is just the opposite of this. We are perhaps kindly disposed towards certain persons, and show them various

favours. They receive all, but are cool and unappreciative. We are annoyed, and declare we will have done with them! But it was not thus with Paul. Even if things got so bad that their response only decreased as love increased, he would go on expressing his love in the most practical way of all. He would spend and be spent for them. A little of this lovely spirit we see in 1 Samuel 12: 23. A good deal more of it we see in the passage before us. But the thing itself is seen supremely in God Himself, as displayed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

The same spirit had been seen in those associated with the Apostle in his labours, as Titus and others. Yet this loving spirit did not mean indifference to evil, and a condoning of things that were not right; and so there follow very plain words as to the sin which he feared was still to be found amongst them, which would merit very severe judgment if he again came into their midst.

Sin breaks out in many ways, but two forms of it were very prevalent at Corinth, as verses 20 and 21 bear witness. First, there were all those disturbing features that spring from self-assertiveness and the envy and jealousy thereby generated. Second, self-gratification and the licentiousness that springs from it, in its varying forms. The Apostle feared that both these things were still rife at Corinth and unrepented of; and that if he came on this proposed third visit he would be full of grief in their midst and have to act in judgment. We may observe that he speaks of his humiliation and sorrow (2 Cor. 12: 21) before he speaks of his authority in judgment (2 Cor. 13: 2).

2 Corinthians 13

AS AN APOSTLE he had special authority and power in this direction. When once the apostles had passed off the scene the only discipline possible was that exerted by the church or by the saints collectively; and that so often in these days appears to be singularly ineffectual. There are of course reasons for this. One reason is that it has been so often perverted to ends of a personal or party nature that the whole idea of it has fallen into disrepute. Another is that even when discipline has been rightly inflicted it has been done in a harsh judicial spirit instead of in the spirit of humiliation and sorrow which marked the Apostle here. We have made it the cold, heartless discipline of the court of law instead of the warm, affectionate discipline of the family circle.

Still, discipline there has to be: the discipline of God's house, which is not prejudiced nor unreasoning but founded on well established facts. Hence when Paul came he intended that every word should be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses. All should be sifted with impartiality, so that if some reports were not based upon fact their falsity might be exposed, and their weight fall not upon the head of the accused but upon the head of the accusers. Some may have sinned by licentiousness as Paul feared; but others may have sinned by "backbitings" and "whisperings" of false accusations, because their hearts were filled with envy. All would be made manifest and judged, as we see in the opening verses of chapter 13. We venture to think that, if today there were as much zeal in bringing discipline to bear against the backbiters and whisperers as against the licentious, it would be for the spiritual health and well-being of the church of God.

Paul's authority as an apostle had however been questioned, and the Corinthians had very foolishly given ear to these questionings. They were the last persons who should have done so, or should have had any doubts as to whether Christ had spoken through him. Since they had entertained such doubts, some kind of answer was needed, and a very crushing one Paul was able to give. He had simply to say, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith." Since they were his converts, the fruit of his labour, they themselves were the proof — unless indeed they were reprobates, just worthless frauds. If they were but frauds then indeed Christ might not have spoken in Paul; but if they were true

men He most certainly had.

Verse 5 has sometimes been taken apart from its context and turned into a plea for continual self-inspection, and even doubt as to one's own salvation. This is because the parenthesis extending from the middle of verse 3 to the end of verse 4 has not been noticed. If we connect the early part of verse 3 with verse 5 the sense is quite clear. There is again a touch of irony in Paul's words, for the doubts they had foolishly entertained as to Christ speaking in him really recoiled upon their own heads. If indeed Christ had *not* spoken *in Paul* then — since they had professed conversion under his *speaking* — Christ would *not* be found *in them*. But if Christ was indeed found *in them* it was conclusive proof that Christ had spoken *in him*.

It is quite possible of course that in speaking thus the Apostle wished to convey to them the fact that he was not too sure of the genuineness of some of them, and thereby he desired to stir them up and exercise their consciences. At the same time he was quite confident as to the majority of them.

This is evident if we consider the parenthesis, the first words of which tell us that Christ had not been "weak" toward them but rather "mighty in you." Looking back to the work that had been wrought when first he came among them, Paul was full of confidence that the power of Christ had been in it. The whole path of Christ on earth had been characterized by a "weakness" which culminated in His crucifixion. Yet He is alive in resurrection by the power of God. Now that which marked the path of the great Master marked also the path of the servant, who was following in His life and way. Weakness also characterized the external life and service of the Apostle but under the surface the power of God was vitally present with him.

The words at the end of verse 4 are remarkable — "by the power of God *toward you*." These words indicate that what was in the Apostle's mind was not that he would live in resurrection in the time to come, but that, as associated with the living Christ, he would display in the present the power of that life towards the Corinthians. Christianity is marked by the power of a new life which operates in blessing. Nothing short of *that*, whether it be creed or ceremony or work, will do.

