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“Growth Pains in the Church: Lessons from 2 Corinthians”

by
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About the Author



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WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 1

2 CORINTHIANS 1

2 CORINTHIANS 6:11

*“Our mouth is open unto you,
our heart is enlarged.”*

A PASTORAL HEART

2 Corinthians is the last of four letters which Paul had written to the Christians in Corinth:

- **First Visit.** The church at Corinth was established during Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 18).
- **First Letter.** This letter was written to instruct the church at Corinth on the necessity to deal with sinning members (1 Cor 5:9-13). This letter is not included in the biblical canon.
- **Second Letter.** Sadly, the Corinthian Christians continued to be lax in dealing with sin and carnality. Furthermore, word came to Paul from the household of Chloe (1 Cor 1:11) and Apollos (1 Cor 16:12) concerning contentions in the Corinthian church. Thus, Paul had to address these issues in another letter – 1 Corinthians.
- **Second Visit.** Paul then paid a visit to Corinth to address the persistent issues. However, Paul was rejected and spitefully entreated, causing him to describe the trip as a painful visit with much heaviness of heart (2 Cor 2:1).
- **Third Letter.** Despite the ill-treatment he received from the Corinthian Christians, Paul persevered to rebuke the church with a painful letter composed in tears (2 Cor 2:4, 7:8). This letter caused many to have godly sorrow unto repentance (2 Cor 7:8-12).
- **Fourth Letter.** This is 2 Corinthians. It was written to assure the Corinthian Christians of Paul’s continuing love and care for them despite their earlier mistreatment of him. There was also a need for Paul to defend his Apostleship from the continuing attacks of God’s enemies. Finally, Paul wanted to inform the Corinthian Christians to be ready for his **third visit** to collect funds for the suffering saints of Jerusalem.

This epistle lays bare the pastoral heart of Paul. Do you want to have a heart of a servant like Paul? Study this epistle humbly and be blessed!

THOUGHT: What does it mean to have the heart of a servant?

PRAYER: Give me a servant’s heart, O Father.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 2

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-2

GALATIANS 1:1

“... called to be an apostle ...
through the will of God ...”

DIVINELY APPOINTED

The word “*apostle*” (*apostolos*, 2 Cor 1:1) denotes someone who is commissioned as a messenger (cf. Acts 14:14). However, it is often used in the Scriptures to refer to those whom Jesus Christ has specially commissioned to the office of an “Apostle” (Luke 6:13). These were specially chosen by the Lord to preach and pen down the inspired Word of God. The household of God is said to be built upon the foundation of the Prophets and the Apostles, with Christ as the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20).

Although many in the Corinthian church desired reconciliation with Paul, there were some who continued to oppose him. Some of these claimed to be “super-apostles” (2 Cor 11:5) and undermined Paul’s apostolic authority.

Paul had to defend his Apostleship because these attacks undermined the critical ministry which God had committed to him. Thus, from the beginning of the epistle, Paul asserted that his Apostleship was not of his own appointment, nor that of other men, but solely through the will of God (cf. Gal 1:1). God’s appointment of Paul is recorded in Acts 9. Jesus Christ Himself was the one who proclaimed that Paul was His “*chosen vessel*” to bear His name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15). On the other hand, the super-apostles were but pseudo-apostles. They were self-made and self-appointed. Unlike Paul, they were not from God, but were agents of Satan who is transformed into an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14).

Similarly, God had called the Corinthian Christians to be “*saints*” (*hagios*, 2 Cor 1:1), that is, “holy ones.” It is God’s appointment that they should bear a godly and holy testimony to the world. They must abide in their call. Alas, the Corinthian church was more known for their carnality than their spirituality (1 Cor 3:1-3). They must repent!

What about you, dear reader? Are you serving in God’s appointment?

THOUGHT: Read John 4:34. What is God’s appointment for you?

PRAYER: Father, help me to abide in Thy will.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 3

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7

HEBREWS 4:15-16

“The Father of mercies ...”

GOD OF ALL COMFORT (I)

Christians live in a sin-filled world that hates Christ. Thus, the world will seek to persecute Christians and undermine their testimony for Christ. In these difficult times, we may become discouraged. What is our comfort in these times of great despair?

Paul also went through great suffering for the sake of Christ and His gospel. We can read of his troubles in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. How did Paul respond to these difficulties? He did not wallow in self-pity, nor did he try to comfort himself in the temporal things of this world. Neither did he seek to fulfil fleshly lusts. In his time of despair, he turned to the sole source of comfort in this life – the God of all comfort.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-7, we see two persons of the Godhead comforting the saints. The first is the Heavenly Father, *“the Father of mercies”* (v 3). Mercy refers to how the Father does not reward us according to our iniquities (Ps 103:10). This term is written in the plural to express the richness, and fullness of God’s mercy in sparing us from eternal condemnation. Second, we have Christ, our Mediator, Substitute, Atonement and Advocate. His completed work on the cross of Calvary assures us that our salvation is secured in Him. As our Great High Priest, He is sympathetic to our pains and distresses (Heb 4:15-16).

The main message of today’s passage is aptly expressed in the answer to the Heidelberg Catechism Question 1 - “What is thy only comfort in life and death? That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.” Meditate on this.

THOUGHT: God the Father, Christ and His Word are my sole comforts in distress.

PRAYER: Father, I thank Thee that I can come boldly to Thy throne of grace.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 4
2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7
JAMES 1:2-4

“... the God of all comfort.”

GOD OF ALL COMFORT (II)

The comfort of God helps us endure our various trials, enabling our faith in Christ to mature. James exhorts us, *“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing”* (James 1:2-4).

However, this comfort is not only for our benefit, but for other saints as well. Verse 4 tells us that the experience of comfort through our various trials enables us to comfort others. Having gone through these trials, we have experiential knowledge of how God has comforted us through our difficult times, and thus we are now able to empathise with other suffering saints who go through similar challenges, and comfort them through God’s Word and prayer.

In verses 5 to 7, Paul shared how his patience in the midst of persecutions, imprisonments and other challenges had emboldened others in their stand for the faith. Similarly, when saints testify during prayer meetings of how God’s Word encouraged them through difficult times in their places of work, their testimonies encourage others in their walk with God. When young Christian men refuse to kowtow to peer pressure and the temptations of the world, other youths will be provoked to do likewise. Those who are comforted by God will also be of comfort to others.

Let us be comforted that our trials have a purpose. The troubles we experience serve as our University of Life. God can also use us to comfort and encourage others to persevere in their sufferings for His sake. We can be powerful instruments in the hands of God. Let us then be comforted in our triune God and live faithfully as witnesses for Christ.

“For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ” (2 Cor 1:5).

THOUGHT: God’s care for His children is the best.

PRAYER: Father, help me to be a comfort and blessing to others.

LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 5

2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-11

PSALM 3

*“... in whom we trust that
he will yet deliver us.”*

DELIVERANCE ASSURED

There may be times when troubles seem to be so severe that there seems to be no way out. This was certainly the experience of Paul and Timothy as they contended for the gospel in Asia. The situation was so desperate that they despaired for their lives as though they have received an official death sentence (*apokrima*).

Nevertheless, in a time when everything seemed hopeless, Paul placed his trust in God. Does God not have the power to raise the dead? Thus, Paul was certain that God could deliver them from their precarious situation in Asia.

Verse 10 tells us that Paul and Timothy were indeed rescued from the danger in Asia. It is thus with great assurance that Paul looks forward to God's help and deliverance in future situations. Observe the progression of tense of the verb “*deliver*” in verse 10 – “Who delivered ... doth deliver ... will yet deliver.” God has helped in the past, He helps in the present, and He will continue to help in the future.

The same thought is expressed by David in Psalm 3. Even though he found himself in a desperate situation (Ps 3:1-2), David recalled that God has helped in the past and will continue to help in his present situation (vv 4-7). David's unwavering faith in God caused him to declare that God has delivered, even though he had not yet experienced that deliverance (see Ps 3:7: “... *thou hast smitten ... thou hast broken ...*”).

We too like Paul and David can be assured of God's deliverance in our pilgrim journey on earth. Even if wicked men were to take our life, we know our salvation is assured in Christ, and we will be with Christ forever. “*And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand*” (John 10:28-29).

THOUGHT: He hath delivered, He doth deliver, He will deliver.

PRAYER: Teach me, Father, to always trust in Thee to deliver.

MONDAY, JANUARY 6

2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-11

EPHESIANS 6:18-20

*“Ye also helping together
by prayer for us...”*

PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER

In verse 11, Paul thanked the Corinthian Christians for praying for his deliverance, thereby enjoining them to continue to pray for him as he laboured for Christ.

It was a common practice of Paul to beseech the saints to pray for him (cf. Eph 6:18-20; Rom 15:30-32; Col 4:2-3). The question may then be asked: if Paul's trust is in God rather than in men, why then does he enjoin the saints to intercede for him?

Answer: God does not need any man, nor does He need the prayers of any man, to perform and accomplish His will. Yet it pleases God that He should use the prayers of the saints to effect His will upon earth. Thus, the Scripture remarks, *“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much”* (James 5:16b).

It is our God-given duty and privilege to intercede for one another. When we unite in Christ to present our prayers in truth to the Father, we are filled with thanksgiving, praise and joy when we see our supplications answered. It provides a wonderful occasion for the saints to experience God's comfort.

Passages such as these affirm the importance of the prayer meeting. A church which does not pray is a dead church. On the other hand, a church that prays finds much grace and comfort from the Lord. Spurgeon said, “Well, you may try to do without Prayer Meetings if you like, but my solemn conviction is that, as these decline, the Spirit of God will depart from you and the preaching of the Gospel will be of small account. The Lord will have the prayers of His people to go with the proclamation of His Gospel if it is to be the power of God unto salvation -- and there is no change in this matter since Paul's day! Jesus Christ is ‘the same yesterday, and today, and forever.’”

Are you attending your church prayer meeting?

THOUGHT: “If God be near a church, it must pray” (Spurgeon).

PRAYER: I flee to Thee for help, My Rock and Shield!

TUESDAY, JANUARY 7

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-14

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-8

“... *that in simplicity and
godly sincerity ...*”

A PURE CONSCIENCE

There is a proverb in the Chinese Church which says, “When God works, Satan also works.” So it is the case for the Apostle Paul. Despite his good work for the Lord among the Corinthians, there were those who still opposed him and attacked his integrity. Some of these false teachers and brethren accused him of being deceptive and manipulative. They pointed to Paul’s change of plans to visit Corinth as possible evidence that he was untrustworthy and devious. These were outrageous and outlandish accusations – fake news!

Paul’s answer was to appeal to an objective assessment of how he had conducted himself in the ministry of the Lord. He declared that the witness of his conscience before God was pure. He had always conducted himself in “*simplicity and godly sincerity*” (2 Cor 1:12). The term “*simplicity*” (*haplotēti*) points to Paul’s singleness of purpose and devotion to the cause of Christ. On the other hand, “*sincerity*” (*eilikrineia*) speaks of Paul’s motives being pure before the Lord. He was confident that he would be vindicated when he gave his account in the day of the Lord Jesus (2 Cor 1:14). He was indeed a workman approved unto God.

One proof of his sincerity is seen in how he did not serve in “*fleshly wisdom*” (2 Cor 1:12). He did not serve according to worldly philosophies, neither did he engage in sin nor in fulfilment of his lusts, but he conducted every aspect of his ministry according to the truth of God’s Word. His life is an example of holiness and Christ-likeness. He was blameless in the sight of man and God.

When we serve the Lord, we too must serve in the integrity of our heart, “*providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men*” (2 Cor 8:21). Be like Paul who always strived to be accountable to the Lord. Do not be like the false accusers. Despite their protestations against Paul, they were in fact the ones who served in hypocrisy to fulfil their lusts. Serve with a pure conscience before God.

THOUGHT: How important is a pure conscience to you?

PRAYER: Father, may I serve Thee with clean hands and a pure heart.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8

2 CORINTHIANS 1:15-22

1 CORINTHIANS 16:5

*“... our word toward you
was not yea and nay.”*

FALSE ACCUSATIONS!

Paul confessed that he originally planned to journey from Ephesus to Corinth by sea, and then onward to Macedonia (1 Cor 16:5). However, when Paul wrote this epistle, he was already in Macedonia, missing Corinth all together. This caused his opponents to accuse him of “*lightness*” (v 17), a charge which Paul vehemently denied. Paul did not serve according to fleshly whims and fancies.

In his defence, Paul pointed to the trustworthy character of God. God is always true to His Word. His will always fulfil His promises. This same God was also the one who commissioned Paul to preach the Gospel. When the detractors accused Paul of being insincere and fickle-minded, it was as good as levelling the same charge against God. Were they therefore trying to say that the promises which they had received in the gospel were unreliable and false? God forbid!

Furthermore, the validity of the Apostle’s message and ministry is further attested by its effects and results (vv 21-22). The Corinthian Christians have seen how they were established in Christ by God working through the Apostle. They have also experienced the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives which God had given to indwell believers as the earnest (i.e. down payment) of their salvation. The sealing of the Holy Spirit marked the Corinthian Christians as belonging to God. Since they have experienced all these spiritual blessings, why then were they doubting the integrity and truthfulness of Paul’s ministry?

The conclusion therefore is this – Paul changed his plan not because of ill intentions, but because circumstances had changed. This was God’s direction. Man proposes, but God disposes. The Corinthian Christians had been too quick to judge Paul and ended up with false insinuations, to the hurt of everyone in the work of Christ. Similarly, do not be quick to judge, but evaluate all things carefully and biblically. You do not want to end up being an accuser of the brethren. Beware!

THOUGHT: Do not be a false accuser like Satan, the father of lies.

PRAYER: Father, help me answer my detractors truthfully.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 9

2 CORINTHIANS 1:23-2:4

1 SAMUEL 12:19-24

*“For out of much affliction
and anguish of heart ...”*

PASTORAL ANGUISH

Paul did not change his itinerary because of any malice nor fickle-mindedness on his part. Instead, it was with godly and loving intentions. The Corinthian Christians were very much in his heart. Paul had earlier visited the Corinthian Christians to address deep-seated issues (see 1 Corinthians). Alas, the refusal of the Corinthian Christians to receive Paul meant that it was a painful visit (2 Cor 2:1) which caused much heaviness in the heart of Paul. This was followed by a severe letter by Paul written *“with many tears”* (2 Cor 2:4).

Nevertheless, Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to know that he did not take delight in causing such grief and sorrow. He viewed himself as a fellow labourer of Christ (*sunergoi*) who desired to see the Corinthians walk in joy (2 Cor 1:24). However, joy can only be fully experienced when the deep-seated issues are addressed. Therefore, for the good of the church, Paul had to minister and rebuke.

Paul was confident that these issues would be resolved with loving instruction, and the result would be the great joy of everyone (2 Cor 2:4). In the meantime, he decided to defer his visit and go straight to Macedonia to avoid causing further sorrow and anguish to the Corinthian Christians. How he wished that everything would eventually be resolved for the joy of the Corinthian church! This was despite the maltreatment he received at the hands of many in the congregation.

This same pastoral heart of Paul can also be seen in the life of Samuel. Despite many faithful years of service in the midst of God’s people, the people demanded a king like the nations around them. What was Samuel’s reaction to their rejection? *“... God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and right way”* (1 Sam 12:23). This is a pastor’s love.

You may face misunderstanding and rejection for seeking the spiritual welfare of others in love. Read Proverbs 27:6. Are you ready to love?

THOUGHT: What does it mean to weep for the souls of men?

PRAYER: Father, be merciful to Thy people.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 10

2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-11

1 CORINTHIANS 5

*“Sufficient to such a man
is this punishment...”*

MERCY IN JUDGMENT

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul rebuked the Corinthian Christians for failing to discipline a man who had slept with his stepmother. Even in a sexually promiscuous city like Corinth, this act was so shameful that it was described as *“such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles”* (1 Cor 5:1). What a shame to the name of Christ!

Nevertheless, the Corinthian Christians were so spiritually apathetic that they refused to deal with the situation. When Paul visited the Corinthian church a second time, they opposed his instruction to discipline the man. This moved Paul to write his severe letter to chide them for sweeping sin under the carpet and not being concerned for the purity of the church. Thankfully, after reading the severe letter, the Corinthian Christians realised their error and took the offender to task. The man also genuinely repented of his sin and stopped his opposition to the Apostle Paul.

However, the Corinthian Christians now swung to the other extreme. They continued to inflict punishment despite the man’s genuine repentance. They failed to understand the purpose of church discipline: (1) to protect the purity of the church and (2) to seek the restoration of the sinner unto a right fellowship with Christ. An overly harsh punishment would in fact play into the hands of Satan, for this would cause a brother to be divided from the church (v 11). Now that the man had genuinely repented, the right way was to forgive him as how Christ has forgiven, and to receive him back into the fellowship of the church. There must be mercy amid judgment.

While God’s discipline of His children is necessarily painful, it is always well-thought out and in moderation (Isa 27:1-9). He does not under-punish nor over-punish. Any form of discipline, whether in the church or at home, must be carried out according to the same principle. Discipline must not be carried out in frustration. Discipline should seek restoration, not destruction.

THOUGHT: A good judge is a weeping judge.

PRAYER: Merciful Father, teach me how to be merciful to others.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 11

2 CORINTHIANS 2:5-11

ISAIAH 15:5; 16:9-11

*“Sufficient to such a man
is this punishment ...”*

SCHADENFREUDE?

The term “schadenfreude” is often used to describe the pleasure or joy derived from another person’s suffering or pain. This pleasure is often tinged with malice and gloating.

It is most easy to revel in *schadenfreude* when something bad happens to those who oppose us. The Apostle Paul could have reacted this way when the man who opposed him was finally punished for his sins. Yet, this was not the heart of the Apostle Paul. He called for the Corinthian Christians to forgive the man, just as how we are also readily forgiven by God. *“To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ”* (2 Cor 2:10).

The Apostle Paul was simply reflecting the heart of God. As a holy and just God, He loves righteousness and judgment (Ps 33:5; 37:28). Yet, there is no rejoicing in the destruction of the wicked. *“Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?”* (Ezek 18:23). He is not like a Nero or Hitler, who will gloat at the destruction of man.

Similarly, Christians must not gloat over the destruction of their enemies. When the Lord delivers us from the attacks of our enemies, we can rightly find joy in the Lord’s vindication. Nevertheless, this must always be accompanied by deep sorrow for those who are judged. O how we should rather desire to see the salvation rather than the destruction of men!

On an ecclesiastical level, it should fill our hearts with great sorrow when we see churches falling away in the end times. There must be no gloating but a deep remorse for the spiritual malaise in Christendom. When we warn of error, it is in the hope that more will turn from waywardness and embrace the truth. May more see the light, O Lord!

THOUGHT: Christians should not revel in *schadenfreude*.

PRAYER: Give me a heart of compassion, Father.

LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 12

2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-13

JAMES 4:13-17

*"... a door was opened
unto me of the Lord."*

D.V.

You may have seen the letters "D.V." at the back of some pastoral letters. Have you wondered what they mean? These letters are the abbreviation of the Latin expression "*Deo volente*" which means "God being willing" (Merriam-Webster). It talks about a person's hearty submission to the plans and designs of God in all matters. He is willing to follow God's direction, even if it means a change in his plans.

