

# SLOW PAUL: THINKING THROUGH 2 CORINTHIANS

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-7:4

### Introduction

All letters are written out of one context (the writer's situation) into another context (the recipient's situation as understood by the writer). The difficulty with 2 Corinthians is that it has to be placed in a sequence of exchanges between Paul and the church at Corinth, which include visits, lost letters and events of which we have (even despite the information given in Acts) only partial knowledge. For the purposes of this particular attempt to see inside Paul's thinking as he writes the letter, it seems best to adopt the view that 2 Corinthians as we have it is a single compositional unity (though written over a stretch of time during which fresh developments may have occurred), and to follow the reasonably likely sequence of events as reconstructed by Colin Kruse (IVP Tyndale NT Commentaries 1987; IVP New Bible Commentary 4<sup>th</sup> ed 1994) and Linda Belleville (IVP 1996):

1. *Paul's first visit to Corinth*, about AD 50, towards the end of his second missionary journey. He preaches the gospel of Christ crucified, founds the church and stays for at least eighteen months (Acts 18:1-18).
2. *Paul leaves Corinth* some time in 52. He visits Jerusalem and Antioch before setting out on his third missionary journey and *settling in Ephesus* where he spends the best part of three years (Acts 19:1-20:1).
3. Between 52 and 53 while in Ephesus he *writes a letter to Corinth* rebuking them for not dissociating themselves from sexually immoral people (referred to as 'my previous letter' in 1 Cor 5:9). This letter has not survived.
4. Some time around 53-54 *the Corinthians write to Paul* about concerns in the church (1 Cor 7:1). He also receives visits by individuals and groups from Corinth (1 Cor 16:15-18, 1:11-12).
5. In the spring of 54 (1 Cor 5:7-8; 16:8) *Paul writes 1 Corinthians*, addressing these concerns and warning the church about spiritual pride. Meanwhile he sends Timothy to Corinth.
6. Later in 54 Paul *pays a personal visit to Corinth*, as 1 Corinthians seems not to have achieved its desired effect. He describes this visit as a 'painful' one (2 Cor 2:1) because one unnamed member of the church challenged his authority and the church was lukewarm in its support of Paul (2 Cor 13:3).
7. He then *returns to Ephesus*. He had originally intended to go north from Corinth to Macedonia and return to Corinth on his way to Jerusalem with funds for the poor; instead he *writes a 'severe' letter* (2 Cor 1:23, 7:8) challenging them to show loyalty to him and punish the offender. Titus brings this to Corinth early in 55. This letter is now generally considered not to have been preserved.
8. In summer 55 Paul and some companions *leave Ephesus for Troas*, experiencing an attempt on their lives on the way (2 Cor 1:8-9). Paul is anxious to meet Titus but doesn't find him at Troas. He shares the pressures of the churches in Macedonia as they are under severe persecution (2 Cor 8:1-2).
9. *Paul and Titus meet somewhere in Macedonia*. Titus brings the good news that the Corinthians have punished the guilty party (2 Cor 7:6-16); however, he also tells Paul of further criticisms and attacks on Paul's authority. Paul *responds with 2 Corinthians*, written from Macedonia between autumn 55 and autumn 56 (Belleville prefers the latter date in order to fit in a Balkan evangelistic campaign, Rom 15:19). 2 Corinthians 10-13 may be a separate letter from 1-9, or an addendum when further news about challenges to Paul's apostolic authority reaches him.
10. In winter 56 *Paul makes a third visit to Corinth* which lasts three months, suggesting that his appeals in 2 Corinthians have been successful, at any rate for the time being.

As so often, Paul moves from subject to subject with great rapidity. 2 Corinthians in fact intersperses his personal reactions to his ongoing situation and that in Corinth, with reflections on God's grace and on his own ministry of the word. The section 2:14-6:10 in particular has immediate relevance for any church or individual servant of Christ attempting to stand for the gospel of Christ in an unbelieving world. 2 Corinthians as a whole is a corrective to a triumphalist or rose-tinted view of what God is prepared to allow his people to go through.

As with other *Slow Paul* experiments, I have tried to get into the writer's way of thinking, working from the original Greek text but ranging as freely as possible over the imaginative landscape. (See the Introduction to *Slow Paul: Thinking through Colossians* for an attempt to justify this approach.) I have consciously avoided following any commentaries (unconscious debts are another matter), with one exception: when checking on the likely Old Testament background to Paul's thinking, I have gained invaluable assistance from G K Beale and D A Carson *Commentary on the NT use of the OT* (Baker Academic/Apollos 2007).

**1:1-2** <sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia: <sup>2</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Grace and peace**

[1:1] Hallo again from Paul! Yes, I'm writing with full apostolic authority from my Master, Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. I never cease to be amazed how he met me and commissioned me, all because God planned it that way and made sure it happened. Timothy, my indispensable companion in Christ here in Macedonia, is co-authoring this letter, which is intended not only for the church of God in Corinth itself, but also for all believers scattered through the whole of Southern Greece – please see to it that copies are made and carried to Athens and other cities – I want it to have the widest possible circulation.

[1:2] So – my greetings to you all, greetings which flow abundantly from the Head of this great family in heaven and on earth, God the Father and his anointed King whom we know as Jesus. He welcomes us through his own sheer love and goodness, reminding us of the permanent treaty of friendship he made with us through the cross. Yes, grace and peace be with you! Two incredible words, beyond all our expectations. They're what this letter is all about.

**1:3-5** <sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. <sup>5</sup> For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

### **Yesterday's trouble, today's relief**

[1:3] We're praising God from a full heart this morning, Timothy and I. He's the true and only Father God, and his Son is Jesus, our Lord and Master. He brought Jesus through death and out the other side, and he's doing the same for us, because he's that kind of God. You think, 'This God must be hard as nails, to let all this happen to us, when we're supposed to be his beloved children,' and then you catch a glimpse of his heart of compassion and tender merciful love, like a great mother eagle brooding over her nestful of hungry fledglings, or a lioness licking the wounded bodies of her cubs as they learn to survive in the jungle of this world.

[1:4] Because, have no doubt about this, we were really going through it while we were in the province of Asia. We had everything thrown at us, and it wasn't a pleasant experience. Yet our God stood by us and stayed closer than anything that could come to us from outside agencies. Just when you're thinking, 'Not even God himself could cope with this kind of thing,' you find, time and again, that help comes just when it's needed – a word of encouragement here, a hint of sympathy there, a doorway providing shelter from the relentless rain. This means that, because we know from the inside what people sometimes have to go through, we in our turn can offer the practical compassion that makes all the difference to them. It is quite amazing how yesterday's trouble for us gets transmuted into today's relief for someone else. Pain is pain is pain; but when you know someone has been going through the same experiences as you, or not very different ones, you don't just apply external bandages or an uplifting word or two, you go to the heart of the problem and minister healing at the point of real distress.

### **Overflow from the cross**

[1:5] How can we do this? Only through Christ. It doesn't come from us. What he went through for us on that terrible cross will never have to be, nor can ever be, repeated. He drained the cup of guilt, sin

and death to its very dregs and no trace of it remains for us to taste for eternity. Yet in another sense that cup of bitterness continues to slop over in our direction, because some people still don't want the loving rule of God in their lives, and they take it out on us. How then do we cope with this continuing agony? Only because there's another overflow from the cross, the healing stream of forgiveness, acceptance, identification and Divine sympathy that is deep and wide enough for a whole world to bathe its wounds in.