The whole passage shows once more that what God looks for is reality and power. It emphasizes also that, as far as outward appearances go, weakness has been stamped upon the true saints and servants of God from the beginning, even when the Gospel was winning its earliest and greatest triumphs. We need not therefore be surprised if weakness is stamped upon us today. The thing to be concerned about is that we may judge and refuse all that would jeopardize that power.

The self-abnegation of the Apostle again comes strikingly to light in verse 7. He prayed that they might do no evil, and so be manifestly approved and not reprobate; and this, not that it might approve his work amongst them, and so be for his glory, but that they might do what is right, and so prove beyond all question that they were not reprobates. If that were so he would be content, even though he appeared to be a reprobate himself. That he was not a reprobate he knew very well, and he trusted they knew it too, as he says in verse 6.

So also we see his self-abnegation in verse 9. He was not only content but glad to be weak if it but led to spiritual strength in those to whom he ministered; the great object before him being the perfecting of the saints. He longed to see them led forward to completion — to full growth in Christ. As for himself, he knew that all the power in which he served was Divine in its origin, and so was only available for so long as he was labouring for the truth and in the truth. If he had turned against the truth he would instantly have been shorn of *that* power. There are powers antagonistic to the truth, but in the long run they cannot prevail. Hence against the truth he was powerless, whilst for it he was powerful.

In all this a note of sharpness or severity has not been absent, and in verse 10 we have the explanation of why he had written in this strain. He anticipated being amongst them for the third time and desired to overthrow and clear away the evil by means of this letter, and so have only the happy work of building up what is good when he came. He had authority given of the Lord, but it was primarily for building up. Overthrowing is necessary, as we saw when reading the early part of 2 Cor. 10, but only in view of building up, which is the great thing the Lord desires for His people.

Verse 11 gives us *the closing desires*. If we are perfected, of good comfort (or encouraged), of one mind, and at peace, we shall indeed do well. It is easy to see that these were things much needed by the Corinthians But we need them just as badly. The church of God today, as a whole, is in a condition very similar to them. There is plenty of immaturity, of discouragement, of disunity, of strife: indeed these things seem very much to flow one out of the other. They are met and countered by a true ministry such as Paul's; and maturity, encouragement, unity and peace are promoted. May it be so with us, and we too shall know the presence of the God of love and peace.

Verses 12 and 13 give *the closing salutations*. Verse 11 being fulfilled in them, there would be no difficulty amongst themselves, no jealousies and strifes and evil speakings, which would prevent their saluting one another in holiness. The spirit of faction, the desire to boast of being of Paul or Peter or Apollos, would be cast out. Moreover "all the saints" saluted them, for their affections had not been alienated from them by reason of their blameworthy condition of unspirituality. The saints elsewhere had not formed a party against them, or what is even worse, fallen themselves into parties as the result of hearing about the schisms at Corinth. *All the saints* saluted them, in spite of their failures.

Verse 14 gives *the closing benediction*. Here we have indicated the great realities which are calculated to produce the things desired in verse 11 — grace, love and communion, proceeding respectively from the three Persons of the Godhead. Let us notice in passing that the Lord Jesus, who is so often spoken of as the Second Person, is put in the first place here, just as the Holy Spirit is put in the first place in 1 Corinthians 12. All such terms as First, Second or Third Person must therefore be used with a considerable measure of reserve.

The grace of the Lord Jesus was *known* by the Corinthians, as the Apostle had acknowledged in chapter viii. It is another and a further, thing for it to be *with us all*. Then we shall *all* be pervaded by its blessed influence. So with the love of God; and so too with the communion of the Holy Spirit. In this benediction the grace is put first, for if that fails with us all will fail.

Heaven will be filled with the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit, but we shall not need grace — at least, not as we need it here. It is in the circle of the church on earth that all kinds of trials and testings occur. It is here that we have to do with perverse men and trying brethren, all the while possessing wayward hearts ourselves. Nothing but the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ can preserve us in a way that is pleasing to God. But the grace of the Lord *can do it*.

And if the grace of the Lord does preserve us, then the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit may have full course and be with us all. The Spirit being holy the communion which He inspires must be holy. We shall be found in happy partnership and fellowship as to the whole range of things which He reveals to us, even the deep things of God.

The love of God *shines upon us* as His children, even when our practical condition is not at all pleasing to Him. But when it is *with us all* its benediction is felt throughout the great circle of all saints. Indeed it overflows that circle and goes out to the world beyond. A lovely picture is thus presented of what the church is according to the thought of God: a circle governed by grace, overflowing with love, and filled with a holy communion concerning the things of God.

We cannot say that the church is that practically; but we can say that it may and should be that. We can say also that if any of us approximate to this, even in a small degree, we shall be greatly blessed, and be a benediction to others.

So may it be then with all of us.