In the passage today, Paul gave two further explanations why he went to Ephesus directly instead of through Corinth as initially directed. First, God had opened an opportunity for him to preach at Troas. Since this is at the Lord's direction, he must go and preach. Herein is a principle for preachers, that when the invitation comes to minister the Word, it is wise to fulfil it.

Second, Paul had sent Titus to Corinth as the bearer of his "severe" letter. While he was in Troas, he waited anxiously for Titus' return so that he might know the state of the Corinthian church. However, Titus' return was delayed. Therefore, Paul had to move on to Macedonia in the hope of meeting Titus on the way. All these were changes in the itinerary enforced by God, which Paul was most willing to follow.

We may have certain desires and plans in our hearts. It could be a change of career. Or a plan to go for a holiday. Or perhaps a desire to serve in a certain ministry. However, God may have other designs. His ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts (Isa 55:9). While it is our human responsibility to plan, let us also be ready that God may change our plans. To stubbornly trust and insist in our own plans is foolishness for God knows better than us. "*For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that*" (James 4:15). Let our trust be in God, rather than in the arm of flesh.

THOUGHT: Man proposes, God disposes.

PRAYER: Father, help me to be fully submissive to Thy will.

MONDAY, JANUARY 13

2 CORINTHIANS 2:14-17

MATTHEW 25:31-46

“God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ.”

A TRIUMPHANT MINISTRY

The term *“triumph”* (2 Cor 2:14) invokes the picture of a Roman victory procession when a general returns from war with his army. Christ here is the Commander-in-Chief who leads the missionary team of Paul and his associates unto victory. With Christ as the Leader in their labours, they will not fail!

It is also common in the triumph procession for garlands of flowers to be placed along the route. This is accompanied by the burning of incense and spices. This fragrance would then spread so that people from afar could also smell the aroma.

The preaching of the gospel of Paul and his associates is thus likened to this fragrance. Wherever they went, the savour of the gospel would accompany them. *“How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!”* (Rom 10:15b).

However, not everyone will find the aroma of the *“triumph”* palatable. For those who are on the victor’s side, the aroma is understandably sweet. On the other hand, the prisoners-of-war who are due to be executed will find the aroma to be a *“scent of death.”* Similarly, there will always be two reactions to the preaching of the gospel. Those who are saved are those who received the gospel in faith. For such, the gospel fragrance is truly sweet. However, those that reject the gospel will perish. To them, the gospel is but the odour of death. Which group are you in? Make sure you are in the right parade.

The success of a preaching ministry is thus judged by how faithful a man is to the Word of God. There are many false workers who *“corrupt”* God’s Word. This term has the sense of engaging in shady business with greedy intentions. These are *“preachers”* who only *“preach”* for their bellies. *“Less pay, less preach! No pay, no preach!”* Not so, the Apostle Paul, who is true and sincere in the ministry of the Christ. This is how one may have a triumphant ministry in Christ.

THOUGHT: How do we measure the success of a church ministry?

PRAYER: Father, help me to triumph in Christ Jesus.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 14

2 CORINTHIANS 2:17

1 PETER 2:2

*“For we are not as many,
which corrupt the word of God.”*

WHAT FOOD DO WE EAT? (I)

Parents are careful with what they give their children to eat. They will make sure the child is given clean and nutritious food so that they will grow up strong and healthy. No loving parent would deliberately give their child food that is poisonous. Similarly, we are also careful to ensure what we eat is hygienic. Ingesting anything that is tainted can cause a stomach-ache. In severe cases, there can be extensive vomiting and diarrhoea, and even death.

The Christian lives by the Word of God (Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4). It is food to our souls. Thus, the Bible tells us that we should *“desire the sincere milk of the word”* that we may *“grow thereby”* (1 Pet 2:2). The word *“sincere”* here refers to something that is pure and unadulterated. If we are to grow spiritually, then we must make sure we feed upon the pure Word of God. To do otherwise would be spiritually dangerous. It is not something that we should play a fool with.

Carl McIntire stated the severity of the issue well: *“Experience warns us that the food for our bodies must be pure, and without poison. So, also, God's Word demands that the food for our souls be pure, and without poison. When physical food is poison, the body dies. When spiritual food is poison, the soul perishes.”* It is thus an *“absolute requirement”* that our food be pure.

Alas, the Bible tells us in 2 Corinthians 2:17 that there are many who corrupt the Word of God. It is not just *“a few,”* or *“some,”* but many handle the Word of God deceitfully! They twist and turn the Holy Scriptures to suit their nefarious ideas and practices, peddling the Word of God to make merchandise of God's people. There is no concern whether the souls of men will perish due to their tainting of God's Word. They will do what it takes to corrupt the truth so that their fleshly lusts may be fulfilled. Beware of such men. *“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them”* (Rom 16:17).

THOUGHT: What are the characteristics of false preachers?

PRAYER: Father, help me to have discernment in spiritual things.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15

2 CORINTHIANS 2:17

PROVERBS 19:27

*“For we are not as many,
which corrupt the word of God.”*

WHAT FOOD DO WE EAT? (II)

Paul and his associates were true to their calling as servants of Christ. First, they were serving in *“sincerity”* (i.e. with pure motives). The proof of this was how they handled the Word of God. They preached faithfully according to the Word and refused to *“sugar-coat”* the scriptures to defraud God’s people. They were committed to speaking the truth because they knew they were sent by God and thus were accountable to Him. Thus, they spoke the whole counsel of God even if it meant that it might not be well-received by some. They also lived out the Word of God. These are the marks of one who is truly called of God to be a messenger of His Word.

The problem of false messengers was not new. Israel was plagued with false prophets throughout her history before her dispersion. In order to boost their popularity and elicit gain, the prophets preached false messages of health, wealth and prosperity to the people. They refused to rebuke the people for their sin, neither did they warn of the judgments of God. Concerning these prophets, the Lord said, *“I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied”* (Jer 23:21).

Sadly, the nation of Israel did not reject such prophets but embraced them. Jeremiah 5:31 is a sad indictment of the Jews: *“The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?”* They loved food that was tainted with poison!

Similarly, the church at Corinth ought to have noticed the difference in the message of Paul and that of the false messengers. However, they allowed themselves to be swayed by the false messengers. That ought not to be. In application, if we are stringent with our physical food, we must be even more so with our spiritual food. We must guard our hearts that we may love to digest the truth and not that which is false. Our food matters. Let us be mindful of what we eat.

THOUGHT: Read Proverbs 19:27.

PRAYER: Father, may Thy pure Word be always preached.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 16

2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-3

1 CORINTHIANS 4:4-5

“Do we begin again to commend ourselves?”

THE RECOMMENDATION THAT MATTERS

When a person applies for a scholarship, he may be required to submit a letter of recommendation. A similar letter may also be required when a person is being considered for promotion within a company. This letter attests that the person is of good character and aptitude, and thus worthy of receiving the scholarship or promotion.

In the first century AD, letters of recommendation were often given to Christian pilgrims to prove that they were honest and worthy of reception by the churches. Paul apparently lacked such letters. These caused the opponents of Paul to question his credentials. Furthermore, these accusers had strings of (likely deceptive) certificates and credentials to back them up. Paul seemed like nothing compared to them.

In response, Paul said that there was no need for him to have such letters of recommendation. The Corinthians should know better. God had used Paul to establish the Corinthian church (Acts 18). Was there really any need for him to reintroduce himself to the Corinthians? They had seen how Paul conducted himself in a godly fashion from the very beginning.

Moreover, the Corinthians themselves were living proof that Paul was a genuine minister of the gospel. Their lives were transformed by the gospel of Christ which Paul preached. Such living epistles of the transforming power of the gospel are worth much more than letters engraved in stone or written in ink. The Corinthian Christians themselves are thus *“the epistle of Christ ... written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God”* (2 Cor 3:3) and this far outweighs any paper recommendation.

On the other hand, there may be many in Christendom who have strings of theological degrees, but nothing in true spirituality and godliness. We must not be like these men. The commendation that matters is from God. Read 1 Corinthians 4:4-5.

THOUGHT: Genuine spirituality? Or worthless certificates?

PRAYER: Father, how I long to hear Thy commendation!

FRIDAY, JANUARY 17

2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-6

JOHN 15:1-5

*“... but our sufficiency
is of God.”*

OUR SUFFICIENCY IS OF GOD

The false accusers of Paul were boastful men who were quick to trumpet their own credentials. Their trust was in their strength and intellect. They were men who drew away disciples to themselves and not to Christ (Acts 20:30).

On the other hand, Paul's trust was not in the arm of flesh but in his Saviour. He was quick to give all glory to God for the successes in the gospel ministry. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to know that this success was not due to himself nor his intellect, but was wholly of God. Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9). Paul preached the gospel, but God was the one who wrought salvation to the souls in Corinth by the Holy Spirit. *“I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase”* (1 Cor 3:6).

In fact, the work of the Lord was often fraught with much stress, danger and pain for the Apostle Paul. He had to face much labour, suffering and persecution, sometimes even to the despairing of his life (2 Cor 1:8). It would not have been possible for Paul to endure the ministry if God had not sustained him by His grace.

It is often easy to let success get to our heads. Instead of acknowledging the Lord, we rely on our own strength to pull us through. Being deceived by our pride, we think that all is well in our life, but everything we do is in vain, for we have failed to give God the glory. No work is acceptable before the Lord if it is not done in Christ, no matter how beautiful it may appear in the eyes of man.

Men who rely on their own strength will find the arduousness of life and service too much for them. Some compromise with worldly methods and philosophies to help them out of their predicaments. Others wallow in self-pity as they refuse to turn to God for help. If only they would turn to Christ, they would find in Him their sufficiency. Without Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5).

THOUGHT: What is your trust in this life?

PRAYER: Father, may Christ be my trust and refuge.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 18

2 CORINTHIANS 3:4-6

ROMANS 2:28-29

*“... the letter killeth, but
the spirit giveth life.”*

THE SPIRIT OR THE LETTER?

Unlike his false accusers, Paul's reliance was wholly upon God. It was God who made him an able and competent minister of the gospel. Paul walked in the Spirit, obeying God and His Word sincerely from the heart out of love for Christ. As a true minister of the new testament, he was a minister of the Spirit (i.e. serving in the power of the Holy Spirit), thus his ministry for the Lord was full of power and life.

On the other hand, the false accusers had a false show of piety. Externally, they might have appeared to be “holy” men, but internally, they were devoid of any spirituality and true love for God. Their “ministry” was like that of the Pharisees, with only an external adherence to the law, yet inwardly they were ravening wolves. They were men who drew nigh to Christ with their mouths, and honoured Him with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him (Matt 15:8). Thus, their “ministry” of the “letter” was one that was dead and lifeless. It is in this sense that Paul said, *“the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life”* (2 Cor 3:6).

“But when the Holy Spirit subdues the heart of an individual, obedience to the law and fulfilling its true intention are evident (see Rom 2:27-29). Not the letter but the Spirit changes a person's heart. We distinguish between an external conformity to the law (the letter) and an internal obedience, through the Spirit, to fulfil the express purpose of the law: to have life” (Kistemaker).

Herein lies a danger, that there may be those who go to church thinking that by their attendance and outward adherence to religious duties, that all is right with their souls. And yet, they may have never trusted in Christ Jesus. Oh, may such men through the hearing of the gospel be truly born again of the Word and of the Spirit!

Let our lives not be a show of religious hypocrisy, but one that is lived sincerely and truthfully in the Holy Spirit.

THOUGHT: Why is religious hypocrisy such an abomination to God?

PRAYER: Father, help me truly to walk in the Spirit.

LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 19

2 CORINTHIANS 3:7-11

JOHN 1:17

*“... the ministration of
righteousness exceed in glory.”*

THE GLORIOUS MINISTRY OF THE GOSPEL

2 Corinthians 3:7-8 points us back to the event recorded in Exodus 34:29-35. Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments written on a second pair of stone tablets. As Moses came down, the skin of his face shone so brightly that the people were unable to look directly at his face.

Nevertheless, despite the glory that was manifested in the sight of people, the ministration of the law was described as the *“ministration of death”* (2 Cor 3:7). Why so? Not because the law is bad, for Paul himself taught that the law is holy, just and good (Rom 7:12). Moreover, God Himself wrote the Ten Commandments with His own finger. Therefore, the ministration of the law is a glorious ministration.

The problem is not with the law, but with man. The law reveals man for who he is and like a sword condemns him of his sin (Rom 3:19-20). The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). *“Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful”* (Rom 7:13). Therefore, the ministration of the law is also a ministration of death unto man.

Why then is the ministration of the new testament far glorious? It is because man through the gospel may find eternal life. Christ, the only begotten Son of God, has come into the world to become the Son of man, so that the sons of men may become the sons of God. He came to be our Substitute and Propitiation for our sins. *“For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ”* (John 1:17).

Now that we know the wondrous privilege for us to be involved in the glorious ministry of the gospel, should we not therefore hasten in our witness for Christ?

THOUGHT: We must hasten in the ministry of the gospel today.

PRAYER: Father, grant me boldness to share the gospel of Christ.

MONDAY, JANUARY 20
2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-16
JOHN 9:24-41

*“But their minds
were blinded ...”*

THE VEIL UPON THE HEART

In 2 Corinthians 3:7-11, Paul explained why the ministration of grace in Christ Jesus is far more glorious than the ministration of the law. Christ has come to fulfil the law (Matt 5:17), and to be our righteousness. As such, He is the mediator of a better covenant (Heb 8:6). Paul is assured of the work of Christ and the sure hope of this new and better covenant. Thus, he is bold and open (*parrēsia*) in the declaration of the gospel. There is no reason for him to be ashamed of the gospel, and so must it be the case for us today.

Alas, despite the preaching of such a glorious gospel, there are still those who are resistant to the truth. Paul drew a parallel of this spiritual hardness with the veil that was over the face of Moses. Just like how the veil hid the face of Moses from the children of Israel during the ministration of the law, so now in the ministration of grace, there is also a veil over the hearts of the Jews this day that blinds them to the glory in Christ. They are unable to see how the things of the Old Testament have found their fulfilment in Christ. Similarly, there were still many who remained blind to spiritual truth despite the preaching of Paul. These included the opponents of Paul who opposed his Apostleship and message. Paul would later deal with this in 2 Corinthians 4:1-5.

Who then can remove this veil from the heart? Only Christ! However, those who harden their hearts refuse to go to the Saviour to have this veil removed and therefore, they cannot see. They may be reading the Scriptures, and hearing the preaching of the gospel, but because they refuse to go to Christ in faith, their blindness remains. Thus, Jesus told the hardened spiritual leaders during His earthly ministry, *“If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth”* (John 9:41).

As for those whom we have shared the gospel with, understand that only Christ can take away the veil from their hearts. Pray for God’s mercy to be upon them.

THOUGHT: Has the veil over your heart been taken away in Christ?

PRAYER: Father, only Thou can give light to the spiritually blind.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 21

2 CORINTHIANS 3:17-18

GALATIANS 5:13-17

“And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”

LIBERTY IN THE SPIRIT

There are advocates of social justice who view 2 Corinthians 3:17 as a call to champion human and civil liberties. However, this verse deals with a far greater liberty: a spiritual liberty that involves not just the body, but the soul.

What then is this liberty we have in the Holy Spirit? In the preceding verses, Paul talked about the veil that has been placed over the hearts of men preventing them from understanding the truth. Thus, the liberty mentioned in verse 17 has to do with a man coming to Christ, and Christ removing the veil by the Spirit. He is then delivered from the bondage of sin. Before a man comes to Christ, he is dead *in* sin (Eph 2:1b; Col 2:13). He cannot help but serve sin. However, once he is regenerated by the Spirit, he is now dead *unto* sin (Rom 6:2, 11, 18). He no longer serves sin but righteousness.

We must not, however, equate the liberty from sin as a license to sin. Sadly, there are those who teach that a person is free to do what he wants because all his sins are forgiven in Christ. This is a perversion and an abuse of the doctrine of grace. To such teaching, Paul retorted, *“For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”* (Gal 5:13-14, see also Rom 6:18-23). The Apostle Peter also declared *“that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness”* (1 Pet 2:24). The freedom Christians have in the Spirit is thus the freedom to do that which is right and pleasing in the sight of God.

Finally, consider how in the Spirit there is liberty from the penalty of sin. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). However, in Christ Jesus we no longer have eternal death but the gift of eternal life. *“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”* (1 Cor 15:55). What a glorious freedom we have in the Spirit!

THOUGHT: How can I best use my Christian liberty to please God?

PRAYER: Father, I thank Thee for the liberty I have in the Spirit.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 22

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-6

1 TIMOTHY 1:12-13

*“As we have received
mercy, we faint not.”*

DO NOT LOSE HEART

The cooperative will of God teaches us that if we seek to obey God’s Word and follow God’s direction in our life, He will help us and grant us good success. This does not mean that there will not be obstacles in the ministry which God has committed to us. This was true in the life of Paul. He faced great difficulties and opposition as he tried to serve the Lord faithfully.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas endeavoured immediately to go to Macedonia, having been directed by God in a vision. From Troas, the Lord gave *“a straight course”* all the way to Philippi (Acts 16:11-12). At Philippi, Paul and Silas met with Lydia, who was saved by the preaching of the gospel, having her heart opened by the Lord. However, Paul and Silas soon found themselves cast into jail for having cast a spirit of divination out of a girl who was used by her masters to bring them gain. However, Paul and Silas did not lose heart, but sang praises unto God in prison. In the end, God turned the situation for good, allowing Paul to preach the gospel to the jailor who was then gloriously saved.

Paul explained why he did not *“faint”* (i.e. grow spiritually weary, lose heart) despite the difficulties in ministry. The conjunction *“therefore”* points back to 2 Corinthians 3:6-18 where Paul rejoiced in the glorious nature of the ministry of the new covenant. As a minister of the gospel, he had received this ministry by the rich mercy of God (see 1 Timothy 1:12-13). He was a great sinner who was once a chief persecutor of the church. Yet God saved him in His sovereign mercy and put him into the ministry. Since God in His mercy and goodness had placed him in His service, Paul was assured that He would also grant him the strength to perform the task which was set before him. This was Paul’s confidence and encouragement in the midst of much distress and tribulation.

We too are saved by God and called to be Christ’s witnesses. What area of service has the Lord called you to? Do not lose heart as you serve.

THOUGHT: Read 1 Samuel 30:6. What can you learn from it?

PRAYER: Father, in Thee I have my encouragement in stormy times.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23

2 CORINTHIANS 4:2

1 THESSALONIANS 2:3-5

“... commending ourselves to every man’s conscience ...”

AN OPEN MINISTRY

2 Corinthians 4:2 contrasts the ministry of Paul with that of the false teachers. The ministry was one that was open and transparent whereas that of his accusers were steeped in deceit and lies.

Paul’s ministry was an open ministry in two ways. First, Paul’s ministry was conducted in true holiness. The “*hidden things of dishonesty*” (2 Cor 4:2) refer to a secret life of sin. Sin brings shame, but man often seeks to hide behind a facade of religiosity, covertly committing evil and iniquity. Such were the religious teachers during Jesus’ time who came in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly were ravening wolves (Matt 7:15).