*1:6-7 <sup>6</sup> If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. <sup>7</sup> And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

### **Growing pains of the kingdom**

[1:6] I look at it like this. We regularly get beaten up, verbally and physically, as we press on with the preaching of the gospel. But it's all part of the growing pains of the kingdom. You folk over in the Greek homeland, you're under attack as much as we are, and you need God's protection if your faith is going to stay firm till the very day of salvation itself. Should the troops in the front line waver and crack under the strain, it has to affect the total scene of battle. If your apostolic leaders turn tail and flee, the pressure is going to come full on the church as a whole. But if we stand undaunted thanks to the encouragement and reassuring presence of the Commander-in-Chief, then it's going to generate incredible morale through the whole army. [1:7] That's why we stay hopeful even when the fighting is really grim, because we feel a solidarity with you, we know we're going to win this war all together. What happens to us directly affects you, and vice versa; we all share each other's pain, and even more important, we all share each other's upholding support and deeply-felt consolation. Because the Lord Jesus is here with us. No doubt about that. The victory is his!

*1:8-11 <sup>8</sup> We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup> He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, <sup>11</sup> as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

### **Big trouble in Asia**

[1:8] Why am I going on about this? Well, there you are in Corinth, enjoying each other's fellowship, listening to gifted speakers, ministering the gifts of the Spirit to each other and generally making a good impression on the cosmopolitan society you belong to; and you may conceivably be thinking that the same scenario operates elsewhere. Let me tell you, it doesn't. We have been in big trouble in Asia. Let me describe the past few months. The pressure has been so relentless and overwhelming that it has felt as though someone was piling enormous boulders on us and trying to crush us under their weight. We have felt completely helpless, in fact at times our lives have hung by a single thread. I promise you I'm not exaggerating. [1:9] But in God's hands this has been a most salutary experience. We had been having such good times that (as I realise now) we thought they were going on for ever, and even that it was down to our qualities as skilled missionaries that God was able to do so much through us. And now God is saying, 'Sorry, friends, but it's me you're going to have to rely on, because I'm going to empty every drop of self-reliance out of your complacent souls. I'm putting you to death, which means you'll have to trust me to bring you back to life again.' And of course he has, because he's that kind of resurrection God. [1:10] Not just theoretically, but actually: there was one occasion – I won't go into details – when we walked straight into a monstrous death-trap and faced total wipeout, yet he reached down and drew us out of the flood-waters. That won't be a one-off; in fact, our confidence in him is such that we are

prepared to face the same dangers again and again, hoping against hope that rescue will come just when it's needed.

### **God's resistance movement**

[1:11] What's this got to do with you? Quite a lot. Your prayers are an essential part of the great enterprise. They are God's underground resistance movement, quietly summoning resources and support for us while sabotaging the plans of actively hostile forces. And the same multitude of faces that have been turned in urgent prayer to the throne of grace on our behalf will break out into delighted praise when they learn that God has been gracious to us once again. Let me encourage every reader or hearer of this letter, wherever you are: prayer works. But don't forget to thank the one who makes it work!

**1:12-14** <sup>12</sup> *Now this is our boast: our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace.* <sup>13</sup> *For we do not write to you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that,* <sup>14</sup> *as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

### **Whose agenda?**

[1:12] 'Yes, Paul (do I hear someone saying?), we know we can trust God – but can we really trust you? Your plans seem to change so often. Is it God's business you are engaged in, or is it really your own all along?' Look. I have nothing I need to apologise for. My team and I constantly search our consciences in the presence of God, in case we have started to pursue a double agenda where you Corinthians and other churches are concerned. We believe that we are in the centre of God's holy will and are acting in total honesty and integrity. I know (and remind others) that one can be sincerely wrong; but in our ordinary day-to-day dealings with people, and above all in our relations with you, we have abandoned any reliance on 'the sensible thing in the circumstances', and instead have cast ourselves utterly and unreservedly on the grace of God. That means that we trust in his loving promise to show us his will and to enable us to carry it out, even though we are fallible and potentially very selfish human creatures.

[1:13] Letter-writing has its limitations. Sometimes the surface meaning is transparent and obvious to the recipients; but sometimes you have to read between the lines, and then it's a question of how well you the readers know us the writers. You ask if I'm the genuine article – well, have I changed at all? One day you'll find out. of course, when the full human story finally gets published for all to see; [1:14] but until then, our past dealings with each other have surely shown you a bit of what I'm like, and if I may say so, you have had no reason to be ashamed of your acquaintance with me – in fact, you've demonstrated that you're really quite pleased to have me as your apostle! And if I may return the compliment, I'm really looking forward to the day (which can't be far off) when the Lord Jesus comes back with his battered but triumphant church, and I see you all there wearing the badges of the faith you held on to through thick and thin, and I can say with justifiable pride, 'Those are my very own Corinthians.' Sorry – I'm getting quite emotional. But it's true.

**1:15-17** <sup>15</sup> *Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice.* <sup>16</sup> *I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to let you send me on my way to Judea.* <sup>17</sup> *Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no'?*

## Can you trust me?

[1:15] Let's look at the issue that seems to be causing you problems. As I say, I'm sure we know each other well enough to realise that any plans I had to visit Corinth a few months ago were based on what was going to be best for you, and not for my own selfish convenience. In fact, you were going to get a double dose of Paul medicine (good wholesome medicine I hope!), [1:16] because Plan A was that I should stop off with you before going north into Macedonia, then pay you a second visit on my return south and get sent on my way by you on my nail-biting mission to Judea. [1:17] Now, does the fact that I have had to adopt Plan B, and not fulfil my original intentions, mean that I am perfectly happy to change my mind at the slightest opportunity and that I couldn't care less about our relationship? 'A snap of the fingers for those Corinthians.' Is that the Paul you know? Would I do this to you??

There's an absolutely vital principle at stake here. When you make a promise, you lay yourself on the line to make sure you carry it out. Oh yes, we all know thoroughly selfish people who will swear black and blue that they're going to stick to an arrangement, then 'something else comes up' and they let you down. One moment it's 'Yes, yes' and the next it's 'Er, as a matter of fact, no.' Do you think I'm like that? A dodgy character whose word can't ever be trusted because it might mean the opposite?

**1:18-22** <sup>18</sup> But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not 'Yes' and 'No'. <sup>19</sup> For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us – by me, Silas and Timothy – was not 'Yes' and 'No', but in him it has always been 'Yes'. <sup>20</sup> For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God. <sup>21</sup> Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, <sup>22</sup> set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

## God's trusted signature

[1:18] Well, let me tell you this. God's word can be trusted. What he says, he means; and what he means, he does. If he makes a promise, he makes sure it gets carried out, even if it means sending his own Son to the cross. When we came preaching the gospel to you, we didn't hop from one foot to the other saying, 'On the one hand this, but on the other hand possibly that,' like the people on Mount Carmel limping from one opinion to the other. [1:19] We announced loud and clear that Jesus is God's Son and Messiah and you must follow him. Don't you remember Silas and Timothy and myself quoting scripture after scripture to show how all God's purposes converge on Jesus, how he is the final glorious and emphatic 'Yes' from God to the human race? The gospel isn't just for some of the people some of the time depending on certain conditions or circumstances, it's for everybody – full, unconditional access to the love of God in Christ.

[1:20] Let me put it like this: every time God makes a covenant promise in Scripture, he puts his sign and seal upon it by ordaining a sacrifice. This sacrifice isn't something we offer as our side of the bargain, it's both sides putting their signature to the deal, and that signature is written in blood to show the seriousness of the transaction. You can see where this is pointing. The cross of Jesus Christ is God's final signature on all the covenants of promise he has ever made with fallen mankind. When we say 'Yes' to Jesus, we are honouring God and saying that we trust his word of salvation. We use the word 'Amen' at the end of a prayer to tell God, 'Yes! I really mean it!' Well, Jesus is God's 'Amen' to us, his assurance that he really means every promise he has made; and our 'Amen' to Jesus is our response of faith to God, telling him we believe and trust his assurance.

## Special anointing

[1:21] But God doesn't just leave us with a form of words and tell us to get on with it. This isn't a cold legal transaction, it's a living relationship we enter into; and God lays himself on the line to make sure

we lock firmly and solidly into Christ who is our life hope. The cross is God's signature, but the Spirit is God's seal. This is an incredibly precious truth and I want to stay with it for a minute or two.