Paul once led such a double life when he was a Pharisee. However, following his conversion on the way to Damascus, he had sincerely renounced such a hidden life of shame (*aischunēs*). He now abhorred sin and earnestly shunned from sinful deeds. It was a walk of commitment to a blameless life and a life of godliness. His life was an open book of the beauty of Christ.

Second, Paul was a true preacher of the Word. He earnestly sought to preach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27) and held nothing back. He did not teach “sweet” doctrines only and neglect the “sour” but taught all which the Lord desired him to declare. He also did not manipulate (*panourgia*) the Scriptures like “Play-Doh” for personal gain. He was a workman who rightly divided the Word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). He was an example of a true pastor (see 2 Tim 4:1-6).

On the other hand, his opponents engaged in much duplicity for the sake of pay, power and popularity. Such men who play a fool with God’s Word will not go unpunished (cf. Rev 22:18-19).

Serve openly and transparently before God and men. Be not pretentious. God will not be fooled.

THOUGHT: No hidden skeletons.

PRAYER: Father, let me not live a life of duplicity.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 24

2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-4

ISAIAH 6:9-10

“In whom the god of this world hath blinded ...”

JUDICIAL BLINDING (I)

Have you ever wondered why God should choose to save you? In fact, the marvel of it all is that God should save anyone at all. We are all undeserving of salvation, for there is not one good thing in us. There is none that doeth good, no not one (Rom 3:12). Yet the Bible tells us that God has set His love upon us in His good pleasure even before the foundation of the world to elect us unto salvation (Eph 1:4-6). This is often called the unconditional election of the saints. When rightly understood, it should serve to humble us that we are saved not by any merit in us, but simply by the merit of Christ (cf. Eph 2:8-10). In other words, the salvation of the elect is in God Himself. Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

On the other hand, there is also an election of those who are lost. This is the teaching in verse 3, that the gospel is hid to those who are *“lost.”* However, we must understand that the destruction of the reprobate is fully of his own responsibility. He chose to rebel against God, and thus is fully deserving of God’s wrath. Buswell put it this way: *“The chargeable cause of the loss of the lost is in the lost himself.”*

In today’s reading, Paul explained that those who wilfully opposed him had been blinded by the devil, who is *“the god of this world”* (cf. Eph 2:2). This is the judicial blinding of the Lord. Since Paul’s accusers had hardened their hearts against the truth, the Lord had permitted Satan to blind them spiritually. This is the thrust of what the Lord said to Isaiah: *“And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed”* (Isa 6:9-10).

May none of us be found hardening our hearts against Christ and His Word.

THOUGHT: “Chosen not for good in me...” (M’Cheyne)

PRAYER: How I owe everything to Thee, Father!

SATURDAY, JANUARY 25

2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-4

JUDE 4

“In whom the god of this world hath blinded ...”

JUDICIAL BLINDING (II)

The principle of judicial blinding of the reprobate is similarly proclaimed in Jude 4: *“For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”* While they are divinely decreed for destruction, yet they are every bit responsible for their destruction, having their hearts set in opposition to the Lord and His truth. As stated yesterday, “the chargeable cause of the loss of the lost is in the lost himself” (Buswell).

Rev Timothy Tow in his book *The Clock of the Sevenfold Will of God* explained the doctrine of judicial blinding in this way:

“The decretive will is a high mystery of Divine Sovereignty and human responsibility. It may be illustrated by this famous moot question often discussed in the schools of law. Suppose I invite you to come to my party. On the way you trip on a banana skin and break your kneecap. Who is to blame? You or I? Can you sue me at law?”

Thus, we see from the above that it is the immediate cause (the one who suffered the broken kneecap) that is to be blamed and not the remote cause (the one who initiated the invitation).

How then should we respond to this high mystery of God’s decretive will? Deuteronomy 29:29 has the answer, *“The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.”* When we preach the gospel of Christ, some will believe, and others will reject. God will save those whom He has ordained unto eternal life (Acts 13:48). Our concern is not to dwell on who are the elect and who the reprobate. This is in the secret will of God. We should focus instead on obeying God’s Word and fulfilling the Great Commission. Do what we must do, and leave the results to God.

THOUGHT: What are my human responsibilities in life?

PRAYER: Help me to fulfil my human responsibilities, Father.

LORD'S DAY, JANUARY 26

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-6

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5

*“For we preach not ourselves,
but Christ Jesus the Lord ...”*

CHRIST IS THE MESSAGE

Just like John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul was always seeking to glorify Christ in his conduct and message. *“He must increase, but I must decrease”* (John 3:30).

Paul's preaching was never a bombastic show of oratorical skill or sophistry. He had earlier declared in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5: *“And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.”*

To drive home his point, Paul was quick to point out that the ability to believe in the gospel did not come from himself but from God (2 Cor 4:6). The allusion here is to Genesis 1:3, where God created light by the power of His Word. *“And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.”* Just as God is the giver of physical light, He is also the giver of spiritual light that so illumines the minds and hearts of men. Paul was just an instrument in the hands of God. As the servant of Christ, he was most willing to serve men so that Christ may be glorified.

On the other hand, the opponents of Paul were often quick to preach about self. Their preaching was designed to draw the admiration of men. They were also keen to lord themselves over others, that they may gain an advantage. There was no spirit of servanthood in them. *“These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage”* (Jude 16).

How do you conduct yourself in the service of Christ? Are you like Paul or his opponents? Never be self-serving in the ministry of Christ!

THOUGHT: Christ must increase, and I must decrease.

PRAYER: Give me a servant's heart, Father.

MONDAY, JANUARY 27

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-12

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

*“But we have this treasure
in earthen vessels ...”*

TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS

What exactly is this treasure that we have in earthen vessels (2 Cor 4:7)? The answer is found in verse 6. It is *“the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”* (i.e. the saving knowledge of the gospel). Now that we have this knowledge, we are to be witnesses for Christ Jesus in the world of darkness in our *“earthen vessels”* (i.e. our bodies and minds).

It was common in the days of Paul to use earthen wares for storage purposes. However, these clay containers were extremely brittle and would crack easily under pressure. So too are our bodies and minds – they are weak and often succumb to the stresses of life.

Why then did God put the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels? This is so that God’s glory and power may be clearly manifested in the weakness of man (cf. 2 Cor 12:9). When *“earthen vessels”* which should ordinarily break under stress are sustained through the punishing rigours of labour for Christ, it would be made manifestly clear that this is by the power of Christ. “By utilizing frail human ministers, God demonstrates that the ‘surpassing greatness of the power’ that transforms men’s lives is from God and not from any preacher” (Kent).

Paul then employed four seemingly paradoxical statements to press home his point (2 Cor 4:8-9): *“... troubled ... yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.”* These were descriptions of how Paul and his associates endured hardships and trials so that the gospel work could proceed for the salvation of souls and the edification of the saints. This is what Paul meant when he said, *“So then death worketh in us, but life in you”* (2 Cor 4:12).

A good restatement of today’s passage can be found in the hymn “Keep On Believing”: “If all were easy, if all were bright; Where would the cross be? And where the fight? But in the testings God gives to you, Chances for proving what He can do.” God is glorified in our weakness.

THOUGHT: What does it mean to take up the cross?

PRAYER: Father, help me to deny myself and take up the cross.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 28

2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-18

1 CORINTHIANS 15:58

“... yet the inward man is renewed day by day.”

INDEFATIGABLE CHRISTIANS

What sustained Paul throughout the gospel ministry? Paul's answer: *“the spirit of faith.”* He then quoted Psalm 116:10a: *“I believed, therefore have I spoken.”* When Paul preached, he did so out of a faithful conviction of his heart concerning the truth of the Holy Scriptures. It was not a vain show. Because he genuinely believed in the truth, he could not help but proclaim the truth despite the opposition that it might bring. *“For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth”* (2 Cor 13:8).

On the other hand, the opponents of Paul preached with no real conviction of biblical truth. They manipulated the Scriptures to preach their own ideas and philosophies. It is therefore not surprising that such hirelings would flee at the first sign of trouble come. They cannot endure toughness because they were never truly convinced of the truth in the first place.

Herein is a lesson for preachers today. Preaching must always be done out of biblical conviction from the heart. When preaching is done out of such conviction, with a reliance on the Spirit, the Lord will find it pleasing to bless such preaching. The Lord's promise is that the Word which proceeded will not return unto Him void (Isa 55:11).

Furthermore, Paul stated that he was willing to go through such suffering because of the hope of the resurrection. On the day of Christ, the temporal corruptible body shall be raised up as one that is incorruptible (see 1 Cor 15:51-58). That gave Paul encouragement to speak boldly among the masses because he knew that the afflictions he faced were for a moment. Soon, he would be forever with the Lord.

This is also the same encouragement we have today as we serve the Lord in this world of darkness. Let us press on then and not despair. In the sure hope of Christ, we can be indefatigable Christians!

THOUGHT: Am I willing to take up the cross?

PRAYER: Father, may I look towards that glorious day.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 29

2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-8

HEBREWS 9:11

“... our earthly house
of this tabernacle ...”

AN EARTHLY TABERNACLE

The passage today plays on the two words “house” (*oikia*) and “tabernacle” (*skēnos*). “Tabernacle” refers to a tent, and thus a temporal abode. On the other hand, the term “house” is a general term of residence that has a sense of permanency.

Our body in this world, our earthly house, is described to be simply a tabernacle. In other words, this body of ours is but temporal. It is a body which is perishing, and one in which we must soon put off. On the other hand, a permanent house awaits us which is not made by hands. This permanent house is none other than the incorruptible body which we will be clothed with.

The question is, will you be clothed with such a permanent house? Only if you repent of your sins and believe in Christ!

Sadly, many in the world place undue emphasis on the temporal body and world. This was the lament of Dr S H Tow in his autobiography *Footprints in the Sands of Time* using this illustration:

“A young lady, receiving a priceless diamond ring, exclaimed to her young man, “Dearest, thank you for the lovely box! I promise to look after it with utmost care so that no harm or loss will come to it!” Ridiculous, you say. So we all agree. Yet it is a picture of time-bound men and women, young people lavishing everything on their perishing bodies, without a thought for their priceless souls. Before they realise it, the day of judgement will have dawned.”

Beloved, this body of ours will one day perish. On the other hand, the soul of man is eternal. When the roll is called, where will you be? We pray it will not be in the lake of fire, eternally separated from the Lord, but forever with the Lord, clothed with a house which will never be taken away again.

THOUGHT: My earthly body is perishing day by day.

PRAYER: Father, help me to focus on the eternal.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 30

2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-8

HEBREWS 9:11

“We are confident ...”

A GODLY CONFIDENCE

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul revealed that faithful Christians must expect suffering in this world for the sake of the glorious ministry of the gospel. Nevertheless, they can still walk as indefatigable Christians in this world of darkness with a godly confidence.

Why can we walk on the earth with godly confidence?

1. A Heavenly House (2 Cor 5:1-4). As stated in yesterday’s devotion. This house refers to a glorified body that will not corrupt. This will be a body just like that of Christ, made of flesh and bones (1 John 3:2; Luke 24:39).

In 2 Corinthians 5:2, Paul declared that the believers “groan” with earnest desire for this heavenly house. This “groaning” of Paul is not because he was sorrowful beyond hope, for Paul had intimated in the book of Philippians that we are able to rejoice always even while in prison. Rather, it points to an expectation of an heavenly estate that is far better than the present earthly tabernacle, for the glorified body to come will no longer be weighed down by the consequences of sin.

What about us? Do we look forward to our heavenly body? Or are our eyes still trained on the things of the earth?

2. A Divine Deposit (2 Cor 5:5-6). The word “earnest” (*arrabōn*) is a contractual term, referring to a deposit or down payment that is laid down as a guarantee. The use of the word here refers to the Holy Spirit indwelling every believer as a guarantee of the glories to come. While we are walking on earth, the Holy Spirit supplies us with our need, granting us a foretaste of that which is to come.

With these in mind, we can have godly confidence in this life. While we live on earth, we look forward to these things by faith. When our salvation is consummated, we shall then see these things by sight.

THOUGHT: Is my mind set on things on earth, or in heaven?

PRAYER: Father, I look forward to be forever with Christ.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 31

2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-10

1 CORINTHIANS 3:12-15

*“Wherefore we labour, that
... we may be accepted of him.”*

CHRISTIANS SHALL BE JUDGED

There is a certain carelessness in Christianity today where those who profess to be believers feel they can do anything they want because there is always forgiveness in Christ. They show little concern to bear a good testimony for Christ, or to give a good account of the things which they do in the present body.

The Bible teaches otherwise. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”* The judgment seat here is the Greek word *bēmatos*. This word is often used to describe a raised dais or platform from which a judge would ascend to chair a tribunal.

In this case, the judge is none other than Christ who will judge the works which every believer has done in the body. The nature of the judgment is not with regard to the salvation of the believer. Rather, it has to do with the quality of service. All the works which we have done will be revealed before Christ, whether it be good or bad. Nothing will be hidden from His eyes.

The nature of the judgment of believers is spoken in greater detail in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15: *“Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.”*

As believers, our desire should be to hear our Master say, *“Well done, thou good and faithful servant ... enter thou into the joy of thy lord”* (Matt 25:21). Wherefore, we ought to strive to be able to give a good account before our Lord. How are you faring?

THOUGHT: Have I done my best for my Master?

PRAYER: Father, help me to give my best for Thee.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 1
2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-13
HEBREWS 12:28-29

“Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men ...”

SERVING WITH GODLY FEAR

The “*terror*” (i.e. fear, *phobos*) of the Lord in 2 Corinthians 5:11 refers to a godly, reverential fear of God in the light of one’s knowledge of Him. It differs from the ungodly fear of the devils, for though the devils tremble before God (James 2:19), yet they continue in their rebellion against God. Similarly, ungodly fear leads the unrepentant to persist in their wicked ways in the hardness of their hearts despite trembling at their impending doom.

Godly fear, on the other hand, leads one to an appreciation, respect and loving submission to the Lord. There is an awareness that one day he must account for all his ways before a God who is his Master and King. *“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire”* (Heb 12:28-29).

It is with this in mind that Paul seeks to “*persuade men.*” What is Paul trying to “*persuade men*” about? Some think that it refers to the gospel (Barnes). However, in the light of the context, it is likely to do with the integrity of Paul’s ministry. Paul was therefore claiming that he strove to be above board in everything that he did because he knew he was accountable to God.

Alas, there were those who claimed that Paul was beside himself (i.e. mad) in the ministry. This is the common accusation laid upon preachers when hearers take offence at the faithful preaching of God’s Word. Jesus testified that “*a prophet hath no honour in his own country*” (John 4:44). Are you guilty of the same?

Nevertheless, Paul in the integrity of his heart (cf. Psalm 78:72) declared that all he did was for God’s glory and the welfare of the saints. Godly men are often misunderstood. So long as our motive is pure, we need not be downhearted. Only fear God, not man.

THOUGHT: Fear God, not man.

PRAYER: Help me serve in godly fear of Thee, Father.

LORD'S DAY, FEBRUARY 2

2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-17

1 JOHN 4:19

*“For the love of Christ
constraineth us ...”*

CONSTRAINED BY CHRIST'S LOVE

The *“love of Christ”* here refers to Christ's love for man. This love is manifested in Christ coming to this world to die for our sins. He did not have to do so because man deserves eternal death. Yet in His love He willingly submitted to the will of the Father. He came to live on earth and then to die on the Cross of Calvary. This is love most amazing, most divine!

Since Christ was the sinless Lamb of God and the Second Adam, His death on the cross was sufficient to pay for the sins of all mankind. Those who believe in Christ are thus identified with Him in His death and resurrection. They now have a new life in Christ (cf. Rom 6:1-11).

Having been saved by the grace of God, Paul was *“constrained”* (*sunechō*) by Christ's love. This love controlled, governed and impelled Paul to live, a life of full surrender unto Christ. It is the love of Christ that motivated Paul in his service for Christ, and so it must be also for us. *“We love him, because he first loved us”* (1 John 4:19).

Spurgeon aptly commented: “The life of the saved man must never be lived for himself; he is false to his profession if it is so. He must henceforth live as earnestly for God as, aforesaid in his unregeneracy, he lived for himself, for he now has a new life which is not his own, to do with it as he pleases, but it belongs entirely to him who purchased it with his own most precious blood.”

What motivates us in our service for Christ? Is it for fame, power, prestige or gain? These were the motivations of Paul's accusers, but these must not be so with us. Let our motivation for serving Christ be the love of Christ, that we may do all things for the glory of God alone. We can do none other after what Christ has done for us.

“Love so amazing, so divine. Demands my soul, my life, my all” (Isaac Watts).

THOUGHT: What is my motivation for service?

PRAYER: Help me to love Thee with my all, for Christ first loved me.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

GALATIANS 2:20

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature ...”

A NEW CREATURE (I)

2 Corinthians 5:17 describes the nature of one who is a true Christian. A genuine Christian is one who is *“in Christ.”* He has repented of his sin and trusted in Christ as his Lord and Saviour. He is now united to Christ and belongs to His body (1 Cor 12:27).

Paul further described the Christian as one who is a *“new creature.”* The term *“new”* points to how a Christian has a different nature from the past. On the other hand, the term *“creature”* describes how God has created life in the believer.

Before a man believes in Christ, he is spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. His thoughts are opposed to God. His works are like filthy rags before the Lord (Isa 64:6). He lusts for the things of the world: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1 John 2:15-17). Had his sins not been cleansed, what awaits is eternal condemnation in the Lake of Fire. That is what the Bible describes as the *“second death”* (Rev 20:14).

However, now that the believer is saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus, he is no more like the old self, but is a *“new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness”* (Eph 4:24). This new life that he has in Christ is not a life that will serve sin, but one that will serve righteousness and holiness (Rom 6). The *“old things,”* that is, his ungodly ways of sin and wickedness, are now passed away. His life is now realigned with the pursuit of holiness and godliness. He lives now for the glory of God and not for self. What a radical transformation in his life. He will now say with Paul, *“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me”* (Gal 2:20).

THOUGHT: What does it mean to have new life in Christ?

PRAYER: Help me to live for Jesus every day, Father.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 4

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

ROMANS 6:1-11

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature ...”

A NEW CREATURE (II)

Sadly, while there be many who profess to be Christians, yet some may seem to live no differently from the rest of the world. Their outlook is one that is carnal. They are still pursuing worldly interests and lusts. And in excuse, they proclaim, “Let us continue to sin that grace may abound” (cf. Rom 6:1). Where is the evidence of transformation that ought to characterise one who is truly born again?

On the other hand, consider the example of Augustine who used to lead a lascivious life before he truly knew Christ as his Saviour. One day, he met a wanton woman whose company he used to enjoy. This lady, recognising him from afar, began calling out to him, “Augustine, Augustine, it is I!” Upon hearing her voice, he shuddered, and quickly ran away, saying, “It is not I! It is not I!” He was anxious to not have anything to do with his old life.

Another testimony comes from the ministry of Dr John Sung. When people heard the preaching of the gospel and believed, they smashed their wine bottles, threw away their cigarettes and destroyed their gambling paraphernalia. Those who stole returned the money. Rev Timothy Tow testified of the John Sung days, saying:

“... I can recollect those who, like Father, were delivered from their smoking habit. Delivered not only from cigarettes but also delivered from opium. Opium-smoking was a particular social evil of the Chinese race. ... It was said of them that they would rather eat ‘black rice’ than white rice. What a manifestation of the total depravity of the human heart. Praise the Lord, I saw one of these scrawny opium smokers rise up to testify to the saving power of God with a new gleam in his eyes.”

As new creatures in Christ Jesus, let us have nothing to do with our old sin-plagued life. We should instead put on the new man, and aspire after a life of righteousness and true holiness. May your life truly be a new life in Christ!

THOUGHT: “New life in Christ, Abundant and Free”!

PRAYER: Help me to serve righteousness and not sin, O Father.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 5

2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-21

HEBREWS 2:17

*“We pray you in Christ’s stead,
be ye reconciled to God.”*

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

In 2 Corinthians 4, the Apostle described his ministry as the glorious ministry of the New Testament. Here, we see another designation for this ministry: the ministry of reconciliation.

The term *“reconciliation”* (*katallaggē*) refers to a changing of one’s relationship or status before God. Every man outside of Christ is still in his sin. Thus, the wrath of God is upon him and he is accounted an enemy of God. However, when a man is born again, he is cleansed of his sin by the Blood of the Lamb. The wrath of God is no longer upon him. He is no longer an enemy but an adopted child of God in Christ Jesus (cf. Eph 1:5; 2:1-7).

How was Jesus Christ able to reconcile us to God? First, as 100% man, He is able to be our Representative and Substitute. Second, as 100% God, He is without sin. He was sinless at His birth; He was sinless throughout His life on earth; He was sinless at His death (cf. Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:21-22). Thus, Christ was the perfect Sacrifice for our sins at Calvary. He is the spotless Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. *“For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him”* (2 Cor 5:21). He fulfilled the divine requirements of justice, appeasing the wrath of God as the Propitiation of sins. Thus, all who repent of their sin and believe in Christ Jesus can be reconciled to God and find peace with Him.

As Christians, we are now appointed *“ambassadors”* of this message of reconciliation. An ambassador is a distinguished and commissioned representative of a sovereign to serve as his messenger. Thus, as *“ambassadors for Christ,”* we are privileged bearers of the gospel. Let us therefore do our utmost to tell others of Christ. Just like Paul, our message to the world is *“be ye reconciled to God”* (2 Cor 5:20). How are you faring in proclaiming the message of reconciliation?

THOUGHT: It is a privilege and honour to be a witness for Christ.

PRAYER: Father, help me to tell others about Christ.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6

2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-2

ISAIAH 49:8

*“... that ye receive not the
grace of God in vain.”*

RECEIVING THE MINISTRY

One common difficulty Christians face is handling the disappointments that may come in the ministry. The reality is that a faithful servant of the Lord can at the same time be loved and hated by those in his congregation. Those who love the Lord will appreciate his labours among them. However, those who walk in sin and reject God's Word may often regard him as a thorn and a major irritation (2 Cor 6:3). Such are the seeming paradoxes in the service for the Lord.

Paul taught in 2 Corinthians 5:20 that Christians are *“ambassadors for Christ”* to bring the message of reconciliation to others. It is indeed a high and noble calling to be working together with God to bear witness of the gospel to the world (2 Cor 6:1a). Thus, despite the difficulties we face in serving the Lord, we must press on.

It is in this context that the Apostle Paul exhorted that one ought not to receive the grace of God in vain (2 Cor 6:1b). Christians have received the saving grace of God for a purpose: that we may be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-16). Thus, after declaring that we have been saved by grace, Paul added in Ephesians 2:10, *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”* Moreover, every Christian is graciously given at least one spiritual gift that they may use it to build up the body of Christ (1 Cor 12; Eph 4:7-12). Therefore, every man must strive to do the best for his Master, that the grace received from God may not be in vain.

Paul then quoted Isaiah 49:8 to emphasize the urgency of the task at hand. The emphasis is on the words *“now”* and *“accepted time.”* Christ has come and proclaimed salvation. Now that He has ascended into heaven, the task has now been passed to us who are His ambassadors. Since He has commissioned us for this task, He will also grant us the grace to perform it. We must therefore not take this grace for granted, but persevere in the midst of the hardships of service.

THOUGHT: Have I taken the grace of God for granted?

PRAYER: Father, as Thou has called me, so help me to serve Thee.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 7

2 CORINTHIANS 6:3-10

2 TIMOTHY 3:12

*“But in all things ...
in much patience ...”*

THE HARDSHIPS OF MINISTRY

Paul reiterated the importance of being unreproachable in the ministry of the Lord. One's conduct must be worthy of the gospel of Christ that the gospel may not be discredited before the world. Paul was thus determined to maintain his testimony for Christ despite the many hardships in his ministry, that he may stand approved before God in the day of judgment.

Paul then described some of the hardships he had to patiently endure in his ministry :

- *“Afflictions”* describe the various tribulations and troubles, be it physical or emotional, that Paul suffered.
- *“Necessities”* point to inevitable pressures or difficulties in service.
- *“Distresses”* carry the picture of being confined in a narrow space, being pressured on all sides seemingly to the point of no escape.
- *“Stripes”* refer to beatings, whether by hand or by an instrument.
- *“Imprisonments”* refer to the times when Paul was thrown to jail for his faith.
- *“Tumults”* point to the various riots that occurred because of Paul's preaching.
- *“Labours”* describe the unceasing hard work put in by Paul for the ministry of Christ.
- *“Watchings”* refer to sleepless nights.
- *“Fastings”* point to the times when there was lack of food.

The godly will suffer persecution for Christ's sake. Are you prepared?

THOUGHT: Ready to serve, ready to suffer.

PRAYER: Father, grant me the grace to endure sufferings for Christ.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8
2 CORINTHIANS 6:3-10
TITUS 2:12

*“But in all things ...
in much patience ...”*

RESPONSE TO HARDSHIPS

Despite the various difficulties in the ministry, Paul did not compromise in his testimony for Christ. 2 Corinthians 6:6-7 thus describes how Paul handled the situations in a godly manner:

- *“By pureness”* – This describes the absence of any maliciousness or blame in Paul’s thoughts, motives, words and actions.
- *“By knowledge”* – Not just theoretical knowledge but experiential knowledge. Paul was a committed student of the Scriptures and sought wholeheartedly to know God and His Word.
- *“By longsuffering”* – This refers to patience with difficult people.
- *“By kindness”* – This refers to goodness in action. Paul did not return evil with evil, but evil with good.
- *“By the Holy Ghost”* – When we walk in the Spirit, He will help us to produce fruit which glorifies God despite the opposition of the world.
- *“By love unfeigned”* – This talks about love that is genuine and sincere. Thus, there is no pretence or ulterior motive in helping others.
- *“By the word of truth”* – The Holy Scriptures is our sole authority of faith and practice. It is the Bible that we must preach and follow.
- *“By the power of God”* – Paul served not according to the arm of flesh but simply by relying on God.
- *“By the armour of righteousness”* – This describes how Paul put on the whole armour of God to guard himself in the spiritual warfare. Our weapons are spiritual and not carnal (2 Cor 10:4-5).

THOUGHT: Godly living in a fallen world.

PRAYER: Father, teach me patience in the midst of difficulties.

LORD'S DAY, FEBRUARY 9

2 CORINTHIANS 6:3-10

2 TIMOTHY 3:12

*“By honour and dishonour,
by evil report and good report.”*

THE MINISTRY'S CONTRADICTION

As stated in our earlier devotions, the faithful pastor can easily find himself to be the most loved and yet most hated person in the community. This seeming contradiction is beautifully captured by Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:8-10.

Verse 8: *“By honour and dishonour ...”* – The godly would honour those whom the Lord has set as faithful overseers in their lives, for that reflects the high regard they have for the Word of God. On the other hand, the ungodly would dishonour faithful pastors, for they have no regard for the Word of God. Similarly, those who appreciate Paul's ministry would praise God for the blessings they have received through Paul. On the other hand, the opponents hated the ministry of Paul so much they gave an evil report of Paul, accusing him of lies, even when he had been truthful in all manner of speech and conduct.

Verse 9: *“As unknown, and yet well known ...”* – There are times when Paul seemed to be the most despised among men, and yet he was well-known. There were also times when his life seemed to be in danger, and yet each time the Lord preserved his life.

Verse 10: *“As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing ...”* – There are many things that can cause a pastor's heart to sorrow. In the case of the Corinthian church, Paul often had to handle the disappointment of the believers turning towards carnality rather than spiritual things. Yet at the same time, when men turn to the truth, the heart of Paul rejoiced. There is also the great joy of knowing that Christ will not forsake those who are His own. Therefore, though Paul at times found himself poor in the eyes of the world, yet he praised the Lord for how he had his all-sufficiency in Christ. Christ used this “poor” man to provide spiritual things to others so that they may be spiritually “rich.” How wonderful is the working of our Lord!

THOUGHT: It is the Master's commendation that matters.

PRAYER: Father, teach me how to handle the challenges of the ministry.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10

2 CORINTHIANS 6:11-13

2 CORINTHIANS 7:3

*“Our mouth is open unto you,
our heart is enlarged.”*

PASTORAL AFFECTION

“O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged” (2 Cor 6:11). This verse is the thrust of the epistle, for here, Paul laid open his heart for all to see. He was not an unmoved, straight-jacket theologian, but a caring Apostle who dearly loved the flock of God.

First, consider who the objects of Paul’s affections were. They were none other than the Corinthian Christians. The city of Corinth was well-known for being the centre of sexual promiscuity and wanton behaviour. Nevertheless, God saved some in this city of debauchery, calling some out of darkness into His marvellous light.

Sadly, while the church may have grown in numbers, they were struggling spiritually. There was a carnal and sectarian spirit in the church. When the Apostle Paul tried to correct them on certain issues, they treated him dishonourably.

Having gone through such painful rejection, Paul could have chosen to shut up and keep quiet. But he did not turn away from the petulant Corinthian Christians. Paul’s love for Christ and God’s people compelled him to continue reaching out to the Corinthian Christians. Thus, he continued to speak freely and affectionately to the Corinthians, opening his heart to them in love.

On the other hand, the Corinthians were slow to respond in the same way to Paul. Thus, Paul pointed out that they were not to be straitened with respect to him and his associates. The term *“straitened”* (*stenochoreisthe*) has the idea of narrowness, and is the opposite of *“enlarged”* (*platunō*). Paul was asking the Corinthians to show the same affection to him, just as he strove to show them affection. The desire is for an open honest relationship among God’s people.

In application, how is your relationship with your pastor? Let there be genuine affection and love between pastor and the flock of God.

THOUGHT: What is the joy of every faithful pastor?

PRAYER: Father, teach me to love my church leaders and Thy people.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 11

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-7:1

2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-15

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers ...”

WHAT IS BIBLICAL SEPARATION?

Biblical separation is God’s mandate for Christians not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14-7:1), and to have no association with all that is sinful, wicked and false. This doctrine finds its basis in the holiness of God, as well as the purpose of the church. As Christians we separate from all sin and unbelief because it is God’s nature to do so. And as an assembly that has been called out from the world (*ekklesia*), and having been afforded the title of saints (literally: holy ones), it is therefore also our duty to remain unspotted by the world.

Biblical separation involves two aspects:

1. Personal separation. This refers to the believer’s willing removal of oneself from all sin and uncleanness. He will make good effort to abstain from all evil, even appearances of evil (1 Thess 5:22), and not love the things of the world (1 John 2:15-17). Positively speaking, he will seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt 6:33). His mind will be on things above and not on things of the earth (Col 3:1-2).
2. Corporate Separation.
 - a. In the Old Testament, God commanded the nation of Israel to be separate from all idolatry, and from the rest of the heathen nations (Deut 7:1-11). They were to be a national spiritual witness for Jehovah to the nations around them. *“And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation”* (Exod 19:6a)
 - b. This could involve a disciplinary measure of a Christian or a church against another professing believer. See 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 14-15; 1 Corinthians 5.

This could involve a dissociation of a Christian or a church from another church. For example: a church may dissociate herself from other churches that are involved in the ecumenical movement.

THOUGHT: Biblical separation is a command, not an option.

PRAYER: Father, keep me unspotted from the world.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 12

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-7:1

DEUTERONOMY 7:1-11

*“And be not conformed
to this world ...”*

THE COMMAND TO SEPARATE

Separation is not an option but a command. This is evidenced by the five commands in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1:

1. *“Be ye not unequally yoked”* (6:14)
2. *“Come out from among them”*
(6:17a)
3. *“Be ye separate”* (6:17b)
4. *“Touch not the unclean thing”*
(6:17c)
5. *“Let us cleanse ourselves”* (7:1)

The command to not be unequally yoked derives its picture from an Old Testament legislation. *“Thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with divers seeds: lest the fruit of thy seed which thou hast sown, and the fruit of thy vineyard, be defiled. Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together”* (Deut 22:9-10).

Why did God forbid any mixing of seeds for sowing or animals for ploughing? The reason lies not in the seeds or the animals. Rather, the statutes serve as a pictorial lesson to the children of Israel that they must remain separate from the nations around them (cf. Deut 7:1-11). They are not to worship their gods, neither are they to engage in their ungodly ways.

On the other hand, separation from unbelievers does not equate to isolationism. In John 17:15, Christ said, *“I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.”* Christ was referring to how believers should be separate from the world’s system and philosophy, yet continue to witness to those who are in the world.

In application, a church must fulfil her evangelistic duty to reach out to the lost. At the same time, she must also take care not to bring into the church any worldly philosophies or practices. The church which does so will surely die.

THOUGHT: A believer must not join in marriage with an unbeliever.

PRAYER: Father, teach me what it means to be separated unto Thee.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-7:1

1 CORINTHIANS 3:16; 6:19

*“Ye are the temple of
the living God ...”*

THE REASON TO SEPARATE

The first reason for the need of separation between a believer and an unbeliever is communicated via five rhetorical questions from verses 14 to 16. In each question, a contrast is being made between two opposing groups:

1. Righteousness versus Unrighteousness
2. Light versus Darkness
3. Christ versus Belial
4. Believer versus Unbeliever
5. Temple of God versus Idols

Observe how the two categories in each question simply do not mix. This highlights the point that there must be no unity between the believer and the unbeliever.

The second reason involves the sanctity of the saints. In verse 16, Paul describes the Corinthian Christians as the “*temple*” (*naos*) of the living God (2 Cor 6:16). The term “*naos*” refers to the inner sanctuary of the temple where the glory of God is supposed to dwell. Paul had earlier used this expression in 1 Corinthians to describe the church (1 Cor 3:16) and the individual Christian (1 Cor 6:19). Christians, collectively and individually, are expected to reflect the holiness and glory of God. If sin and worldliness is present, how can God be glorified?

Paul quoted from Leviticus 26:12 and Ezekiel 37:27 to elaborate his point. “*I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*” As the temple of God, God is dwelling in the midst of His people and is presiding over their activities. Thus, the people of God must not be lax in their conduct and allow sin to dwell in the camp. Similarly, the Holy Spirit indwells every believer. It behoves us that we be diligent not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30). Let us therefore take care to keep ourselves unspotted from the world (James 1:27).

THOUGHT: My body is the temple of the living God.

PRAYER: Father, help me be devoted to a life of holiness.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 14

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-7:1

2 CHRONICLES 19:2

“And touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you.”

THE FRUIT OF SEPARATION

The failure to separate from sin and unbelief invokes God’s anger and wrath. When Jehoshaphat aligned himself with the ungodly Ahab, God sent Jehu the son of Hanani to warn him – *“Shouldst thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the LORD”* (2 Chron 19:2). Jehoshaphat’s trysts with Ahab resulted in his son Jehoram marrying Ahab’s daughter Athaliah. This is the same Athaliah who sought to exterminate the royal seed of David after the death of her son Ahaziah (2 Kings 11:1). Such is the tragedy of compromise. Compromise never pays.

On the other hand, there is great reward for those who practise biblical separation. Two such rewards are highlighted below:

1. The Blessing of Fellowship – *“I will receive you”* (2 Cor 6:17). The picture of the word *“receive”* is of a welcome being extended to a friend or guest. Here, it refers to God welcoming us into a gracious fellowship with Him.
2. The Blessing of Sonship – *“And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty”* (2 Cor 6:18). When we obey the command of separation in faith, we get to experience the fullness of our relationship with our Heavenly Father. He knows our needs and will take care of us. Just like Daniel and his three friends who were blessed by God as they refused to be defiled with the king’s meat (Dan 1), so too will the experience be for the saint who is committed to remain undefiled for the Lord’s sake.

“The doctrine of separation is a doctrine of preservation. Like white blood cells in our body that seek and destroy any invading virus or bacterium, separation keeps the Church pure and free from false teachers and heresies” (Tow and Khoo). Let us therefore keep ourselves pure for the Lord. There is great spiritual reward for them who do so.

THOUGHT: Compromise never pays.

PRAYER: Father, help me to walk in Thy way.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 15

2 CORINTHIANS 7:1

JAMES 1:27

*“Let us cleanse ourselves
from all filthiness ...”*

KEEP YOURSELF PURE

Paul brought a fitting conclusion to his grand treatise on separation. First, he directed the mind of the readers to the great spiritual blessings in store for those who are committed to separation. Those who obey God will experience sweet fellowship with Christ. They will also experience the care and guidance of God the Father which is reserved for His children. Surely the theological basis of separation and the blessing attached to the command ought to grip the heart of God’s children to pursue after purity!

Paul then proceeded to exhort the Corinthians to “*cleanse*” themselves “*from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit.*” This cleansing brings in mind the ceremonial cleansing in the Old Testament from ritual impurity. Whenever God’s people were ceremonially unclean, they had to confess their sins and purify themselves before entering into His presence. The terms “*flesh and spirit*” would indicate how ceremonial purity alone would not suffice for the Old Testament worshippers – they must also be pure in heart and conduct. Thus, they must come before the Lord with a humble spirit, confessing their sins. It is only in purity that they can meet with the Lord. Similarly, the Christian must also be of clean hands and pure heart if he desires to approach God.

Paul then concluded that every Christian should be “*perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*” “For if the fear of God influences us, we will not be so much disposed to indulge ourselves, nor will there be a bursting forth of that audacity of wantonness, which showed itself among the Corinthians. For how does it happen, that many delight themselves so much in outward idolatry, and haughtily defend so gross a vice, unless it be, that they think that they mock God with impunity? If the fear of God had dominion over them, they would immediately, on the first moment, leave off all cavils, without requiring to be constrained to it by any disputations” (Calvin). Let us then be committed to a life of holiness, for the Lord saith, “*Be ye holy; for I am holy*” (1 Pet 1:16).

THOUGHT: How pure is my life?

PRAYER: Father, help me to be committed to a life of purity.

LORD'S DAY, FEBRUARY 16

2 CORINTHIANS 7:2-4

2 CORINTHIANS 6:11-13

“Receive us; we have wronged no man ...”