The key lies in the meaning of 'Messiah'. Previously, every priest and every king would be anointed with oil to show that they were dedicated representatives of the One True and Holy God, with special access to him. But in the course of time it became clear that there was going to be one uniquely special 'Anointed One' who would represent God supremely and have access to his presence like no other. [1:22] Now get hold of this: once we put our trust in Christ, we too receive this special anointing, this direct and intimate access to the very heart of God. How? Because we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit into our hearts and lives, to form the very image of Christ in us. This doesn't mean we all become little Messiahs, or perfectly sinless saints. It's more like God putting the absolutely unchangeable seal of his promise upon our lives. You remember when Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, the king stamped the stone with his personal seal, to show that his authority over the place was permanent and unalterable. Well, that's what happens when each of us receives the Spirit. We belong to the Lord, we are his special possession for evermore, and we stand to inherit everything that is in store for us. And as I was saying, God doesn't change his mind.

**1:23-2:4** <sup>23</sup> I call God as my witness – and I stake my life on it – that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. <sup>24</sup> Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. <sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup> So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. <sup>2</sup> For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? <sup>3</sup> I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. <sup>4</sup> For I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

### **That painful letter**

[1:23] It is this utterly reliable God whom I want to call as my witness (and I feel my very soul is at stake here) in this matter of exactly why I failed to pay you my promised visit and sent Titus instead. I stayed away from Corinth, badly as I wished to come, because your wounds hadn't healed as much as I hoped they would. In fact, if I had turned up as I'd intended, it would have opened up those wounds afresh.

[1:24] I've been accused, I know, of trying to dominate your relationship with God and of manipulating you into being dependent on my every whim. That is complete nonsense. We apostles aren't like some tyrannical master lording it over you, we're loving parents who want their children's eyes to light up with joy at the presents they are giving them. It's not your loyalty to Paul or anyone else that gives you firm ground to stand upon, it's your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't you understand?

[2:1] I wrestled long and hard with this decision, and in the end I reckoned it would be better not to turn up if it was going to cause fresh grief all round. [2:2] When two friends fall out over some matter, and bitter words are exchanged, the way to reconciliation and restoration is for the aggrieved party to take the initiative and say 'Forget it.' Then they can start enjoying their friendship again. [2:3] You and I have fallen out because I wrote you that stern letter which was intended to put things right, and instead it caused acute grievance, in the short term. The original idea was that you should unanimously take the action which I was recommending, and then I could arrive wreathed in smiles and everything in the garden would be lovely. I thought, 'If I appeal to the whole church, they'll realise that their best interests coincide with mine.' Well, obviously that didn't happen, because some of you were really cut up about the whole thing. [2:4] In case you should think I was taking a sadistic delight in inflicting pain on you, I just want you to know that I wrote that letter in considerable turmoil and personal distress. In fact I broke down in tears more than once while dictating it; if you doubt it, ask my longsuffering scribe. It

was intended to demonstrate how very special you all are to me; but it only succeeded in heaping fresh fuel on the fire.

**2:5-11** <sup>5</sup> *If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent – not to put it too severely.* <sup>6</sup> *The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient.* <sup>7</sup> *Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.* <sup>8</sup> *I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.* <sup>9</sup> *Another reason I wrote to you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.* <sup>10</sup> *Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake,* <sup>11</sup> *in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

### **Healing process**

[2:5] Well, thankfully the fire has died down now and we're just left with some smouldering embers. What about the person at the centre of all the controversy? Do I still feel personal animosity towards him for causing me such pain? Not really. It's more that he's caused a certain amount of damage to the church as a whole. Anyway, I'd prefer not to go on about it. [2:6] I understand there's been a majority verdict about how he should be sanctioned, and that this has been carried out. I'm very relieved that you've drawn a line under the whole affair. [2:7] We've now reached the stage, I hope you agree, where the spiritual health of the individual trumps the formal discipline of the church, and the process of healing can begin. I would therefore counsel you to exercise tolerance towards the offender and forgo any resentment you have towards him. In fact he may need a friendly arm around his shoulder. I know this may seem like a dramatic change of course, but experience shows that in such cases serious depression can set in, when the perpetrator becomes consumed by guilt and feels he's permanently forfeited the goodwill of the community.

[2:8] Please take this injunction seriously. I suggest, therefore, that there could be some public act of reconciliation, to signify that he is fully accepted back into the church and that the formal proceedings against him are over and done with. [2:9] This was in fact the original intention of my communiqué, because I felt the stability of the fellowship as a whole was under severe strain, and I decided to make it an issue of whether or not you would submit to apostolic authority in all matters affecting the church. What a relief that you have passed the test with flying colours!

### **Account closed**

[2:10] If you can find your way to reinstating him finally and publicly, then I for my part declare that there is no lingering bitterness on my side either. He may or may not have run up a personal debt against me, but that's all taken care of and the account's closed. We have all come together at the foot of the cross, where forgiveness flows so freely; the Lord himself in his compassion is present with his church and his love unites us all. [2:11] Don't ever forget that we have a great adversary; Satan, the arch-strategist, ceaselessly plots to create disunity in the church of Christ. Nothing pleases him more than to see Christ's followers at each other's throats, blaming the other person while justifying themselves. It's only at the cross that all the guilt and accusations he loves to generate melt away, because Christ has achieved the reconciliation we could never have found for ourselves.

**2:12-13** <sup>12</sup> *Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me,* <sup>13</sup> *I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.*

## **But where was Titus?**

[2:12] Let me take up the story from where we were about to leave Asia. I had made up my mind, for the reasons I've stated, not to revisit Corinth for the time being, but to go northwest into Macedonia to support the persecuted churches there. When we got to Troas (the take-off point for Greece on the Asian side) we found that the Lord had opened up a gospel opportunity. People were flocking to hear the wonderful news about Jesus being God's Messiah, and of course we were only too glad to share it with them. [2:13] The only fly in the ointment was that we couldn't find Titus anywhere. The arrangement had been for him to terminate his stay with you and come north to meet us – but he was nowhere to be seen. I normally deal with problems like that by turning them over to the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit, and he gives me peace however great the pressure. But for some reason on this occasion I couldn't get rid of my anxiety. Suppose something had happened to Titus, whom I love as a brother in Christ? Suppose things at Corinth were far, far worse than I had ever imagined and he'd had to stay on there to try to sort them out? Did he need me to come to his rescue? Anyway, I had to say a painful goodbye to the dear people at Troas and the kingdom opportunities there, and take ship for northern Greece.

Seasickness was the least of my problems – I was on an emotional roller-coaster.

**2:14-17** <sup>14</sup> *But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.* <sup>15</sup> *For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.* <sup>16</sup> *To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?* <sup>17</sup> *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.*

## **Triumphal procession**

[2:14] I'll return to the Titus narrative in due course (I think you know how my crisis was resolved) because I am just so thankful to God for the way he makes everything work out for his own glory and praise. I had thought that in leaving Troas at the height of a successful gospel campaign I was letting down Christ and rattling on the work he had appointed me to do. But he had other plans. He is Commander-in-Chief of the whole operation. Wherever he goes in this world, it's like a triumphal procession, and we're all swept along in his wake. When a victorious general like Pompey or Caesar leads his army in person through the streets of Rome and up to the Capitol where the sacrifices of thanksgiving are made, the smoke of the incense and the fragrance of the offerings affect those present in opposite ways. [2:15-16] The captured enemy soldiers who have fought against the conqueror smell their own doom approaching, whereas for the people of his own side they are the very fragrance of life and celebration.