AN APPEAL FOR AFFECTION

Paul now returned to his theme in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13. Once again, he declared his love and concern for the Corinthian Christians. This time round, he declared that the Corinthians were *“in our hearts to die and live with you”* (2 Cor 7:2). Paul was proclaiming that whether he lived or died, it was for the benefit of the Corinthians.

Paul's heart was that of a true pastor. Just like our wonderful Shepherd Jesus Christ who was willing to lay down His life for the sheep (John 10:15), the Apostle Paul was also willing to lay down his life for the flock of God. *“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:13).

On the other hand, the Corinthian Christians had initially narrowed their hearts towards the Apostle Paul even though Paul had done no wrong to them. They may have not liked what Paul had said and done, but he had conducted himself righteously in the sight of God and man. He had the spiritual welfare of the Corinthian Christians in his heart. If only they could continue to make room in their hearts to receive him!

The experience of Paul is perhaps the experience of many a pastor. A situation may have arisen which requires warning and admonishment. Alas, the faithful preaching is not well-received, and the pastor ends up with many brickbats and hurtful words. How the pastor must desire that the detractors may enlarge their hearts to him too.

Let us seek to be the joy of faithful pastors rather than their grief. Thankfully, the Corinthian Christians repented to the joy of the Apostle Paul. Heed the injunction of Hebrews 13:17: *“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”*

THOUGHT: Let there be godly affection among the brethren.

PRAYER: Father, grant me true and sincere affection for the brethren.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17

2 CORINTHIANS 7:5-7

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-5

*“God, that comforteth those
that are cast down ...”*

COMFORT IN THE MINISTRY

We have seen in our previous devotions that ministry for the Lord can at times be full of heartbreaks, sorrows and distresses. Paul summarized this experience in verse 5, *“For, when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears”* (2 Cor 7:5). The continued absence of Titus, whom Paul had sent to Corinth, was of great concern to him. Why was Titus absent? Could it be that the situation at Corinth had worsened, and Titus was spitefully entreated? Or perhaps Titus had met with some danger along the way to meet up with Paul? These and other cares of the ministry caused *“fears”* to well-up in the heart of Paul.

Moreover, Paul also had to contend with *“fightings,” “contentions”* and *“conflicts”* (*machē*). He was in Macedonia, where he had previously caused a ruckus for casting a spirit of divination out of a girl. This act caused him and Silas to be thrown into prison (Acts 16:16-24). There were probably still factions of the populace who did not welcome the Apostle Paul and desired to get rid of him.

Nevertheless, the *“God of all comfort”* (2 Cor 1:3) knows when to comfort our hearts. His consolation is always just on time. The fears of Paul were soon assuaged when Titus finally returned. He rejoiced in the safe return of his co-labourer and the renewed fellowship he had with him.

Moreover, Titus brought good news from afar. The congregation at Corinth had responded positively to the severe letter which Paul had written. First, there was an *“earnest desire”* (i.e. zeal) to make right that which they had done wrong, and to seek a restoration of relationship with Paul. Second, there was a true *“mourning”* for their sins before the Lord. Third, there was a *“fervent mind”* and sincere longing for the Apostle Paul which had previously been absent. This cheered the Apostle Paul, for it meant his patience in the ministry had not been in vain. *“As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country”* (Prov 25:25). God’s comfort was just on time!

THOUGHT: A true pastor desires spiritual growth in God’s people.

PRAYER: Father, comfort me amidst the difficulties in service.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18

2 CORINTHIANS 7:8-13

MATTHEW 27:3-5

“... but the sorrow of the world worketh death.”

A GODLY SORROW (I)

Paul revealed in 2 Corinthians 7:8 that he took no joy in writing the severe letter to the Corinthian Christians. He did not mete out his rebuke like a harsh disciplinarian who seeks destruction. Rather, he was like a loving father disciplining his child. Thus, he had no regrets writing the severe letter even if it meant making the Corinthian Christians sorrowful for a moment, for it was for their spiritual welfare. Paul's decision was vindicated, for the Lord led the Corinthians into godly sorrow for their sins. It was a godly sorrow, for it led to a true repentance of their sins.

On the other hand, the Scriptures also teach of a worldly sorrow over sins that leads to death. One example of this is Judas Iscariot. *“Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself”* (Matt 27:3-5). Though Judas sorrowed for his sins and regretted his actions, he did not go to Jesus for the cleansing of his sins. Instead, in the midst of despair, he decided to take his own life. This sorrow led him not to a saving faith and genuine repentance, but to death by suicide.

A second example of such worldly sorrow is that of King Saul. Saul was told of his coming death in the battlefield after his ill-conceived visit to the witch of Endor (1 Sam 28). While he was in the battlefield, he was heavily wounded by archers. Instead of repenting of his sins, Saul chose to fall upon his sword and take his life. In his pride, Saul chose to commit suicide (in an attempt to control the time of his death) than to genuinely repent of his sins. The child of God must never have such a petulant attitude towards his God.

THOUGHT: Have I truly repented of my sins?

PRAYER: Father, forgive me of my sins and restore me.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19

2 CORINTHIANS 7:8-13

PSALM 51

*“For godly sorrow worketh
repentance to salvation ...”*

A GODLY SORROW (II)

Yesterday, we saw the worldly sorrow of Judas Iscariot and King Saul for their sins which ultimately led to their deaths. Their sorrow stands in contrast with David's in Psalm 51. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. To cover his tracks, he had Uriah killed in the fiercest point of battle. Nevertheless, when he was confronted by the prophet Nathan, he did not push the blame but wholly admitted his sin. Psalm 51 records his genuine sorrow and repentance of his sins:

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest” (Ps 51:1-4).

The Corinthian Christians had a similar response when confronted by Paul in the severe letter. *“For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter” (2 Cor 7:11).* They were eager and diligent to deal with the spiritual issues addressed by Paul in the severe letter. They were not like Saul or Judas Iscariot who chose the route to death. Rather, they sought to make themselves right unto a restored fellowship with God and His saints.

Are there any sins which you have not repented of? Truly confess your sins and repent. There is always forgiveness with the Lord. Be like David, not like Judas Iscariot.

THOUGHT: Have I truly repented of my sins?

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 139:23.)

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20

2 CORINTHIANS 7:13-16

PHILIPPIANS 2:12

“I rejoice therefore that I have confidence in you in all things.”

A PROVEN CONFIDENCE

Even though the Corinthian Christians had their clashes with the Apostle Paul, Paul nevertheless “boasted” of the virtues of the Corinthians to Titus before sending him to Corinth. Perhaps this was done to comfort the heart of Titus who may have been concerned about making the trip because of the ill-reputation of the Corinthian church. Nevertheless, Paul was not lying to Titus when he put forth these virtues to Titus, for he truly regarded many in the Corinthian church as genuine believers in Christ. This can be seen from the outset of 1 Corinthians where Paul declared the Corinthian church as “*the church of God*” at Corinth. Thus, Paul was confident that as genuine believers in Christ, the Holy Spirit would work in the lives of the Corinthians and help them to spiritually mature in Christ Jesus. How happy therefore was the Apostle Paul to hear that the Corinthian Christians had warmly received Titus into their midst and had refreshed Titus’ spirit. This served as a vindication of Paul’s “boasting” that there was no lying nor exaggeration when he promoted the virtues of the Corinthian saints.

What caused Titus to be spiritually refreshed was how the Corinthian Christians reacted to his presence and exhortations. First, the Corinthian Christians received Titus in “*fear and trembling*” instead of reviling him. This trembling was due to a recognition that Titus was a minister of the Lord, and that he had come to proclaim the truth of God’s Word. This reveals the reverence which the Corinthians had towards God’s Word. As further evidence of their heart for God’s Word, the Corinthian Christians displayed a willingness to obey Titus’ scriptural commands. This was a big difference from how the Corinthian Christians had reacted to Paul. Seeing this change in attitude towards God’s Word warmed his heart and gave him renewed joy and confidence that the Corinthian Christians had repented and were seeking to glorify God.

The way a church treats faithful preachers reveals their heart for God’s Word. What about you?

THOUGHT: Am I ready to obey God’s Word?

PRAYER: Grant me a heart that is ready to obey Thee, O Father.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 21

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-7

MARK 12:41-44

“Their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.”

MODEL EXAMPLES OF GIVING

(I)

2 Corinthians 8 begins a new section on the theology of giving. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-3, the Apostle Paul started a fund to relieve the poor saints in Jerusalem. However, the giving was delayed, perhaps due to the manifold problems which besieged the Corinthian church. Therefore, Paul exhorted the Corinthian Christians to complete giving to the relief fund which they had begun.

In order to encourage the Corinthian Christians to complete their giving unto the poor saints in Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul cited the good examples of the churches in Macedonia (eg: Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea).

The region of Macedonia had seen numerous long wars in history. Due to the toils of these wars, the region of Macedonia was not rich compared to its neighbours. Moreover, the churches in Macedonia had to endure much persecution for the gospel's sake. Hints of these troubles can be seen in the other epistles. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Paul wrote, *“And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost.”* He added in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15, *“For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews: Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men.”*

Nevertheless, the Macedonian Christians were able to rise above their circumstances to give to the relief fund for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Instead of considering their own needs, they empathized with the brethren in Jerusalem and gave generously to them. This was Christian-giving manifested out of God's grace in the hearts of the Macedonians. They were of the same spirit as the widow who gave her all to the Lord with her mites (Mark 12:41-44). Everything we have belongs to God.

THOUGHT: What is the proper use of possessions in this life?

PRAYER: Father, all I have belongeth to Thee.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 22

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-7

ROMANS 12:8

“Their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.”

MODEL EXAMPLES OF GIVING (II)

Concerning the attitude and extent of the Macedonians' giving, Paul recorded that *“beyond their power they were willing of themselves”* (2 Cor 8:3). Some health-and-wealth gospel churches teach that Christians must *“give till it hurts”* in order to receive the rich blessings of the Lord. This is a twisting of the good teaching in this passage of Scripture. Paul was not asking Christians to give beyond what they were able. Rather Paul was pointing to the willingness of the Macedonians to consecrate everything that they had unto the Lord including their money. If they were given more in their hands, they would have also put these resources to good use for the Lord's glory. Thus, 2 Corinthians 8:3 is a wonderful testimony of what it means to exercise good stewardship in the Lord.

The liberality of the Macedonian Christians ought to provoke the Corinthian Christians to do likewise. The Corinthian Christians were far more well-off economically compared to the Macedonians. However, they were so distracted by their internal problems that they had forgotten their duty to help the needy brethren.

Herein is a warning to us that when worldliness creeps into our lives and we stray from the Lord, our giving to the Lord's work will also be affected. Moreover, this *“giving”* ought to be viewed as a *“returning”* because all that we have belongs to God. Is not God the owner of the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps 50:10)? We are but stewards of the resources that are placed in our hands. However, when we are rich, there is a tendency to forget that it is the Lord who has granted us power to get wealth (Deut 8:17). *“But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth ...”* (Deut 8:18a).

When we truly surrender all to the Lord, we will find that the Lord will grant us grace to consider others before ourselves. We will then be able to give with simplicity, as commanded by the Lord (Rom 12:8).

THOUGHT: How can I give joyfully with simplicity?

PRAYER: Father, teach me to abound in giving.

LORD'S DAY MORNING, FEBRUARY
23

2 CORINTHIANS 8:8-9

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

*“... he became poor, that ye through
his poverty might be rich.”*

JESUS, THE MASTER GIVER

Although Paul could easily issue a command for the Corinthian Christians to contribute to the relief fund, he preferred they give cheerfully and willingly from their heart. Thus, he urged them to consider the example of the Macedonian Christians, hoping that the giving of the Macedonians would provoke the Corinthians to also “*prove*” their love for the saints.

The example *par excellence* however, would have to be the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. “... *that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich*” (2 Cor 8:9). This points to the humility of Christ in His incarnation. Though Christ was infinitely rich as God, yet He humbled Himself to come down to earth as a man, that man may find salvation from his sins. “*Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*” (Phil 2:5-8). Through the sacrificial giving of Christ, those who believe are now spiritually rich, having been blessed “*with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*” (Eph 1:3). Indeed, through the poverty of Christ we have become rich. Thus, Calvin said, “The Son of God became the Son of Man so that the sons of men may become the sons of God.”

Since Christ has given of Himself so that we may have the gracious gift of salvation, surely the Corinthian Christians ought to do the same for the poor saints in Jerusalem in their need. Thus, the Apostle Paul urged them to consider what Christ had done for them, and prove their love by following in the same self-sacrificial spirit of Christ. They ought to place the needs of others above themselves.

Christ has set the example in giving.
Will you follow?

THOUGHT: Christ has given all of Himself for me. What about me?

PRAYER: Father, may Thou give me the mind of Christ.

LORD'S DAY EVENING, FEBRUARY
23

2 CORINTHIANS 8:10-15

EXODUS 16:19-21

*"... your abundance may be
a supply for their want ..."*

CHURCHES MUST HELP ONE ANOTHER

Paul reiterated that he did not mean for the Corinthian Christians to give beyond their means, unlike what some "prosperity gospel" churches would teach today. What the Lord desires is for us to be good and willing stewards of that which He has bestowed upon us. As we give cheerfully according to the means which the Lord has blessed us with, the Lord can use us to be a channel of blessings unto others. It is not the size of the gift that matters but the attitude and motive in giving.

Paul was not asking the Corinthian Christians to be impoverished so that the Jerusalem Christians may be enriched (2 Cor 8:13). Rather, Paul was urging the Corinthian Christians to consider how their current state of abundance presented a wonderful opportunity to help the poor saints in Jerusalem out of Christian charity. Paul's mention of the principle of equality hearkens back to the example of the saints just after Pentecost. *"And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need"* (Acts 2:44-45). This is not a promotion of communism, but rather a teaching of genuine concern for the needs of others. The saints' possessions were meant to bless others and promote the kingdom of Christ. Thus, they willingly parted with their possessions as their brethren had a need. The Corinthians were to consider this and follow in their footsteps.

Paul then quoted Exodus 16:18 in support of this principle of equality. The historical scenario of this verse involves the gathering of manna. Every man was to gather what he needed. If he gathered beyond his need, the excess would breed worms and stink (Exod 16:20). The principle here is that we must be good stewards of the resources which God has given to us. If we do not use those resources wisely, then all may be in vain. The Lord may even take them away from us, for what use is there for us to have those possessions if we do not use them for God's glory? These possessions would be just like the excess manna that stank. May we be good stewards in the sight of God.

THOUGHT: Have I used my possessions wisely for the Lord?

PRAYER: Father, grant me wisdom to be a good steward.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24

2 CORINTHIANS 8:16-24

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12

*“Providing for honest things
... in the sight of men.”*

ACCOUNTABILITY IN CHURCH FINANCES (I)

Every church is to be careful in handling her finances. First, these funds are the monies of God’s people given with the trust and intention that it be used for the extension of God’s kingdom. Second, these funds belong to God. Thus, the church finances must be employed in a manner that is consistent with God’s Word. It must never be abused, wasted or used in support of unlawful causes.

The passage today demonstrates the carefulness of Paul in handling the contributions of the Corinthian Christians for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Paul’s principle in the handling of public funds is stated in 2 Corinthians 8:20-21, *“Avoiding this, that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered by us: Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.”*

Paul was wholly committed to be blameless, accountable and transparent with regards to church funds. He was keen to avoid any occasion for suspicion or accusation in financial matters. Once suspicion in such matters is aroused, it will be difficult to eradicate for future collections. Kent wisely observed that “anyone in the limelight, as Paul was, quickly learns that his prominence makes him an obvious target of critics, especially in financial matters.” Moreover, there were many opponents of Paul in the Corinthian church that were only too eager to attack him. The collection of vast amounts of funds could easily be a trigger for false rumours against Paul. Precaution must be taken to make sure that the collection was not misunderstood. Financial integrity is the key.

To ensure transparency and accountability, Paul sent three men to oversee the collection. These were men who were trusted by the churches. We will study the character of these three men tomorrow.

THOUGHT: The monies in the church belong to God.

PRAYER: Father, help me to be careful in managing finances.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25

2 CORINTHIANS 8:16-24

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12

*“Providing for honest things
... in the sight of men.”*

ACCOUNTABILITY IN CHURCH FINANCES (II)

The three men chosen to oversee the collection were as follows:

- Titus (2 Cor 8:16-17). Here was a man in whom the Lord had placed a great passion for the Corinthians. Titus was more than ready to go, and was thus a most suitable man to be sent to urge the Corinthian Christians to make true their pledge of aiding the poor saints in Jerusalem.
- The brother (2 Cor 8:18-21). The presence of the definite article “*the*” indicates that this brother was one who was well-known among the churches for his faithfulness and trustworthiness. His godly reputation made him well-positioned for the task of the collection. He was also one who was elected and appointed by the churches to make the collection. The fact that he was chosen by the churches and not by Paul would absolve Paul of any charge of undue collaboration with Titus to solicit funds from the Corinthians.
- Our brother (2 Cor 8:22). He was also chosen by the churches, and thus served to be the other neutral party in the band of three collectors. He was one who had proved to be diligent in many things. In other words, he had shown himself to be zealous and faithful in many occasions. Thus, he was accounted to be suitable in the collection of the relief fund from the Corinthians.

Observe that these men were not chosen haphazardly, but were men recognised for their spiritual maturity and integrity. Spiritually immature men should stay clear of handling church finances.

Church leaders today must do their part to ensure that there be no suspicion of misappropriation, misuse or wastage of church funds. The collection and use of these funds must be according to the law of the land. They must be blameless in every aspect of handling finances.

THOUGHT: Only spiritually mature men should handle finances. Why?

PRAYER: Father, help my church to be wise in handling finances.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26

2 CORINTHIANS 8:16-24

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12

*“Providing for honest things
... in the sight of men.”*

PROPER USE OF CHURCH FINANCES

What then is the proper use of church funds? The Bible teaches us that the gifts from God’s people be used as follows:

- For the support of missionary and gospel work, and the edification of the saints (Phil 4:15-16; 1 Cor 9:4-11)
- In support of the poor and needy (2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15:26)
- The support of church workers and pastors (1 Tim 5:17-18; 1 Cor 9:11-14)

Churches must take financial integrity seriously. God’s money must be put to its proper use of promoting the cause of Christ. To ensure transparency and accountability in the process, all collections should be meticulously recorded and reviewed. Major financial decisions should also be declared honestly and openly to the congregation. The church leadership must be prepared to explain these financial decisions in the light of God’s Word.

The handling of church finances is a serious matter. No trustee of the funds should ever handle them carelessly for they belong to God. Any church leadership that is not prepared to handle funds cleanly, responsibly, transparently and biblically will find itself spiritually disqualified. If the leadership of a church cannot be trusted to handle earthly monies, how can it be trusted to look after the souls of men. May our churches be found to handle her funds in the fear of the LORD!

Kent summed up this section well: “From this collection ... the modern reader can learn the importance of a right attitude toward money. The Christian is a steward of God’s property. He must be sensitive to the wisest use of the goods which he has been entrusted, and be aware of the needs of his fellow members in the body of Christ.”

THOUGHT: How should I use my resources to benefit others?

PRAYER: Father, direct me to use my finances rightly.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27

2 CORINTHIANS 9:1-5

2 CORINTHIANS 9:15

“... ye may be ready.”

BE READY TO GIVE

It is interesting that Paul thought it superfluous to write to the Corinthian Christians about giving to the poor saints in Jerusalem. This was because he had earlier witnessed their willingness to give to this cause. However, due to internal issues, the Corinthian Christians were distracted from contributing to the fund. Thus, Paul was now anxious that they should complete the collection.

To encourage the Corinthian Christians in the completion of their task, he revealed that he had earlier boasted to the Macedonians about the Corinthians' generous spirit of giving. The example of the Corinthians provoked the Macedonians to give effusively to the Jerusalem saints. In fact, the Macedonians were so moved in their heart that they became more diligent than the Corinthians in their giving.

In addition, since Paul had used the Corinthians as an example, what shame it would be if the Corinthian church did not complete the collection. Therefore, it was necessary for the Corinthian Christians to be ready to give when the collection was made. This readiness to give was not to be just in word, but also in action.

Similarly, when the call comes for you to give to the Lord's work, are you ready to give? Do not let it be by word only, but be always ready to give. Consider what great privilege it is that we can play a part towards contributing to the Lord's work. When that work is completed, the window of opportunity to contribute will be gone. Even if we want to contribute, it will be too late. Consider this scenario in the building of the tabernacle. *“And they spake unto Moses, saying, The people bring much more than enough for the service of the work, which the LORD commanded to make. And Moses gave commandment, and they caused it to be proclaimed throughout the camp, saying, Let neither man nor woman make any more work for the offering of the sanctuary. So the people were restrained from bringing”* (Exod 36:5-6). Therefore, let us hasten to give when it is time to give.

THOUGHT: Am I ready to give when the Lord demands it?

PRAYER: Father, may I be ready to contribute to Thy work.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28

2 CORINTHIANS 9:5

DEUTERONOMY 5:21

*“... that the same might be ready,
... and not of covetousness.”*

HINDRANCE TO GIVING: COVETOUSNESS

Paul now warned of one sin that would hinder them from completing their giving: covetousness. This term “*covetousness*” points to an excessive greediness and a grudging stingy spirit towards giving. While the amount of giving was never an issue, the Corinthian Christians must take care that the gift did not appear miserly and insincere.

We can become covetous when we love our possessions more than God. Some think that they can be in two camps at the same time: loving the world and loving God. However, the Bible says that no man can serve two masters, for he will either love the one and hate the other. One cannot serve God and Mammon (Matt 6:24). Alas, in a world that focuses on getting rich quickly, it is so easy to put our trust in our perishing possessions. This causes our love for God to grow dim. When we do not love God, we will find it hard to part with our possessions. Consequently, our giving towards God will also be lacking.

The Bible also says that the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10). One way in which this evil manifests itself is in a person’s refusal to help those who are in need. *“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin”* (James 4:17). In the case of the Corinthian Christians, it would be the grudging refusal to help the poor saints in Jerusalem. Take care not to have the same spirit.

What then is the cure for covetousness? 1 Timothy 6:6 has the answer: *“But godliness with contentment is great gain.”* To be godly is to pursue after Christ-likeness. When we are walking close to the Lord, the things of the world will grow strangely dim. We will view possessions rightly in the light of the Scriptures: that the possessions are only useful if we use them to serve the Lord. Thus, this guards us from a heart of covetousness. Consequently, we will learn to be generous in our giving.

THOUGHT: Do I have a covetous heart?

PRAYER: Father, guard my heart from covetousness.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 29

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-11

ACTS 20:35

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

THE BLESSEDNESS OF GIVING

(I)

The Apostle Paul then dwelt on the blessedness of giving. First, he drew an agricultural imagery which was familiar to the Corinthian Christians. A farmer who sows few seeds will naturally reap a small harvest. On the other hand, the hardworking farmer who sows more seeds will have a larger yield. Similarly, the one who refuses to give will receive little blessing, but the one who abounds in giving will receive a rich blessing.

The second principle highlighted by the Apostle Paul is the attitude of giving. We are to be *“cheerful”* givers. The Greek word for “cheer” is where we get the English term “hilarious.” This points to giving that is with a happy and cheerful disposition. Why should the believer be cheerful in his giving? Because he understands that all he has belongs to God, and his heart is cheered when his possessions are put to proper use to glorify God. Since he understands that all that he has belongs to God, he is more than happy to return them to God. On the other hand, a lack of cheerfulness indicates a heart that is grudging and covetous.

Our attitude reveals our heart for the Lord. What is your spirit when you return your tithes and offerings unto God?

The third principle taught in this passage is that God is no debtor to man. “When we give, God takes notice. He will not be indebted to us (and will never be). He promises to supply all our needs. This includes physical and spiritual needs” (Khoo).

Acts 20:35 restates the passage in this way: *“I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.”* Society often teaches us the reverse, that one should seek to receive rather than to give. Scripture, on the other hand, teaches us to put others before self, just like Jesus Christ. We will receive a rich spiritual blessing when we walk so in the Lord.

THOUGHT: It is more blessed to give than to receive.

PRAYER: Father, teach me to give cheerfully.

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 1

2 CORINTHIANS 9:12-15

ROMANS 15:26-27

*"Thanks be unto God
for his unspeakable gift."*

THE BLESSEDNESS OF GIVING

(II)

When there is sincere giving, not only is the giver blessed but also the recipient. In the case of the Jerusalem saints, they were very much cheered when they received the contributions from the Macedonian and Corinthian churches. They were greatly relieved from their poverty by the funds that were given in love by the saints. *"For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem. It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things"* (Rom 15:26-27).

However, Paul looked beyond the physical relief to the spiritual. When the Jerusalem saints received the generous help, it led them to praise God for how the Lord had used the Gentile churches as instruments to lovingly bless them. This was only possible because of the Gospel of Christ which transformed men from being selfish creatures to selfless saints. The cheerful giving of the Gentile churches led to effusive worship and praise of God. All glory be unto His matchless name!

Paul then gave thanks to God for the *"unspeakable gift."* What is this gift that is too wonderful for words? Some believe this gift to be the generous relief received by the Jerusalem saints. Others however take this gift to be the exceeding grace in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 9:14). The fact that the *"gospel of Christ"* is mentioned in 2 Corinthians 9:13 makes the latter to be more likely. *"Inasmuch as Paul called this gift 'indescribable', any lesser identification than the one given above seems out of place"* (Kent).

We thank God that the Corinthian Christians heeded the exhortations of Paul and gave liberally to the Jerusalem saints as seen in Romans 15:26-27. Let us learn from the Macedonian and Corinthian Christians and be a blessing to others by our giving.

THOUGHT: "Do something good for Jesus every day" (Timothy Tow).

PRAYER: Make me a channel of blessing, O Father.

MONDAY, MARCH 2

2 CORINTHIANS 10:1-2

2 TIMOTHY 2:24-26

“... by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.”

MINISTERING WITH MEEKNESS

While many in the Corinthian church received Paul's severe letter favourably, there was a hardened and rebellious faction that continued to malign Paul's character. They accused Paul of being only meek and gentle only when he was in the presence of the Corinthian Christians, while he was brave only when he was away, hiding behind his letters.

Such defamatory statements hold no water at all when one considers the example of Christ. While Christ was ministering on earth, He taught the people with much meekness and gentleness (cf. Matt 11:29; 21:5). It is with this in mind that Paul exhorted pastors in 2 Timothy 2:24-26: *“And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.”* Paul was just following the example of his Saviour Christ Jesus.

Ironically, it was the adversaries of Paul who were operating contrary to the pattern of Christ. By attacking the Apostle Paul with such libellous remarks, they revealed their hearts to be full of malice and malevolence. There was no meekness and gentleness at all in their speech and actions.

In fact, those who were treated firmly and austerely by Jesus were the religious teachers of the day who ought to have known the Scriptures better. Instead of teaching men to follow God's Word, they taught them to transgress the commandment of God by their tradition (Matt 15:3). Thus, Jesus pronounced woe upon the scribes and Pharisees seven times in Matthew 23:13-29. However, for those who humbly sought Christ like Nicodemus, they were patiently led by Him to the truth.

How do you minister to others? Are you like Paul or his opponents?

THOUGHT: Humility is an essential ingredient in serving the Lord.

PRAYER: Father, make me meek like my Saviour Jesus Christ.

TUESDAY, MARCH 3

2 CORINTHIANS 10:1-6

EPHESIANS 6:10-20

“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal ...”

CARNAL OR SPIRITUAL WEAPONS?

Even though we live on this earth in a physical body, the battle we wage as Christians is not physical but spiritual in nature. *“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”* (Eph 6:12). The weapons we use are not carnal but spiritual. Read Ephesians 6:10-20.

Alas, the rebellious faction maliciously slandered Paul of walking in the flesh (i.e. adopting carnal methods) when ministering among the Corinthians. By doing so, they were saying that Paul’s ministry was not done in the power of the Holy Spirit, but was conducted based on his own desires, thoughts and designs. They were accusing Paul of “assuming unwarranted authority, dictatorial methods, and perhaps inconsistency and pride” (Kent).

It is therefore not surprising to see similar accusations being levelled against many a faithful man in ministry. When these leaders attempt to defend the truth, to steer the church away from sin and compromise, they are falsely labelled as “heretics” and “dictators,” even though they may have conducted themselves in all meekness and gentleness (2 Cor 10:1). What say we then to such slanders? *“... we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth”* (2 Cor 13:8).

In his defence, Paul insisted that the weapons he used were never carnal but spiritual. It is only God who can convert sinners. It is only God who can build His church. We must always bear this in mind when we serve the Lord. A proud dependence upon the arm of the flesh will never lead to success.

Ironically, it was the accusers of Paul who were guilty of using carnal weapons in their malicious attacks of Paul. Paul was patient with them, praying that they would come to obedience when confronted with the truth. Nevertheless, recalcitrants would be dealt with firmly.

THOUGHT: I can learn patience in ministry from the Apostle Paul.

PRAYER: Father, help me put on the whole armour of God with prayer.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4

2 CORINTHIANS 10:7-11

JOHN 7:24

*“Do ye look on things after
the outward appearance?”*

WORLDLY OR SPIRITUAL CRITERIA?

One accusation against Paul was that of his weak appearance. While they admitted that Paul's letters demonstrated literary quality and boldness, they claimed that he was not physically imposing and strong, neither was his speech comparable to the oratory greats of the age (2 Cor 10:10).

Were the accusations true? While tradition seems to paint Paul as a short man with average features, we do know that he was physically able and vibrant by the grace of God to endure many arduous trips during his missionary journeys. With regard to speech, we have Acts 14:12 which records the people of Lystra likening Paul to Mercurius (or Hermes), the Grecian messenger of the “gods,” because he was the chief speaker. Thus, Paul had at least some level of oratorical ability.

The derogatory and inflammatory remarks by Paul's accusers were made with an agenda in mind: they were designed to undermine the Apostolic authority of Paul and to detract the Corinthians from his letters and messages. By doing so, they were in effect pulling the Corinthians from Christ and His Word.

The Apostle Paul thus asked a cutting question, *“Do ye look on things after the outward appearance?”* Some of the opponents claimed they were from a Christ party (cf. 1 Cor 1:12), lauding themselves as being superior over others in the congregation. Paul's reply was: If such regarded themselves to be of Christ, was he therefore not also of Christ? And if Paul was of Christ, surely he ought to be received.

The attack suffered by Paul was no different from that which was suffered by Christ in His earthly ministries. Many regarded Him as no more than a carpenter's son. Others even accused Him of casting out devils in the name of Beelzebub. Christ's reply? *“Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment”* (John 7:24). Judge by spiritual criteria, and not that of the world.

THOUGHT: Church leaders must be selected according to spiritual criteria.

PRAYER: Teach me to judge all things from a spiritual perspective.

THURSDAY, MARCH 5

2 CORINTHIANS 10:12-18

NUMBERS 16

*“Not boasting of things
without our measure.”*

OVERSTEPPING AUTHORITY?

Another accusation levelled against Paul in 2 Corinthians 10 was that of overstepping authority. The power-hungry adversaries of Paul set themselves up as their own standards (2 Cor 10:12), and then proceeded to measure everyone else according to these standards. Alas, these standards were man-made, carnal criteria designed to promote self rather than the glory of God.

As Paul had failed by the self-imposed standards of his critics, they proceeded to accuse him of overstepping the boundaries of his ministry. Paul denied this, saying that he had always ministered within the limits set by God. God was the one who called Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, therefore he did not build upon other men's labours (2 Cor 10:15), but laboured to preach Christ where He was not named (2 Cor 10:14, cf. Rom 15:20). Paul was just being true to the duties of his call.

In a twist of irony, by assuming they were superior to Paul and taking on greater authority on themselves, the accusers of Paul were the actual ones overstepping their authority. They were acting just like Dathan, Abiram and the sons of Korah in the times of Moses who rose up against Moses and Aaron, saying, *“Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?”* (Num 16:3). Moses rightly replied, *“Seemeth it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them?”* (Num 16:9). It was the sons of Korah who had taken too much upon themselves, not Moses (Num 16:7).

Therefore, let every man serve Christ humbly in his calling. Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think (Rom 12:3).

THOUGHT: Read Romans 12:3.

PRAYER: Father, teach me to respect authority and abide in my calling.

FRIDAY, MARCH 6

2 CORINTHIANS 10:12-18

JEREMIAH 9:23-24

*“But he that glorieth,
let him glory in the Lord.”*

WORLDLY OR GODLY BOASTING?

In our last devotion, we saw how the accusers of Paul set themselves as the standards by which other men should be judged. By doing so, they elevated themselves on a pedestal to gain the admiration of other men. Instead of promoting the glory of God, they upheld their own name. Such boasting is no different from that of the world and is condemned by the Lord. Do not the people of the world often pat themselves on the back with their self-designed accolades and awards? But all these self-praises will in the end amount to nothing as the world passes away.

Sadly, many churches have gone the way of the world and have engaged themselves in worldly boasting. Focusing on the carnal, they pride themselves in their numbers and diversities of ministries, forgetting that it is faithfulness to the Word of God that counts. They laud themselves as mega churches, yet the Lord is displeased with their vain show and empty boastings.

On the other hand, Scripture speaks of a right type of boasting that all Christians should be involved in. *“But he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord”* (2 Cor 10:17). Such boasting involves an acknowledgement that we are nothing before the Lord, and that all success is only possible with Christ’s help. *“Here ... it means -- to place our glory at the disposal of God alone, and reckon every thing else as of no value. For while some are dependent on the estimation of men, and weigh themselves in the false balance of public opinion, and others are deceived by their own arrogance, Paul exhorts us to be emulous of this glow — that we may please the Lord, by whose judgment we all stand or fall”* (Calvin).

As we serve the Lord, let us be wary of how easy it is for us to seek out our own glory. In our subtle ways, we may be trying to declare that a particular ministry or work is successful because of our efforts, and set ourselves in the high estimation of men. Let Christ’s name alone be magnified.

THOUGHT: Seek great things for myself? Seek them not.

PRAYER: Father, may my sole ambition in life be to glory in Christ.

SATURDAY, MARCH 7

2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-2

EXODUS 34:14

“But I am jealous over you with godly jealousy.”

GODLY JEALOUSY (I)

Jealousy often carries a negative connotation in modern English. It is often regarded as synonymous with envy, which refers to a feeling of discontentment and resentful longing aroused by another's possessions or qualities.

Jealousy, however, is originally used to describe the fierce protection of what one perceives to be his. The Bible describes God as a jealous God. *“For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God”* (Exod 34:14). All the false gods of this world can never be compared to the one living and true God. Therefore, when man worships other gods, the LORD is rightfully jealous for they have exalted the creature over the Creator, and robbed Him of His glory.

The difference between divine jealousy and human jealousy is that human jealousy is often stained with sin. Such human jealousy was the cause of the sectarian spirit in the Corinthian church (cf. 1 Cor 3:4), and was also the cause of many an attack on the Apostle Paul. Sinful jealousy is often rooted in pride and covetousness, in which the creature desires something which does not belong to him. On the other hand, the jealousy of God is pure and free from sin, for it is rooted in His nature and character.

God's rightful and just jealousy behoves us to denounce all idolatry (Exod 20:4-5). His jealousy demands our exclusive worship. No man can serve two masters. It must be God, and no one else. As God's covenant people, we are also expected to be jealous over His honour and the faithfulness of His people. When we do anything for our own glory rather than God's, we are forgetting how jealous God is over His name and glory. This was what the false accusers of Paul had forgotten. Consumed by their pride, their thoughts were only for self and not for the flock of God. They were not concerned for the spiritual welfare of God's people. Paul, on the other hand, was rightly jealous over God's church.

THOUGHT: What is the difference between sinful and godly jealousy?

PRAYER: Father, may I always be mindful that Thou art a jealous God.

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 8
2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-2
EPHESIANS 5:25-27

*The church
is to be pure.*

GODLY JEALOUSY (II)

In 2 Corinthians 11:2, Paul adopted a striking imagery where he was pictured as the father of a bride betrothed to a groom. In those days, there was a time interval between the betrothal and the consummation of the marriage. Both parties were expected to honour the betrothal until the time of the wedding festivity. The responsibilities of the father was to keep his daughter pure till the consummation of the marriage.

As part of the church of God (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), the Corinthian church was the bride of Christ. Paul being the founding pastor was like the adopted father of the Corinthian church. His duty was to ensure that the church was pure and unadulterated until the coming of Christ when He would take up His bride.

As the spiritual father of the Corinthians, Paul had every right to be jealous over them. This jealousy was not one where Paul was envious of his opponents for drawing men away from him. Rather, as the Apostle, his duty was to make sure that no man takes the bride away from Christ. Just as Christ is jealous over His bride, Paul as the Apostle must also be jealous over the church to guard her from being adulterated by falsehood and wickedness.

The heart of the Apostle Paul for the church must also be the heart of every Christian today. There must not be an accommodating attitude towards falsehood and sin in the church. Are you zealous over the purity of the church that you will labour in prayer for her? Alas, there seems to be a growing apathy among Christians concerning holiness in the church. Have they forgotten that Christ is jealous over His bride?

The jealousy of God requires us to be jealous over the faithfulness of God's people. May we as God's people be prepared to defend His name and truth.

THOUGHT: I must be jealous over the kingdom of God.

PRAYER: O Father, grant me godly jealousy for Thy name.

MONDAY, MARCH 9

2 CORINTHIANS 11:3-4

GENESIS 3:1-7

*“... as the serpent beguiled
Eve through his subtilty ...”*

BEWARE OF DECEIT

The insidious attacks on Paul's character revealed one big issue plaguing the Corinthian church: there were false teachers and brethren in the midst who were trying to pull the Corinthians away from Christ. Paul was concerned that the deceitful lies of these men may prove persuasive as they continued to interact with the Corinthians. Therefore, he wrote this warning to the Corinthians to beware of such deceit.

Paul likened the deceit of these men to that of the serpent beguiling Eve (cf. Gen 3:1-7). First, he approached her with an apparently innocent inquiry, yet one which was calculated to cast doubt on God's Word: *“Yea, hath God said?”* The woman's reply revealed that she fell for the subtle attack on God's Word:

- Instead of saying that man could freely eat of every tree in the garden (Gen 2:16), the woman said that they *“may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden.”* This undermined the goodness of God.
- The woman said that God did not allow them to touch the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, God did not say this in Genesis 2:16-17. The woman had added to God's Word.
- God had said that should man eat of the forbidden fruit, he shall *“surely die.”* However, the woman said *“lest ye die,”* thus weakening God's warning of punishment for disobedience.