So it is with Christ. Wherever his love and power are made known, as we all share our infinitely varied knowledge of him, there are two basic reactions. One is, 'Whoever this so-called King is, he's not going to have me among his subjects.' Nothing you say can convince them, because the scent you give off is like that of a dead animal in the bush – their reaction is simply 'Urgghhh!' When you point out as tactfully as possible that it is in fact they who are their way to death, because they refuse to acknowledge the Lord of life, they find you even more repulsive. It's very sad, but it's true to experience. While on the other hand, some people can react entirely differently. They are prepared to listen to what you say (inadequate as it is) because something in Jesus is attracting them; it's as though his name and his story give off a fragrance they find irresistible, and gradually they are led into full belief and acceptance and find eternal life in Christ.

## **Motives for speaking**

How do we, how does anyone qualify for this kind of work? Don't ask me how or why people do or

don't come to faith. We are simply the messengers, and we aren't responsible for the way they receive the news. [2:17] What we are responsible for is that our message should be the genuine article. I'm not trying to sell shoddy goods in the market for my own profit, like some evangelists I know. I'm not dressing up the gospel to make it look more attractive, or reducing the cost of following Christ to get a quick sale. I and my team, we're preaching Christ pure and simple, the Word made flesh, Jesus crucified and risen for you. What do we say on each occasion? What the Lord God gives us to say. What are our motives for speaking? We do it in his sight and to please him alone. Where does our power come from? From the Christ who lives out his life in us and in whose strength alone we stand there.

**3:1-3** <sup>1</sup> *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?* <sup>2</sup> *You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone.* <sup>3</sup> *You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

### **Read my heart**

[3:1] 'Paul, it looks very much as if you're getting on the defensive again, pushing your own credentials, boosting your own ego.' Absolutely, categorically no. Some of these other evangelists produce CVs signed by impressive referees, to show that they are thoroughly acceptable people who deserve to be listened to with due deference. I understand they've even asked you to give them references to wave in front of other churches! 'The Corinthians think we're ace speakers, so you've got to take our message seriously.' [3:2] Well, all right, let's play this stupid CV game and see where it gets us. If we need letters of recommendation, we've got one right here, and that's you. Open up our hearts and read what's written there in letters of blood: 'Corinth'. That's the depth and passion of our relationship with you. Our only credentials for writing to you, for administering such strong medicine to you, are love and love and love. This is obvious to anyone and everyone. What qualifications does Paul have for taking on this job as apostle to the Corinthians? Read my heart.

[3:3] You yourselves are the only testimonial we need. Not that you are a perfect example of a church, I hope you realise that! But the story of the last few years is that Christ has been writing one particular chapter of the history of his church, and this chapter is titled 'The Corinthians', and it's not written in ink. It's a record of devoted and unstinted discipleship, in characters formed by the Holy Spirit, the living creative author of the whole enterprise. It's like a public inscription set up in the market-place, but it's not carved in stone, it's incised on the heart of every single one of you who has accepted Christ and found new life in him.

**3:4-6** <sup>4</sup> *Such confidence we have through Christ before God.* <sup>5</sup> *Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.* <sup>6</sup> *He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

### **New plan of salvation**

[3:4] How can I be so sure that this isn't some purely human, psychological phenomenon, some mysterious formula which converts people and starts up things called churches which are really just social constructs? It's because we don't operate on a human level. We deal direct with God through Christ. Word, prayer, Spirit. That's how Divine transformation happens. [3:5] In ourselves we are nothing, a spiritual waste of space. I asked just now how one could possibly qualify for the life-and-death ministry of the gospel. Well, we can't. There is no training, wisdom or skill on the human level that could equip us for raising people to new life. It's got to be the work of God. Yet somehow, amazingly, God uses us as the channels for his resurrection power. How does this come about?

[3:6] It happens because (for reasons known only to himself) God has raised up a bunch of people called

apostles who are spearheading a completely new plan of salvation, not just for the Jews but for the whole human race. I've been meditating a lot recently on the difference between the old and new covenants, and I want to share what God has been teaching me. I've been reading what Ezekiel and Jeremiah have to say about the new covenant, and comparing it with the original covenant made by God with Moses. In a nutshell, the old covenant is salvation by carrying out the letter of the law, while the new covenant is salvation by receiving the life of the Spirit. Law withers and kills, Spirit regenerates and recreates. Stay with me while I try to unpack how this happens.

**3:7-11** <sup>7</sup> Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, <sup>8</sup> will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? <sup>9</sup> If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! <sup>10</sup> For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. <sup>11</sup> And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

### **Moses' shining face**

[3:7] Turn with me to the story about Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the two stone tablets of the commandments, and with his face shining. This isn't because he has seen God (no-one can see God directly and remain alive, that's the unalterable decree) but just because he's been speaking with God, receiving his word and talking to him in prayer. Moses' face shone with an unearthly radiance, so much so that the Israelite people had to shield their eyes and couldn't look at him directly. Only a few leaders like Aaron had the courage to go and talk with him, but not for long. After a few hours this radiance would fade away, of course; but Moses had to wrap his face in a veil of thick cloth after he'd been in conversation with God, such was the splendour of the Divine word that remained upon him.

Now there's a rich analogy here. Let me talk first about the shining splendour, and then about the veil.

### **Even greater beauty**

The system of Law, which God gave Moses for us, is radiantly beautiful. Yet religion, as a system requiring strict human observance, kills the soul. Divine law, unalterably inscribed upon solid stone tablets, glorious as it is, paradoxically reinforces human sinfulness; hence, so far from imparting eternal life, it brings judgment and opens the door for death to go on a rampage. Even so, the one who administers this law-system finds his face shining with divine radiance! [3:8] Do you see where this leads? If the old covenant of death-dealing law can generate such splendour, how much greater glory must the new covenant of the life-giving Spirit generate! [3:9] You would think that administering a regime that brings condemnation and judgment would make a person's face grim and solemn (because sin and its consequences are such a serious matter), but that didn't happen with Moses, it made his face glow with a joy and a serenity that came straight from being in the presence of God and hearing his words. Doesn't it stand to reason, then, that hearing God's message of justification and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and sharing it with the world, has to be an altogether more glorious and splendid affair?

### **Light of the world**

It's our experience as gospel preachers that we may indeed have to begin our discourse in a solemn and serious manner, as we talk about our inability to love God and our neighbour (as laid down in the Ten Commandments); but see our faces light up when we begin to describe what Christ has done to atone for sin and bring the hope of eternal life to condemned sinners. [3:10] The point I'm trying to make, though, is that if in the case of Moses his face could light up when announcing the glory of the Law (with all its lethal implications), this radiance is like a flickering candle compared with the overwhelming majesty and splendour of the good news of Jesus Christ which we are commissioned to bring you. [3:11] And if the flickering candle of the Law, which was due to be extinguished as a means of

enlightenment and salvation, could still generate such awesome beauty, how much more radiantly glorious do you think is the Sun of righteousness himself, who is the permanent and everlasting Light of the world?

**3:11-16** <sup>12</sup> Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. <sup>13</sup> We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. <sup>14</sup> But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup> Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. <sup>16</sup> But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

### **Cloak of concealment**

[3:12-13] You will understand, then, how we are liable to go overboard when declaring the hope of the gospel, considering that it brings an eternal inheritance and the chance of seeing God face to face without being condemned to death. We don't have to shield our faces when we preach, in fact we throw caution to the winds and probably get criticised for over-exuberance. You see, this hood which Moses had to put over his head didn't only have a protective function for his hearers – it acted as a cloak of concealment for the real truth of the matter. The Law in all its glory was going to fade away, just as surely as the radiance on Moses' face would fade after a few hours. And this brings me to another extremely serious point.

[3:14] Why were the people of Israel so slow to see the truth of their own inability to keep the Law? Why are they still so slow? It's almost as if a whole area of their brains has atrophied. Come with me to your local synagogue. The scrolls of the Law are reverently brought out and unrolled, and the familiar words of the Old Covenant are read in ringing tones, and they nod sagely and say 'Amen' and resolve to have yet another go at carrying out the Law in all its terrifying perfection. They can't see the obvious and blinding truth, that as Jeremiah told us so plainly there has to be a new covenant, because only when the Messiah comes as the people's righteousness will Israel be saved. Now you can see perhaps why I bang on about Jesus. The Messiah *has* come! The New Covenant is here!