Sensing the victory, the serpent then declared, *“Ye shall not surely die,”* totally denying God's promise of punishment. When the woman saw that the fruit was good for food (lust of the flesh), pleasant to the eyes (lust of the eyes) and able to make one wise (pride of life), she fell for the deception, hook, line and sinker!

The deceiver is still active in the world today. Beware of his devices!

THOUGHT: (Read 1 John 2:15-17.)

PRAYER: O Father, keep me from falling for Satan's lies.

TUESDAY, MARCH 10

2 CORINTHIANS 11:3-4

PROVERBS 19:27

*“For if he that cometh
preacheth another Jesus ...”*

BE A CAREFUL HEARER

Why was Paul concerned that the Corinthians might be deceived? It was because the Corinthians had shown a propensity for loving to hear falsehood. In their naivety, they had acted no differently from the Galatian Christians who were taken in by the false gospel of the Judaizers. This caused Paul to exclaim in Galatians 1:6, *“I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel”* (Gal 1:6).

Sinful man is disposed to love hearing falsehood and wickedness rather than the truth. Thus, the prophet Isaiah wrote of the children of Israel that *“this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD: Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits”* (Isa 30:9-10).

Proverbs 19:27 gives good advice on how we must be careful hearers: *“Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge.”* The call is to exercise discernment. If a teacher or speaker is found to speak things that seek to tear us away from God’s Word, then we must quickly dissociate ourselves from hearing his speeches, as eloquent as they may be. This is the principle of Biblical Separation applied to hearing.

The Bereans were a good example of careful hearers. When Paul taught them, they were careful to search the Scriptures daily to check if what they were taught was consistent with God’s truth. Once they knew that it was, they gladly received it as God’s Word with all readiness of mind.

Alas, today there are those who seek multiple teachers in order to satisfy their itching ears and fleshly lusts. When faithful preaching demands them to confront their sin, they get angry and turn away till they find a speaker that satisfies them. It is such that are fooled and are moved by deceit. Beware!

THOUGHT: What does it mean to be a Berean Christian?

PRAYER: O Father, help me to be discerning in what I hear.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11

2 CORINTHIANS 11:5-12

1 CORINTHIANS 9:3-18

*“I was chargeable
to no man ...”*

PREACH NOT FOR GAIN

We have seen earlier in 2 Corinthians 10 how the opponents of Paul measured others with their own standards in order to put themselves on a pedestal. The godly conduct of the Apostle Paul was, on the other hand, like a light that exposed their dark deeds. In order to promote themselves, they need to smear the deeds of Paul and make them undesirable in the sight of men. They even had the gall to elevate themselves above the Apostle Paul, making themselves “super-apostles” (cf. 2 Cor 11:5).

Paul’s principle was never to preach for the sake of gain. He had declared earlier in 1 Corinthians 9:18, *“What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel.”* Paul’s adversaries were now in a dilemma, for their principle of preaching was very different: they were using religion for gain. They were interested in their own bellies and not the souls of men. Paul’s refusal to take any income showed them up for who they were. To save their reputation, they had to pursue either of two paths: get Paul to receive remuneration from the Corinthians or slander his actions. Since it was impossible to get Paul to receive any remuneration, Paul’s opponents had no choice but to slander him. They claimed that a true Apostle would have received remuneration and that the reason he did not was to make gain under cover.

Paul had earlier explained his principle of preaching in 1 Corinthians 9. Coupled with today’s passage, we see that Paul did not want to receive any remuneration from the Corinthians because he did not want to be a burden on the Corinthian church. Moreover, he did not want any to have an impression that he was preaching for monetary gain. He was only interested that the Corinthian Christians may know Christ crucified. Using a hyperbole, he claimed to have robbed the Macedonian churches, for these churches were not directly obligated to support him. The adversaries’ accusations were baseless. Paul as a true preacher kept preaching, pay or no pay!

THOUGHT: A true preacher will preach God’s Word regardless.

PRAYER: O Father, grant us faithful preachers to feed Thy people.

THURSDAY, MARCH 12

2 CORINTHIANS 11:13-15

ISAIAH 14:12-15

“... for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.”

WORKERS OF DECEIT (I)

In the devotion on March 5, we saw how the opponents of Paul accused him of denying them opportunity to serve. Why did Paul do so? 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 gives us the reason: those who sought such opportunity were not true workers of Christ in the first place. Thus, Paul as a responsible Apostle had to guard the church from such men. Similarly, any faithful pastor must also follow in the same footsteps. Such men must never be allowed to have a foothold in the church.

First, Paul called his opponents *“false apostles.”* They were *“false”* because God had not appointed them to such an office and calling. Yet they pretended to have such a call and exercised authority over God’s flock. The message they conveyed was also in opposition to God’s Word. They were not *“super-apostles”* like they claimed, but *“pseudo-apostles.”*

Second, Paul called his opponents *“deceitful workers.”* This expression refers to how they were like their spiritual father Satan, the father of lies. *“Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it”* (John 8:44).

The Corinthian Christians ought not to marvel that falsehood could so easily creep into the church via men who presented themselves as pious practitioners and teachers of religion. Why? Because Satan himself often disguises himself as an angel of light. Satan does not present himself like a creature with two horns and a pitchfork, as often depicted in folklore. In order to deceive, he must appear attractive to man. The whole idea is that Satan often *“influences people by ideas which seem attractive on the surface,”* but *“his true nature is darkness and not light”* (Kent). So it is with the false teachers who creep in with a facade of pseudo-credentials, but void of true spirituality.

THOUGHT: What are some marks of false teachers?

PRAYER: O Father, help me to discern the true from the false.

FRIDAY, MARCH 13

2 CORINTHIANS 11:13-15

JUDE 4

*“... for Satan himself is transformed
into an angel of light.”*

WORKERS OF DECEIT (II)

The Rev Timothy Tow spoke of how the Scriptures warn of these seven falsehoods that will seek to deceive the world:

1. False Christs (Matt 24:24)
2. False Prophets (Matt 24:24)
3. False Witnesses (Matt 26:60)
4. False Apostles (2 Cor 11:13)
5. False Brethren (2 Cor 11:26)
6. False Accusers (2 Tim 3:3)
7. False Teachers (2 Pet 2:1)

These men will look like any ordinary men of religion. Thus, by putting on an appearance of piety, they will creep into congregations unawares. Some of these that creep in may even be our friends or loved ones. McIntire rightly observed, “The most subtle temptations come through our loved ones. Satan frequently approaches us through intimate friends in whom we have the utmost confidence. So, temptation becomes subtle and powerful.”

It is with this in mind that the Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders that *“of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them”* (Acts 20:30). The church today must be on guard!

Nevertheless, despite these men’s nefarious ways, the Scripture speaks of their sure judgment and condemnation (2 Cor 11:15). The forces of Satan shall never prevail against the gates of the kingdom of God.

THOUGHT: We live in an age of great deception and apostasy.

PRAYER: O Father, guard me from the wiles of the devil.

SATURDAY, MARCH 14

2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-21

2 CORINTHIANS 11:1

*“For ye suffer fools gladly,
seeing ye yourselves are wise.”*

“BOASTING” AS A FOOL

The Apostle Paul was not one who talked often about his personal achievements. Whenever he did, he would be quick to point out that these were achievable only by the grace of God.

Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul would bring up some of his personal achievements here in 2 Corinthians 11, though with much reluctance. Why did he do so?

1. The opponents of Paul were attacking his Apostleship which was given to him by Christ. By doing so, these false workers of iniquity were undermining the work of Christ and misleading many in the congregation of the Corinthian church. The issues were critical. If Paul was a true Apostle, then his message must be gladly received. However, if Paul was a false Apostle, then his entire ministry would be in question, and the message he preached must be rejected. Thus, the issue must be quickly addressed and put to an end before it caused further damage to the church of Christ.

2. To promote themselves, the opponents of Paul vilified his character and credentials. In order to defend his Apostleship, it thus became necessary for Paul to bring out his credentials to light, so that his opponents' accusations may be refuted.

“There are times however, when personal explanations are necessary. In order to prevent distorted statements, unfounded gossip, or outright slander, or to protect the welfare or reputation of others, it may be one's duty to set the record straight, even when one must risk feelings of awkwardness. Surely it is essential to defend the truth and prevent twisting of facts when the Lord's work is involved” (Kent).

One principle we can learn from the passage is how to share a testimony. Whenever we share a testimony, we must be careful not to direct attention to self, but always to Christ. Glorify Christ, not self.

THOUGHT: How should I share my testimony?

PRAYER: O Father, may I always remember to give Thee the glory.

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 15

2 CORINTHIANS 11:22-33

2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-11

*“Who is weak, and I am not weak?
who is offended, and I burn not?”*

THE C.V. OF AN APOSTLE

Having established the reasons for “boasting” about his credentials, the Apostle Paul then proceeded to give a snapshot of his ministry. Observe, however, how Paul gloried not in what he achieved, but rather in the infirmities and afflictions he suffered as he laboured for Christ.

First, some of the opponents of Paul may have boasted of their Jewish descent. However, Paul was not in any way inferior in this aspect, for he was born of Jewish parents (2 Cor 11:22). Moreover, if they claimed to be ministers of Christ (of which they were not – thus Paul said he spoke as a fool), then Paul in every sense had worked harder and suffered more than these so-called “super-apostles.”

2 Corinthians 11:24-25 describes how Paul was often persecuted where he sought to preach the gospel. He was scourged to the maximum legal limit of thirty-nine stripes five times before the writing of the epistle. He also had to suffer stoning, the beating by rods, and shipwreck.

2 Corinthians 11:26-27 deals with the extent of his travels. These travels were accomplished at a time devoid of the transportation available today. Many of the journeys were arduous, with the Apostle enduring much hunger, cold and thirst. Moreover, there was always the threat of robbers. Danger lurked in every corner.

On top of these, Paul was not often received by the people. There were those among the Gentiles who hated him because the message he brought would result in an end of idolatrous practices. The majority of the Jews regarded him as a heretic. And as he ventured among the brethren, there were those who were false who resisted him. As an Apostle, Paul often had to stand alone.

On the other hand, the false apostles were only concerned for their own bellies. Would they be ready for such afflictions? Not so, for at the first sign of trouble they would flee, for they were but hirelings.

THOUGHT: I will glory in my infirmities in Christ.

PRAYER: O Father, help me to be ready to suffer for Christ's sake.

MONDAY, MARCH 16

2 CORINTHIANS 11:32-33

ACTS 9:23-31

*“I will glory of the things
which concern mine infirmities.”*

GLORIFYING IN ONE’S WEAKNESS (I)

The inclusion of 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 after Paul’s conclusion in 2 Corinthians 11:31 has often perplexed commentators. Why did Paul find a need to include his escape from Damascus in a basket (Acts 9:25)?

Perhaps a good answer would be to look at the verses that follow verse 33 (i.e. 2 Cor 12:1-10). Paul would soon write about his unique experience of being caught up to the third heaven which no one else in his time had ever experienced. Nevertheless, Paul insisted that it was an incident which he did not want to boast about. Instead, he would rather glory in his infirmities (2 Cor 12:5). The theme then is that one should not let success get to one’s head, but rather to humbly praise the Lord for His grace in service.

With this in mind, we see how 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 fits into the overall argument of Paul’s defence. Paul’s opponents may have gloated on how weak Paul appeared in the escape from Damascus. They might have also insinuated that Paul was a trouble-maker, pointing out that the churches had rest in all Judea, Galilee and Samaria only when Paul was in Tarsus (Acts 9:31). However, Paul saw in the incident the good hand of God in delivering him from all his troubles. His trip to Damascus was also not in vain as the gospel seed was sown in the city. Paul would rather be viewed as weak so that God’s strength might take centre stage. He would rather have his name decreased, and God’s magnified.

Who then is Aretas in verse 32? According to Kent, Aretas is likely to be Aretas IV, king of the Nabateans, whose capital was Petra. Perhaps this king had an influence in the city of Damascus via a colony of Nabateans. The Jews had somehow enlisted his help to get more men to eliminate Paul. This made the escape of Paul all the more amazing. Despite the odds against Paul, God still made a way of escape for him.

So long as our work on earth is not done, God will preserve our stay in this world.

THOUGHT: God sees fit to glorify Himself via weak instruments.

PRAYER: May Christ’s name be magnified in my weakness, O Father.

TUESDAY, MARCH 17

2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-6

2 CORINTHIANS 11:30

“... yet of myself I will
not glory ...”

GLORIFYING IN ONE'S WEAKNESS (II)

The adversaries of Paul delighted in blowing their trumpet concerning their qualities and achievements. In order to show that such boasting was in vain and to put his adversaries in their places, Paul then proceeded to “boast as a fool” concerning an experience which no one had experienced in his time. Nevertheless, Paul was careful to describe the experience in the third person (cf. 2 Cor 12:2, “*I knew a man in Christ*”), so as not to attract undue attention unto himself.

The experience Paul had was unique for any man in his time for he was “*caught up*” into the third heaven. This “*third heaven*” is called “*paradise*” in 2 Corinthians 12:4 and refers to the dwelling place of God. (The first heaven refers to the atmospheric sky of the earth, while the second heaven refers to outer space.) There in the third heaven he heard of utterings of which he was not permitted to say to any man (2 Cor 12:4).

Where and when did Paul have this unique experience? Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:2 that he had the experience some fourteen years earlier. Since 2 Corinthians was written around AD 55, the unique experience of Paul was likely to be in AD 41 while he was in Tarsus.

The experience was a wonderful privilege granted to Paul by the Lord. Could any one of the “super-apostles” boast of such an experience? No, not one! How then can they claim to be above the Apostle Paul.

Nevertheless, Paul was anxious to remain in the background and give all glory to God. Knowing the disposition of man to glorify other men, Paul quickly cautioned against making him out to be greater than he was (2 Cor 12:6). Thus, Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:5 that he would rather glory in his infirmities. This must not be taken that Paul was proud of going through much suffering for Christ and hanging these events around his neck like personal accolades. Rather, Paul was rejoicing that God’s majesty and greatness were proved when He used such a weak vessel like Paul. It is God, and God alone, who must get all the glory.

THOUGHT: (Read 2 Corinthians 12:10.)

PRAYER: May I be willing to be a nobody as I serve Thee, Father.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18
2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10
JOB 2

*“And lest I should be
exalted above measure ...”*

GLORIFYING IN ONE’S WEAKNESS (III)

The Lord knew that the unique experience of Paul in the third heaven could lead him to be puffed up. If Paul took glory in that experience, he would end up being no different from his accusers who sought self-promotion.

Therefore, to keep Paul humble, the Lord gave to Paul *“a thorn in the flesh.”* There are various views on the identity of this *“thorn in the flesh.”* Some of these views include: (1) Paul’s opponents who relentlessly attacked him; (2) demonic harassment (since this *“thorn in the flesh”* is also known as *“the messenger of Satan”*); (3) a physical ailment such as severe headaches, eye problems or other diseases. This writer tends to the third view. Whatever the identity of this *“thorn,”* it served to remind Paul that he was but a man, and not above those whom the Lord had placed under his care. All men are either sinners who are in need of grace, or sinners who are saved by grace.

Why then is the *“thorn in the flesh”* called *“a messenger of Satan”*? The way to understand this is to consider God’s permissive will in the book of Job. Job’s ailments were caused by Satan, though it was permitted by God. Similarly, Paul’s *“thorn in the flesh”* was caused by Satan, but it was permitted by God so that Paul might remain humble.

Despite Paul’s repeated requests, the Lord did not remove the *“thorn.”* God’s reply was simply that His grace would be sufficient for Paul. It was a lesson for Paul that without Christ he could do nothing (John 15:5). Paul must never think that he could achieve anything with his intelligence and strength.

Just like Paul, the Lord may at times permit difficulties to come into our lives to keep us humble. When we experience success, we may be tempted to attribute it to our own goodness. Big mistake! The difficulties in our lives will therefore keep us in remembrance of how much we need God. Therefore, embrace our crosses, and press on!

THOUGHT: How must I view the troubles and tribulations of life?

PRAYER: Father, keep me humble for Thy service.

THURSDAY, MARCH 19

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9-10

PSALM 23:1

*“My grace is sufficient
for thee ...”*

GOD’S GRACE IS SUFFICIENT

God manifests His grace (i.e. unmerited favour) in several ways. First, He grants us salvation grace by redeeming us from our sin through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8-10). Second, He continues to provide us with daily bread, so that we may live from day to day for His glory (Matt 6:11, 33). Third, He distributes to His children specific spiritual gifts that they may use these gifts to build up the church (Eph 4:8-16).

The Lord did not remove Paul’s thorn in the flesh, but simply stated that His grace was sufficient for Paul. Here, the term “*grace*” refers to the divine favour of God in helping Paul to fulfil his service to God as an Apostle of Jesus Christ. God wanted Paul to learn that the way to success in the ministry was by an unceasing dependence upon Christ and His Word. He must never allow himself to be puffed up, to think that he was worth anything outside of Christ Jesus. On the other hand, if he continued to walk with Christ and seek His help, Christ would help him to overcome all difficulties including his thorn in the flesh.

Paul concluded in 2 Corinthians 12:10 that when he was weak, then was he strong. Paul accepted the thorn in the flesh without any complaint or dissent. He understood that his weakness (i.e. the thorn in the flesh) enabled others to see how it was Christ who was operating in him to accomplish things. If Paul’s weakness brought glory to God, he would gladly bear it.

The passage today also thus instructs us on the cooperative will of God (see devotion of January 22). The promise of God’s help as we serve Him does not mean an absence of trials and challenges. However, God will see us through these difficulties. All we need to do is trust in Him and walk in the Spirit, and there will be no lack of resources to accomplish His will. The cooperative will, rightly understood, leads to great encouragement for the suffering saint. There is no want for the Christian who follows his good Shepherd!

THOUGHT: What does the cooperative will teach me about service?

PRAYER: Father, may I rely on Thy grace each day as I serve Thee.

FRIDAY, MARCH 20

2 CORINTHIANS 12:11-13

HEBREWS 2:3-4

*“Truly the signs of an apostle
were wrought among you ...”*

WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

Before delving deeper into 2 Corinthians 12:11-13, it is beneficial to first understand what a miracle, as taught in the Holy Scriptures, is.

Hebrews 2:3-4 teaches us three aspects of a true miracle. First, the terms “*wonders*” (*terasi*) and “*miracles*” (*dunamesi*, i.e. acts of power and might) teach us that a true miracle involves supernatural power which inspires awe and wonder. Second, the expressions “*God also bearing them witness*” and “*gifts of the Holy Ghost*” teach us that a true miracle must be done by God. On the other hand, the Scriptures describe the supernatural acts of Satan as “*lying wonders*” (2 Thess 2:9). Third, the terms “*signs*” (*sēmeion*), “*confirmed*” and “*bearing witness*” teach us that it is an event (sign) which points to implications far greater than the event itself. As such, there is a spiritual lesson behind every miracle, and it is used to confirm and authenticate the message of God’s spokesman.

There are three main epochs of miracles in biblical history. These miracles served a specific purpose. The first period was found in the time of the Exodus. The miracles were done so that both the Egyptians and the children of Israel might know that the LORD is the one living and true God (see Exod 8:10; 14:4; 16:12). The second epoch came during the time of Elijah and Elisha. The people then had married the worship of the LORD with the false gods of the nations such as Baalim and Ashtaroth. Once again, miracles were done to show that the LORD is the one living and true God for the restoration of pure worship (1 Kings 18:36-40). The third epoch of miracles was during the earthly ministry of Christ and the Apostles. These were done that “*ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name*” (John 20:30-31).

With the completion of the biblical canon, these signs and wonders have ceased (1 Cor 13:8-13). We now have the more sure Word of Prophecy (2 Pet 1:19) to be our guide.

THOUGHT: How should I respond rightly to the miracles in the Bible?

PRAYER: Father, teach me to love the more sure Word of Prophecy.

SATURDAY, MARCH 21

2 CORINTHIANS 12:11-13

MARK 16:14-18

*“... in signs, and wonders,
and mighty deeds.”*

THE SIGNS OF AN APOSTLE

To throw shade at the Apostle Paul, his opponents claimed that he was behind the rest of the Apostles, possibly because he became an Apostle later than the others. If the Corinthian church followed him, they would be inferior to the other churches.

To counter this, the Apostle pointed out how he was able to perform the signs of the Apostles by the power of God. As seen in yesterday's devotion, these signs (*sēmeion*) were supernatural acts done in the power of God to point to implications greater than the events itself.

In Mark 16:14-18, Jesus told the Apostles that signs would accompany them as they served the Lord. *“And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover”* (Mark 16:17-18). These were given by the Lord to authenticate their unique Apostolic ministry. Thus, we can also say that these were signs belonging or accompanying an Apostle.

Just like the other Apostles, Paul was also able to perform these miraculous signs by the power of God. One good example is the record in Acts 19:11-12 of Paul's ministry in Asia, where he was teaching two years in the school of Tyrannus. *“And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them”* (Acts 19:11-12).

The Corinthian church was thus not inferior by following the faithful leadership of the Apostle Paul. If it was in any way inferior, it would be that it had not supported Paul in his missionary endeavours (Paul refused remuneration from them), while others were enthusiastic in their support. The Corinthian church must learn to *“judge righteous judgment”* (John 7:24).

THOUGHT: Beware of the modern Charismatic movement.

PRAYER: Father, help me to follow the faith of true servants of Christ.

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 22

2 CORINTHIANS 12:14-18

1 THESSALONIANS 3:8

*"I will not be
burdensome to you ..."*

BURDEN OR BLESSING?

All loving and responsible earthly parents seek to give the best to their children. They make sure that all the needs of their children are provided for so that they are given the best to excel in life. The love of parents dictate that they be a blessing and not a burden to their children.

As the spiritual father of the Corinthians, Paul always put the needs of the church first. Thus, he said in 2 Corinthians 12:14: *"for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children."*

The last visit of Paul to Corinth was a painful and severe visit (2 Cor 2:1). Paul was desirous that his next visit would not be so. In order not to be a burden to the church, Paul would continue not to receive remuneration from the Corinthian church to silence the accusations of his detractors. There must be no misunderstanding that Paul was in the ministry for monetary gain. Thus, for his next trip (i.e. his third visit), Paul would also bear his own travelling expenses.

Herein is a good principle for us in service. Whenever we serve, we seek to be a blessing rather than a burden to others. This is especially true whenever we are travelling or visiting others. It is also a chief principle on missions trips. What irony if the hosting church has to bear such a huge burden of hosting the missions team when the purpose of missions is to help! The conduct of missions efforts thus requires much wisdom and consideration so that all may be blessed.

Paul then closed his argument by mentioning Titus whom he had sent to visit the Corinthians to know the state of God's flock. Titus was similarly exemplary among the Corinthians, not seeking any gain from them. This is the heart of all who are genuinely concerned for the saints. It is the heart of all spiritual parents. May the Lord grant us such a heart to serve, not for gain or reward.

THOUGHT: Am I a blessing or a burden to others?

PRAYER: Father, help me to be a blessing and not a burden to the saints.

MONDAY, MARCH 23

2 CORINTHIANS 12:19-21

COLOSSIANS 1:25-29

“For I fear ... that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not.”

A PASTOR'S FEARS

As the Apostle and spiritual leader of the Corinthian church, Paul's fervent desire was to *“present every man perfect in Christ Jesus”* (Col 1:28). He wanted the church to grow in her witness for Christ and for the saints to *“grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”* (2 Pet 3:18). As a servant of Christ, he was aware of his accountability before God. Thus, he would do all things for the spiritual good of God's people. His greatest fear would be that the saints remained babyish in their faith with little spiritual progress. It would be a tragedy if the church is no different from the world.

Although Titus brought a good report concerning the Corinthian Christians, the previous visit stoked some concerns in Paul that certain problems were persisting in the Corinthian church. The Corinthians may have received Titus warmly, but would they extend the same welcome to Paul? Were they still weighed down by certain sins (2 Cor 12:21)?

Recall from 1 Corinthians that the Corinthian church was beset with a sectarian spirit. Although the church had grown in numbers over the years, the same could not be said about their spiritual growth. Many were still spiritually immature and exhibited a carnal mindset and lifestyle. Paul was concerned that these potential problems still existed in the congregation. He thus used eight terms in 2 Corinthians 12:20 to describe these issues which he hoped would not be found in the Corinthian church anymore: *“debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults.”* Will there be quarrels and strivings because of jealousy? Will backbiting and gossips that destroy the brethren persist? May these be not named among the saints!

The fear of Paul reveals that his care for the spiritual state of the Corinthian church was pure and genuine. Do you have such a care for the spiritual welfare of the brethren?

THOUGHT: Help me to be true before the Lord.

PRAYER: Father, help me to grow unto spiritual maturity.

TUESDAY, MARCH 24

2 CORINTHIANS 13:1

DEUTERONOMY 17:2-13

*“In the mouth of two or
three witnesses ...”*

NO PRESUMPTUOUS JUDGMENT (I)

The Apostle Paul made it clear that while he hoped for a more cordial visit to Corinth the third time, his meekness should not be mistaken for a lack of action. Discipline would be meted out to those who continued to destroy the peace in the church with their wicked ways and unwholesome doctrines.

The false apostles, teachers and brethren of the Corinthian church employed false accusations and slanders against those who stood in their way. They did so because the truth was not on their side. However, when the saints judged a case, they did not do so frivolously or make presumptuous judgments. Every case must be judged according to evidence and truth.

The principle of *“two or three witnesses”* is rooted in the Old Testament judicial procedure of Israel. One passage which teaches this principle is Deuteronomy 17:2-13. The law dictated that whenever accusation was made of any man or woman of worshipping false gods, due diligence must be made to find out if the accusation was true. *“And it be told thee, and thou hast heard of it, and enquired diligently, and, behold, it be true, and the thing certain, that such abomination is wrought in Israel”* (Deut 17:4). Accusation must be taken not at the hearsay of an individual but from multiple witnesses. If it then be established that the accusation was true, then the congregation must do their part to mete out proper judgment. Their hands must not be slack to do it, starting first with the witnesses. *“At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death”* (Deut 17:6).

In application, people will often bring bits of information and rumours to us. As we hear these words, be careful of making presumptive judgments. Do not be quick to jump to conclusions. Always be diligent to find the truth of the matter before making any decisions.

THOUGHT: Beware of unfounded rumours and gossips.

PRAYER: Father, help me not to be presumptive in my judgments.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25

2 CORINTHIANS 13:1

MATTHEW 18:15:17

*“In the mouth of two
or three witnesses ...”*

NO PRESUMPTUOUS JUDGMENT (II)

The Old Testament principle of *“two or three witnesses”* is also found in the New Testament procedure of church discipline. This procedure is outlined for us in Matthew 18:15-17:

- Confer with the sinner privately.
- If unsuccessful, take another brother along and to confer with him.
- If unsuccessful, bring the matter to the church (i.e. the board of elders).
- If the sinner refuses to repent, but continues to rebel, let the man be counted as a heathen.

This procedure ensures that no frivolous judgment will be made with regard to church discipline. It also gives the sinner every opportunity to repent before he is given harsher discipline.

On the other hand, once the accusation has been found to be true and the sinner to be unrepentant, proper discipline must be carried out. As seen in earlier devotions, the issue of the Corinthian church was her refusal to discipline a man who had committed adultery with his stepmother. The act was known publicly for the sinner had committed it brazenly. If left unchecked, the name of Christ would be brought down. Others in the church might also be emboldened to do the same. Thus, there must be no sweeping under the carpet concerning this issue. How thankful we are that this discipline yielded good fruit for the offender repented of his sin (2 Cor 2). Thus, Paul requested that the man be restored to the fellowship of the church.

Church discipline must always be carried out with great sensitivity and wisdom. It must always be carried out in love and never to destroy. There must be no presumptive judgment.

THOUGHT: Why is discipline important in the church?

PRAYER: Father, help me to be careful in my judgments and decisions.

THURSDAY, MARCH 26

2 CORINTHIANS 13:1-4

MATTHEW 11:29

“I will not spare ...”

MEEKNESS IS NOT WEAKNESS

Following the previous “*severe*” visit of Paul to Corinth, Paul desired a warmer and more cordial third visit to the city. However, his meekness must not be misinterpreted as weakness. While he sought to be gentle among the Corinthians as every good minister should be (see 2 Tim 2:24; 1 Thess 2:7), yet he would be firm to the unrepentant dissenters of God’s Perfect Word. With steely determination, Paul declared, “*I will not spare*” (2 Cor 13:2), for to sweep such matters under the carpet is to destroy the church of God.

There are those who seem to think that meekness and gentleness means a refusal to act against sin. Paul’s words in this passage militate against such a thinking. To be meek is not to be a “softie.” Christians are not to be men-pleasers but God-pleasers.

However, there are also others who seem to regard Paul’s gentleness as weakness. Their desire was for a strong and authoritarian leader. To these people, Paul rightly pointed them to the example of Christ. While Christ was on earth, He displayed “weakness” by willingly submitting to humiliation and suffering all the way to the cross to die for our sins. If it were not for this “weakness” of Christ, there would have been no salvation for us. How thankful we are that in this “weakness,” the power of God was manifested in the resurrection of Christ. And it is in this resurrection that we have new life in Christ.

Similarly, Christians are to follow in the footsteps of Christ when it comes to ministering to one another. Kent rightly noted that we are to “demonstrate at various times both the weakness of non-retailiation against opponents and the resurrection power of God in performing His commands.” The meekness of Christians must not be mistaken as weakness. Let us therefore be gentle and yet firm in our dealings with all men.

THOUGHT: The key is to be gentle and yet firm.

PRAYER: Father, teach me to be gentle, yet firm.

FRIDAY, MARCH 27

2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-10

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-16

“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith ...”

PROVE YOURSELVES

Much of the Corinthian correspondence was spent answering the accusations of Paul’s detractors. These opposers casted shade and doubt on the credentials of Paul’s Apostleship. As this undermined the ministry of the gospel, Paul had little choice but to devote much effort to prove his credentials.

However, while the Corinthians were clamouring for Paul to prove that Christ was speaking through him, they should have also examined themselves and proved that Christ was similarly working through them. Were they truly servants of Christ? If so, had they been faithful to the vocation which God had called them to?

Interestingly, the terms *“examine”* and *“prove”* are both words of testing. They speak about how an object is put under serious examination to prove its authenticity. Thus, the Apostle Paul called the Corinthians to prove the genuineness of their faith: *“whether ye be in the faith”* (2 Cor 13:5). A genuine faith should be a living faith whereby the fruit of the Spirit should be visible. Thus, James declared in his epistle, *“But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?”* (James 2:20). Paul similarly exhorted in Philippians 2:12 that Christians should *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”*

The term *“reprobate”* in these verses can also be rendered *“unapproved.”* Paul was assured that when his ministry was put under honest scrutiny, it would stand approved before God and man. The Corinthian Christians should also be diligent to ensure that their conduct and service before the Lord was also approved (2 Cor 13:7). When they proved themselves spiritually strong, Paul would also be more than happy to desist from any show of strong authority (2 Cor 13:9). He would rather not wield the rod but to rejoice in the presence of the Corinthians.

It is every Christian’s responsibility to prove himself before the Lord. How about you?

THOUGHT: Is my conduct approved before the Lord?

PRAYER: Father, keep me true to Thee by Thy grace.

SATURDAY, MARCH 28

2 CORINTHIANS 13:8

JUDE 3

“For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.”

STANDING FOR THE TRUTH (I)

We live in a world that has little concern for truth. Men resort to lies and falsehoods to achieve their selfish goals. So long as their desired outcome is reached, there is little care whether the truth is upheld. This should come as little surprise to us as *“men loved darkness rather than light”* (John 3:19). Moreover, they excuse themselves by claiming that truth is relative and not absolute. What is true and good to you may not be applicable to me.

However, the Bible declares that God’s Word is the absolute truth, for Christ Himself declared in John 17:17, *“Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”* Christians are thus men of truth for they live by the Word of God.

What set the Apostle Paul apart from the false apostles was his dedication to the truth. The false apostles would do anything for sordid gain. This included teaching falsehood and slandering the Apostle Paul. On the other hand, Paul stood for God and His truth, even if it was offensive to some. He would not do anything that was contrary to God’s Word, but conducted himself according to the Scriptures. If this meant that he had to suffer loss for the truth, he did it, for his conscience was so bound to the truth that he could do no other.

Thus, in this short statement, Paul set forth the ethos of his ministry in contrast with those who were false. “In short, he defends and maintains the honor of his ministry, in so far as it is connected with the truth of God. ‘What does it matter to me? For unless I have in view to promote the truth, all the power that I shall claim will be false and groundless...’ By this consideration, however, he intimates, that the man, who fights and labors for the truth alone will not take it amiss, should occasion require it, to be regarded in the judgment of men as a *reprobate*, provided this does not interfere with the glory of God, the edification of the Church, and the authority of sound doctrine” (John Calvin).

THOUGHT: For the truth, and not against the truth.

PRAYER: Father, help me to be a man of truth.

LORD'S DAY, MARCH 29

2 CORINTHIANS 13:8

JUDE 3

“For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.”

STANDING FOR THE TRUTH (II)

Paul was a man whose conscience was bound by the truth. Thus, his ministry was also one of truth in contrast with those of his accusers who engaged in falsehood and slanders.

This same spirit was also found in the reformer Martin Luther. When asked to deny his writings and teachings on the truth of the Holy Scriptures in the Diet of Worms, he replied: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.” This, indeed, is another man who *“can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.”*

Alas, the spirit found in many a church today is that of compromise. Situational ethics is applied whereby truth can be disregarded if it is thought to be disadvantageous. Thus, churches become weak and powerless in their testimony for Christ.

As we approach the end of the last days, there will be a great falling away (*apostasia*, 2 Thess 2:3). There will be a proliferation of false teachers, false prophets and false doctrines. Iniquity will abound and the love of many will also grow cold (Matt 24:12). We see this in the world today where many false movements abound: Modernism (a denial of the fundamentals of the Christian faith), Neo-evangelicalism (a spirit of compromise and denial of biblical separation), Charismaticism (a promotion of experience as the arbiter of truth) and Ecumenism (the coming together to form a one-world religion). In such a climate, are you ready to stand in the line of Paul and the reformers to earnestly contend for the faith (Jude 3)?

For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.

THOUGHT: Christians must not practise situational ethics.

PRAYER: Father, grant me holy courage to hold on to the truth.

MONDAY, MARCH 30

2 CORINTHIANS 13:10

2 TIMOTHY 4:2

“... lest being present
should use sharpness ...”

THE MINISTRY OF WARNING

The ministry of warning is frequently frowned upon today. There is a clamouring of “positive preaching” with little or no preaching on the “sour” doctrines of the Scriptures. Should any preacher denounce sin, he is soon removed from the pulpit!

On the other hand, Paul did not shy away from warning the Corinthian Christians of their sinful ways in the Corinthian epistles. He was direct in rebuking their worldliness and departure from the faithful way. The reason for doing so in his letters was to avoid the need to use stern language in his upcoming visit to Corinth. Nevertheless, if the situation demanded for firm action, Paul would not hesitate to use “*sharpness*” to address that issue.

Paul’s spirit was in line with the prophets of the Old Testament whom God had sent to rebuke His people. These prophets were spokesmen of God who proclaimed God’s Word authoritatively as it is (“*Thus saith the Lord*”!). There is no shying away from the ministry of warning.

Similarly, it is the duty of the New Testament pastor to engage in a ministry of warning. “*Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine*” (2 Tim 4:2). A faithful pastor must denounce sin from the pulpit so that God’s people may steer clear of that which is false and wicked. One who is called to be the undershepherd of God’s flock must do his best to guard His sheep.

The ministry of warning also falls on the shoulder of all in the congregation. Colossians 3:16 teaches us that we are to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs in order to teach and admonish one another. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 also instructs us that we must warn them that are unruly. If we are to be our brother’s keeper, we must warn one another not to depart from the truth. This we do, not to destroy, but to build one another up in the faith. Admonish one another in the right spirit!

THOUGHT: Warn to build others up in the faith, and not to promote self.

PRAYER: Father, grant my church a strong ministry of warning.

TUESDAY, MARCH 31

2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-14

EPHESIANS 6:23-24

“... the God of love and peace shall be with you.”

PASTORAL WELL-WISHES

In 2 Corinthians 13:10, Paul declared that he sought the edification of the Corinthian saints and not their destruction. This heart of Paul could be seen in the closing remarks of the letter. There were no imprecations pronounced upon the Corinthian church but rather a sincere desire for spiritual blessings to be upon God's people (see especially the benediction pronounced in 2 Cor 13:14). This is all the more remarkable considering that the Corinthian church had on many occasions caused much hurt to the Apostle Paul. Yet Paul had great patience with the Corinthians. This is what it means to be a humble servant of the Lord.

What were Paul's well-wishes for the Corinthian church (2 Cor 13:11)?

- *“Be perfect”* – Paul was not talking about sinless perfection but rather that the Corinthian Christians should grow in spiritual maturity (cf. 2 Pet 3:18).
- *“Be of good comfort”* – This was Paul's desire that the Corinthian Christians should find their encouragement and comfort from all the ecclesiastical issues in Christ Himself.
- *“Be of one mind”* – The Corinthian Christians should set aside their sectarian spirit and unite in Christ and His truth to build up the church.
- *“Live in peace”* – This is an exhortation to keep the peace in the church. This peace is not one at the expense of truth, but one which is achieved by adhering to the truth (cf. Eph 4:3).

Did the letter achieve its purpose? Not much is said in the Scriptures, but the fact that the Book of Romans was written after Paul's visit to Corinth and the success of the collection for the Jerusalem saints seem to indicate that the Corinthians received Paul. If so, the church learnt from its issues and matured in the Lord. May it be so also in our churches today!

THOUGHT: (Read Mark 10:45).

PRAYER: Make me a servant like Christ, O Father.