### **Thick fog**

[3:15] But they can't see it. The reading of the Pentateuch casts a thick fog over their minds, almost as if their spiritual receptors were hooded over like Moses' face. It's still happening today, in our own time, this Sabbath and next, and it's so very, very sad. (I just wonder if the same thing will happen, in the course of time, to the reading of the New Covenant itself in gatherings of Christians. Perish the thought!)

[3:16] This is why I won't yield an inch to those people who want to preach the Law rather than the gospel. The Law re-erects a great thick curtain between people and the intimate knowledge of God – while the Jesus story rips that curtain down at the very moment of his death. It's only when you turn to Jesus and acknowledge him as Lord that the miracle happens: the veil is torn to shreds, the fog disperses and you come out into the glorious light of day. What happened only for Moses – taking off the veil and having direct access to God – is now the norm for every single believer in Christ. You want to go back to Moses? You *are* Moses!

**3:17-18** <sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate (or reflect) the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

### **New people**

[3:17] That's why Jeremiah looks forward to a new covenant. The letter of the Law has reduced the people to spiritual impotence and ignorance; they don't know the God they serve, therefore his will is

alien to them. If only that knowledge of God could be internal and not external! If only it could be 'written on their hearts'! Jeremiah is of course talking about the Spirit, and Ezekiel echoes his words and makes it even more explicit: it's by putting a new Spirit within them that God is going to give them a new heart and rescue them from all their sins. He is going to take their scattered bones and they are going to be raised up from their graves and made a new, living people, by the breath of the Spirit entering their previously lifeless frames.

### **God at work**

Just get hold of this: the Holy Spirit is God at work. Wherever the Spirit is, the Lord is. And wherever the Spirit of the Lord is at work, doors are flung open, graves give up their dead and people are set free. Free to know the Lord and serve him from their hearts, in a power that is not, nor could ever be, their own; the power that the Lord Jesus promised to all who would be united to him by faith. [3:18] The humblest believer is a Moses (whoever you are hearing or reading this, you're included) who can go into the Lord's presence with no veil or curtain in-between – who can listen to his word with full understanding, pray with total integrity and most precious of all, steadily contemplate the Lord's own radiance and beauty as one might see one's own reflection in a mirror. And as our faith-vision gradually (though perhaps unconsciously) improves, we find little changes taking place, little cells of Christlikeness being formed in our characters, love replacing indifference, joy where there was gloominess, peace instead of anxiety. You are not what you were ten, even five years ago. You are on your way to being one with Christ himself, sharing the glory which he through grace shares with us

It's true! The secret is that it's the Spirit doing the work from the inside. The Lord Jesus building himself a dwelling in your life. The whole Godhead at work replacing our ugliness with his beauty, making us fit to walk with him in the glorious new creation. Do we have a part to play in this? Look steadily into his word. Plead with him to transform you. Yield to the Spirit's work. Trust him with every fibre of your being. He will do it.

*4:1-2 <sup>1</sup> Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.*

### **Clear conscience**

[4:1] This has implications for us and everyone who serves the cause of the gospel. We haven't chosen ourselves for this work – it is utterly by his grace and mercy that we find ourselves working in his vineyard. But make no mistake – it's work that will demand every ounce of perseverance we've got. We will be tempted to throw down the tools, to walk away from the ceaseless pressure. [4:2] And other temptations will beckon to us. 'Why not defray some of your expenses from the collection-box? Why not use some of the opposition's methods to beat them at their own game? Why not doctor God's message so you can leave out the unpalatable bits?' We've had to wrestle with these temptations, believe me. We have had to say a firm 'No way!' to short-cutting or soft-soaping the clear implications of following Jesus as Lord.

So what do we do? We tell people the plain, unvarnished truth. We tell them what sin is, what it does and how you end up if you go down that road. We tell them why Jesus took human flesh, so that he could go through death and come out the other side. We explain carefully that getting baptised as a Christian will put you in direct conflict with the world's thinking and lifestyle. We invite them to receive forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. We may use words and ideas that a particular group of hearers can best understand, but we don't dress up the truth in gaudy apparel or complicated philosophical arguments.

This may seem unsubtle; but it actually appeals to people, because everyone has an ally of God within, called conscience. Conscience (which of course can be resisted and even silenced) insistently tells you 'this is the way you ought to go'. It's as though God himself is speaking directly to you, and you're alone together, just you and God, and he wants an answer. I had the same experience on the Damascus road, as I never tire of telling people. Now if God is going to be able to speak directly to people in this way, we the speakers need to be absolutely clear in our consciences that we are accountable to God alone, that we are standing up in his presence and he sees our motives and weighs every word we say.

*4:3-6* <sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup> For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

### **New creation miracle**

[4:3] 'But hold on a moment, Paul. Some people don't accept the message of Christ; some people don't even understand what you're talking about. You surely can't be claiming that the clear proclamation of the gospel automatically convinces everybody.' True, sadly. It's what I was saying earlier about the veil, the barrier that prevents people responding as they should to the word of God. Yes, the whole human race is heading for the cliff-edge, and it's our job (and now yours too) to warn them urgently about the danger they're in. But some people block their ears obstinately against your warning. They simply won't listen however loud and long you go on telling them. It's almost as if they are bent on walking to their own destruction. Why is this?

[4:4] There's an agency at work. Our Lord called it, or him, 'the prince of this world'. I referred to him earlier as Satan. You can't be a Christian for very long without realising that evil, chaotic as it is, seems to have a very powerful rationale behind it, which is to keep the human race in ignorance and disbelief concerning the true character of God. When we preach the gospel, it's as though we are shining the bright light of truth into the world's darkness. We are telling people about the reality and the beauty and the sacrificial love of God's Messiah who is Jesus. Jesus shows us God's true character and nature; if we want to know what God is like, we look at his Son. Now if you persist in not believing that, even after we've told you as clearly as we possibly can, there must be something blocking the light. It's not enough to say that it's just unbelief, because unbelievers do become believers, as you know yourselves. [4:5] It's also not enough to say that it's really because people like following something and in this case it's because they want to be groupies of the apostles. We've never pushed our own party line, I hope you will agree, because our main concern isn't to win converts to our own brand of philosophy, it's to lay ourselves on the line for the sake of people who are lost without Christ. When Jesus said he was the light of the world, he meant he'd come to rescue us from darkness, not to dazzle us or to hypnotise us into believing a fantasy story which ministered to his own ego. We're not here to turn you into our puppets, dancing to our tune; we're here to be your servants and supporters in the spiritual battle.

[4:6] So what happened to you, what happens to anyone who hears the gospel and believes it? Nothing less than a miracle on the scale of the original creation. What do we find at the start of Genesis? 'Where the universe was going to be there was a gaping void, nothing solid, no structure, just an absence. There was God, of course, as there had always been, with his heart of love and capacity for surprise; but in material terms just a darkness, like heaving waters under a moonless night. And a solitary Spirit-bird flying restlessly to and fro, longing to hatch a multitude of offspring. Then it happens: a single word from the Commander Creator, and beauty springs out of nowhere; colour, form, light and shadow,

movement and life.' That's a parable of what has happened with you and me. We had left God out of our lives (or made a God of our own conceiving) and our hearts were shuttered tight against the truth of eternity. Then Jesus arrived; gradually, or as in my case suddenly, we saw his face, we saw what God was really like, the one desirable whom nobody wanted. Offering his friendship, his companionship of honour. Yes, we could have refused, turned back to the darkness, but (here's the miracle, all of God's doing, none of our own) we didn't. We allowed him to remove the veil, unwrap our shrouded souls, accustom our heart's eyes to the new vision. It was like a new creation, which, as I shall explain later, it actually was.

**4:7-12** <sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. <sup>8</sup> We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup> We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. <sup>11</sup> For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. <sup>12</sup> So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

### **Unimpressive containers**

[4:7] 'So, Paul, you and Timothy and the others, did you have anything to do with our becoming Christians? Or was it just an act of God?' Well, we did and we didn't. We did play some part in the process, because in order to respond to Christ you had to see something in him, and it was our job to display the goods. Nobody's going to put blind faith in someone else if there isn't a shred of evidence that they're worth trusting. You only rob a bank if you know it contains a treasure worth stealing. But no, it had to be all God's work, because this particular treasure, the dying and risen Lord, was and is displayed in totally unimpressive containers. We apostles are like your basic earthenware lamps, two-a-penny in the market, yet once the oil of the Spirit is kindled, flickering with heavenly light. Clay vessels, yet somehow radiating the divine power which created heaven and earth. [4:8] I just want to make it perfectly clear that's it's not the missionaries who are responsible for the results, but the Lord of the mission. We are constantly facing huge pressures, yet we somehow always get space in which to operate. Sometimes we have no idea what to do next, yet we never run out of options. [4:9] We invariably meet with persecution in one guise or another, but the Lord never throws us to the wolves, and the local brethren turn up trumps time and again. We may find ourselves sprawling in the dust but we're never trampled to death.

[4:10] You may think all this is a bit paradoxical but wait for what I'm going to say next. We've got to go through the same sort of death that God asked his Son Jesus to go through, so that the risen life of Jesus can be transparently visible in us; only then can the world see what God is really like. And this isn't just a one-off death or a temporary bad patch we might have to face – it's our regular, day-to-day experience. [4:11] We're living, breathing people just like everyone else, but we start each day expecting it to be our last. You may think this is a negative attitude to take, but it's all for Jesus; it's so that instead of displaying our own feeble efforts to be model Christians, we are witnessing to his resurrection power. [4:12] The whole idea is that people should see Jesus and go to him for eternal life. If that means we sign our own death-warrants in the process, we couldn't care less. The seed's got to give up its own existence for the fruit-tree to blossom. That's the principle of all life.

**4:13-15** <sup>13</sup> It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' Since we have that same spirit of<sup>f8</sup> faith, we also believe and therefore speak, <sup>14</sup> because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. <sup>15</sup> All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

## Raiding Satan's kingdom

[4:13] But make no mistake, standing up and preaching is a massive act of faith. As I was saying just now, gospel work is raiding Satan's kingdom of unbelief. We're bound to meet relentless opposition as soon as we start. Not only so, but we're infiltrating the heartland of the flesh, the acropolis of human self-will. I was reading one of the Psalms and thinking, 'That was written by a preacher of the word!' He's thanking the Lord for delivering him from certain death and he realises that speaking about the kingdom of heaven requires a faith and a determination he can only get from God. 'Lord, I'm only up here opening my mouth because I believe you want me to do it. It's for your sake not for mine. The people I'm talking to are living in a fantasy world of lies and deception and it needs a miracle from you if they're going to understand the way of salvation and start trusting you. If I have to die (in whatever sense) I know it will mean a lot to you, because your people are precious to you. Just set me free by your Spirit to speak in a way that brings glory to you.'

[4:14] The bottom line is that whatever happens to Christ's witnesses in this world, we serve a resurrection God. When he pulled the Lord Jesus to his feet in that tomb, he said, 'Son, you're the first of many.' We're travelling with him through death to glory. On that final day Jesus is going to lead a huge procession of rescued prisoners, including you Corinthians, and us apostles, and he's going to present us as living trophies to his Father. [4:15] That's what makes it all worthwhile, that moment of utter relief and exultation which will never die away. Friends, there are going to be millions and millions of us there, because God's mercy streaming from the cross is like an avalanche of grace, that pours down the mountain and sweeps more and more people into its embrace. The chorus of thanksgiving will swell and swell until the universe is full of the infinitely varied theme-song, 'How great and wonderful is our God!' Worth looking forward to?

**4:16-18** <sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup> So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

## Renewal process

[4:16] That's why we're still in the battle. To be perfectly honest, we have often felt like giving up the whole kingdom enterprise. But here's another strange thing, a double process that's going on. On the outside, in our physical and mortal bodies, we are gradually being knocked to bits. This is true, of course, of the human condition in general, but it's happening quicker to some people than others, especially if they happen to be in the front line of mission work. Yet at the same time, on the inside, where our spirits are united with Christ in faith and hope, a renewal process is taking place; day after day, as we face the relentless grind of existence in this world, we find ourselves refreshed by the presence of the Lord, so that somehow we find the strength to struggle on.

[4:17] You see, what we are asked to go through now for the sake of Christ and the gospel is completely trivial compared to the glories ahead of us. Every drop of depressing persecution we suffer in this world is going to be compensated for by a cascade of exhilarating delight in the eternal ages to come. The shadows in the valley of death may seem fearsome at the time, but beyond them is a light growing all the brighter by contrast. [4:18] So where do we set our gaze? Do we look on the heaving waves around us as if they were the only reality? Or do we look beyond the horizon to the land we can't see as yet, the solid destiny we know is awaiting us? Our five senses continually tell us that the present world is all there is, and that its changes and chances make up the full sum of existence. But we have a sixth sense, the eye of faith, which locks onto the home beacon, the love of God in Christ Jesus which will never, ever be extinguished.

**5:1-5** <sup>1</sup> For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. <sup>2</sup> Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, <sup>3</sup> because when we are clothed [or, in the hope that when we are unclothed], we will not be found naked. <sup>4</sup> For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. <sup>5</sup> Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

### **Nomadic existence**

[5:1] So what's going to happen to our mortal bodies? I've written to you about this at some length, but let's just go over it again, because I've been thinking about it quite a lot recently. On this earth we live a nomadic existence. (By 'we' I don't mean just ourselves as missionaries, we mean everyone who calls Jesus Lord.) Nomads are desert travellers who camp in one place for a limited time, maybe days, maybe a few years, then take down their tents and move on somewhere else. Now our earthly bodies are like tents, temporary living-places which are going to be taken down one day; but they're going to be replaced, not by another body of the same sort, not another flimsy tent, but by a solid building made by God himself. Think of the most glorious building you know – possibly Herod's Temple, or the Parthenon at Athens – however beautiful and impressive it may be, it's still constructed by human architects and human builders, and in the end it will fall victim to the ravages of time and circumstance. Well, this new body we've been promised by God isn't of human origin or design at all; what's more, it will never fall to pieces because it's made of heavenly materials which are going to last for ever.

[5:2] Now I admit that knowing this doesn't make life any less painful, just as for Jesus on the cross knowing he was going to be raised by the Father didn't lessen the desperate agony of crucifixion. Rather, we have a different sort of distress, which consists in a fierce longing for our real home, our heavenly dwelling-place. To vary the metaphor, we can't wait to put on our party clothes for the great feast! [5:3] There's a moment, of course, when you change out of one suit of clothes into another, when you haven't got anything on at all, and it would be terrible if that happened (as it were) at the time of our death, leaving us permanently naked (and, as Adam and Eve were, ashamed) in the sight of God and the universe. [5:4] But that's not going to happen to us, and I'll tell you why. Here we are in our mortal bodies, finding that life isn't a piece of cake and quite frankly wishing we hadn't got to go through all these testings and frustrations, and the natural thing is to dread death because it's final undoing, the dissolution of all we've ever been or achieved. But it's not that at all! It's not an unmaking, a stripping off which will leave us exposed – it's a remaking, a putting on of a new set of clothes, what I sometimes refer to as the redemption of the body. It's a transmuting of the merely physical nature of our being into an existence based on a new physics entirely, like Jonah being swallowed by a huge fish and coming out the other side still as Jonah, but utterly renewed for his prophetic task. We don't get destroyed at the moment of death, we get recycled into something completely imperishable, with a dynamism and capacity and purpose we never knew before.

### **Flight of fancy?**

[5:5] This isn't just a flight of fancy, to console myself for the battering I and my team seem to be getting on a regular basis. It's what God has planned all along. He's made us mortal so that one day we should be immortal. In fact our immortality is already there waiting for us. How do I know this? Because God has inserted a little bit of immortality into us, and that's his Holy Spirit, which, may I remind you, isn't a reward we've deserved but a birthday present we couldn't possibly have expected. His coming to live within us is a sure guarantee that we've going to live with him. The Spirit is like a future bride's engagement ring, a sign of a marriage that is one-hundred-per-cent definitely going to take place, and he knows the date even if we don't. Don't ask me why he's chosen this way of doing things, but he has.

And if you doubt his capacity or willingness to bring this about, just look at the cross and the empty grave. There was a seal on that grave, a sign that no human being could possibly tamper with it. But God could, and he did. Then he replaced that death-seal with his own life-seal, by sending the Holy Spirit (as he had always promised to do) into the heart of every believer, to show us that we're his own intended people.

**5:6-10** <sup>6</sup> *Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.* <sup>7</sup> *For we live by faith, not by sight.* <sup>8</sup> *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.* <sup>9</sup> *So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.* <sup>10</sup> *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

### **Faith-knowledge**

[5:6] This is a massive and ongoing encouragement to us, as you can imagine, when we try to witness to the Lord Jesus and get hammered for our pains. If I can revert to the tent analogy, while we're on earth we live in the flimsy frame that is our body, and we call it home for the time being. But our real home is with the Lord Jesus Christ, where we will enjoy his tangible presence and see him face to face. [5:7] Until then, we have to live by faith; not that he isn't with us every day of our mortal lives, but we're not allowed to see him, and we have to put up with that and just carry on, knowing he's there but not necessarily feeling a sense of his presence. [5:8] That faith-knowledge is in itself a great encouragement, and it keeps us going cheerfully enough – but quite frankly we'd rather pack up the tent of our bodies and walk through the front door of our real, permanent home and feel his arms around us in a long, welcoming hug. [5:9] The bottom line is that whether we're away travelling or at home celebrating, his friendship, his ongoing approval are what really matter. We live for his 'well done, good and faithful servant'.

### **Final assessment**

[5:10] The inescapable certainty is (I'm talking about the human race in general here) that all of us without exception are going to be called up in front of the platform where Christ will be sitting on his judgment seat in full regal finery, and we are going to have our earthly lives assessed. Everything we've done will pass under his scrutiny, all the good things, all the not-so-good things. We're not going to get away with anything, and every facet of our mortal existence will be rigorously examined. I'm reminding you of this in case you think any of us, apostle or apostate, can cosy up to the Lord at the Last Day and expect special treatment. God isn't a soft touch, end of story.

**5:11-13** <sup>11</sup> *Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.* <sup>12</sup> *We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart.* <sup>13</sup> *If we are 'out of our mind,' as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.*

### **Examining my conscience**

[5:11] 'Paul, why are you trying to scare us? Haven't you told us that we're washed, sanctified, justified? What's all this about an end-of-term examination? We've already passed with flying colours, thanks to Christ!' Yes, and that's my gospel. He will never go back on his promises. This is what I tell everybody. But I also tell them that, saint or sinner, they've got to look the Judge in the face and account for their lives. Do you remember me writing to you about how the service you have done for Christ will be put through the fire-test? I have to examine my conscience every day to make sure my motives for this or that piece of witness or service for Christ are absolutely pure in the eyes of God. Only then can I appeal

to you to acknowledge the sincerity of my intentions. [5:12] In case you think I'm still on about my credentials as an apostle, like someone continually flashing their CV in your face, I'm much more concerned that you should have ammunition for dealing with these celebrity preachers who are all verbal fireworks and no substance. I want you to be able to point out, with some pride, that God's saving work is done not through slick presentation and showy gestures, but through the message about Jesus that comes from the heart to the heart.

I gather some people are saying that my team and I are mentally unbalanced, or at least emotionally disturbed. They compare us to bands of ecstatic prophets who fill the streets with wild cries and unintelligible ravings. Well, our Lord himself was accused of being out of his mind, so we consider that high praise. Yes, at times we may seem to be like possessed people, but it's God's Holy Spirit who controls us, and anyway if you've got a lifesaving message which people simply won't listen to, you proclaim it with every fibre of your being. All the same, we're perfectly capable of being calm and rational when we need to be, because we realise that you the hearers also need solid grounds for your faith, watertight arguments to combat the sceptics.

**5:14-15** <sup>14</sup> *For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.*

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

### **Divine logic at work**

[5:14] If people complain that we are illogical and they can't follow our line of reasoning, then maybe it's because we're using the language of the heart as well as the mind. The bottom line, the fundamental conviction that holds all our proclamation together, is the unbelievable and paradoxical love of God in Jesus Christ. We've come to the firm and settled conclusion that the cross demonstrates the Divine logic at work like nothing else.

Here is one man, the God-Man, dying on behalf of everyone else. He is the representative of the whole human race, the second Adam. If I carry out a task as your representative, it's as though you have done it yourself, right? *You* don't need to add anything to complete it. So if Christ dies for everyone, it's the same as everyone dying. Someone else has done my dying for me – so I can live! I'm talking, of course, not only of the physical death Jesus endured, but of the spiritual significance that his sin-bearing had for us and for the whole world. Because the Son was cut off from the land of the living, led to execution for the sins of the people, there is now life for everybody! Nobody has to die. If this isn't crystal-clear reasoning, I don't know what is.

### **Second chance at life**

But there are further implications in the cross of Christ. Here is a bunch of captives under sentence of death whose release has been secured through the self-sacrifice of one of their number. Do they simply go off and live a life of whoopee, thinking of no-one but themselves and making everyone else's life a misery? Or do they conclude that but for him they would all be dead meat, so the best thing is to follow his example and use their second chance at life to serve their fellow human beings? Jesus didn't just die and that was it – he came through into a new quality of life at the resurrection, and it's that resurrection life that we are called and motivated to embody. Again, logical? If not, whose reasoning is at fault?

**5:16-17** <sup>16</sup> *So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.* <sup>17</sup> *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:<sup>[h]</sup> the old has gone, the new is here!*

## Relationships with others

[5:16] Here's a third and (like the other two) highly relevant example of the way God's logic appeals not only to our thinking processes but to our whole being at every level. If Christ's death for us means we are now dead, and if being dead with Christ also means we have come alive with Christ, then it follows that we must be new people entirely! This affects our relationships with others in a radical way. Before, we thought of other people purely from the human point of view: 'he or she is good-looking, intelligent, funny, athletic, well-born, interesting – or the opposite.' If we met the Lord Jesus during his earthly lifetime, which I didn't, but many of my contemporaries did, we estimated him according to human criteria: 'he speaks with a northern accent, he has such-and-such a height, weight, hair colour, age and so on; he attracts huge crowds; he might even be the Messiah, which would be good news for us and bad news for the Romans.'

## Pentecost revolution

Now, however, everything has changed. He has come to take up permanent residence in our lives by his Spirit. We know him no longer from the outside but from the inside. His address isn't Nazareth or Capernaum or Bethany any more, it's Paul, Timothy, Lydia, Phoebe, Gaius' house in Corinth, Tyrannus' hall in Ephesus, John Mark's house in Jerusalem, wherever. This is the Pentecost revolution, after which nothing can ever be the same again. This is God's Messiah plan, not some human misconception of it. [5:17] Here is the old Saul of Tarsus (substitute your own name for mine), thinking and acting as his character dictates (I wince to recall it), incapable of being or doing anything different. Then the miracle happens. 'Who are you, Lord? – I am Jesus, whom you want to finish off like you did Stephen.' Result: I become Paul, baptised, forgiven, filled with the Holy Spirit. A new person has been born, no longer myself as I was, but Christ-in-me. Multiply this by all who have had this happen to them, and you have a new world: heaven has invaded earth, the new creation has taken over from the old, sin is history and human destiny has been redesigned.

Does this mean I'm now incapable of sinning? No – but in order to do so, I have to believe a lie, that the old way of living and thinking is the only one that matters or has any validity. As soon as I remember that I'm Paul and not Saul, sin becomes irrelevant to who I am, to my reborn Christ nature. That's the Divine logic at work – and I can tell you, it really does work. Don't just sit there with your mouth open – make it work for you!

*5:18-20<sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God.*

## Mediators in the dispute

[5:18] This isn't some clever system worked out by a bunch of salespeople trying to sell a programme called the Jesus Way all over the Mediterranean. It's God's own plan of salvation conceived before the world began. He always knew that if he gave a creature of his free will, the time could come when that creature might become estranged from him, that the relationship between Creator and creature might deteriorate into a hostile stand-off where neither party would yield an inch. So in the fulness of time God acted in Christ to bring that stand-off to an end. At the moment of Jesus' death the curtain of separation between a holy God and sinful mankind was decisively ripped apart. Human sin was finally atoned for and the way back to God was now open – from the Divine side.

But – and it’s a big ‘but’ – if you are going to seal a pact of friendship, both sides have to shake hands. It’s no good if one party stands there defiantly with folded arms, refusing to be reconciled. In that case you need a middleman, an intermediary who can work tirelessly to persuade the estranged party to drop their hostility. That’s what God has commissioned us to do. To act as mediators in the dispute.

### **What God is really like**

[5:19] The only means of doing this that lies in our power is to deliver a single message, which goes as follows: ‘We human beings have got it into our heads that God is some kind of tyrant or spoilsport who demands absolute perfection, and the moment we fail to come up to the mark, he will descend on us like a ton of bricks. So he sends his Servant to tell us what he is really like. The Servant, Jesus of Nazareth, demonstrates the love of God by his perfectly unselfish life, healing and helping and teaching the people, and by finally going to the cross to remove the barrier of sin and enable anyone in the world to enter into a loving relationship and friendship with God the Father. He is prepared to wipe out any debt we have run up against him. No matter how charged your account is, he has torn it into tiny pieces and now stands with arms outstretched to welcome you home. The most amazing thing of all is that he is totally depending on us, his messengers and representatives, to bring this offer to your notice and to urge you to accept it ungrudgingly.’

### **Treaty of friendship**

[5:20] And you, the unrepentant human race, won’t have any of this. You suspect a trick; you still think we’re a manipulative bunch of salesmen who are trying to convert you to our own twisted agenda. The truth is, we aren’t coming in our own name or under our own flag at all. We’re like a legation travelling hundreds of miles from a distant kingdom to bring you a treaty of lasting friendship. We come under the flag of the Lord Jesus Christ, as ambassadors for him, bearing an absolutely genuine and heartfelt message from God the Father of all. It’s the message Christ came to this world to bring us, the message he died and rose again to make good to us, and the message he now sends by his Holy Spirit through us to the farthest corners of the earth.

What is this message? ‘Drop your hostility. Make friends with me, your Lord and Lover. Let’s meet at the cross.’

**5:21** <sup>21</sup> *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

### **Why is Jesus there?**

[5:21] So here we are at our trysting-place, the foot of the cross. It’s dark here, blacker than any night, but if we can light a flickering candle of faith we may begin to understand what is going on. Up there is Someone who has been sentenced for crimes he never committed. His whole life has been innocent of any violence, any deceit, any self-seeking. So why is he there, suffering the ultimate agonies of God’s displeasure and rejection? He is the scapegoat sent into the wilderness with all the sins and ungrateful rebellion of the people on his head. Your sins, my sins, a world’s sin. Therefore what has happened to that terrible burden, that unsupportable load of iniquity? He has borne it all; there is none left for us to bear, no charge on our account. We are as clear of evil as God himself. Ahead of us now is a life lived by faith in Christ, a life centred on God’s good and right will, full of the fruit of the Spirit, shining with the love of Christ who has called us his friends.

**6:1-2** <sup>1</sup> *As God’s fellow workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.* <sup>2</sup> *For he says, ‘In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you, now is the time of God’s favour, now is the day of salvation.*

## Hopeless situation

[6:1] Yes, we may be menial employees in God's worldwide operation, but the fact is that he's asked us to collaborate with him, and that continues to the present day. In fact this letter is part of God's urgent appeal to mankind, to believers and unbelievers alike. His promise of grace is now out in the open; yet the sad fact is that when told the story of Christ's love and forgiveness, some people reject it outright, while others welcome it to start with then for whatever reason go back on their initial acceptance. Oh my Corinthian friends, I don't want you to be in either of these categories. [6:2] I imagine you are familiar with that magnificent chapter of the prophet Isaiah where Israel admits her failure as the Lord's chosen messenger, and so he commissions his very own Servant to go to the ends of the earth to bring all nations back to himself, including Israel herself. Then you get these resounding lines: 'If you think I've rejected you and turned a deaf ear to your cries for mercy, then I beg and beseech you to change your mind. The door of heaven is wide open; the invitations have gone out and everything is now ready. Come on in, not only Israel but all mankind! It isn't a trap; in fact I'm offering you an escape from the hopeless situation you've got yourselves into.'

## The time is now

Now the amazing thing is that God isn't just speaking to a people who as we now know were in grave danger of exile and in fact suffered that very consequence. He has brought it bang up to date in Christ and has come himself to tell the world that the door isn't closed. The time of exile is over – the gates of the new and heavenly Jerusalem stand wide open – the party is today! The invitation's got your name on it, so accept it while the opportunity is here, because the time is very short; the King is returning at any moment and then the doors will have to be closed for the festivities to begin.

In case you think I'm just talking to people who haven't yet accepted the Christian message, can I tell you that it applies equally to those who may have accepted it in the past, but are now turning their backs on the true gospel, or are indulging a lifestyle which is blatantly unworthy of the kingdom. You may think that God's patience is unlimited and you can put off your reconsideration to the very last minute. Well, you're grievously deluded. The time for escape, for sprinting into the safety of Christ's arms of love, is now if ever. There's no reason for delay, and in fact the danger increases every moment you hang back in irresolution.

*6:3-10<sup>3</sup> We put no stumbling-block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. <sup>4</sup> Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; <sup>5</sup> in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; <sup>6</sup> in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; <sup>7</sup> in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; <sup>8</sup> through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; <sup>9</sup> known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup> sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

## Credentials

[6:3] Does this offend you, talking about a crisis situation? Would you rather we talked about the weather? Ambassadors shouldn't go around offending people, otherwise they bring disrepute upon the country they're supposed to be representing. [6:4] This applies even more for people who claim to represent the kingdom of heaven. I've said that I am not in the business of recommending myself, but in case you think we are a bunch of charlatans who are only in it for the perks, let me present you with a list of our credentials as emissaries of the Most High God.

## **Experience**

Section One: 'Experience'. We have been through everything people have seen fit to throw at us. Time and again we have been physically assaulted, we have been deprived of any material resources, we have found ourselves in one tight spot after another. [6:5] Let me go into a bit of personal detail here. I've been judicially (if not always legally) beaten by Jewish and Roman authorities on several occasions. I've been thrown into prison and had my feet put in the stocks. I've been attacked and stoned by rioting mobs. I've worked myself to a standstill trying to make ends meet. I've spent whole nights awake guarding against death-threats from my enemies. I've gone without necessary food for days on end. And if these kinds of things have been happening to me, they've equally been the lot of my companions in Christ's service. If you haven't suffered with him, you're not going to make much of an impact for him.

## **Character**

[6:6] Section Two: 'Character'. I know a character reference should be written by someone else, but I'm describing the kind of person the missionary has to be. It goes without saying that taking sexual advantage of anyone is completely out of the question. But it's not enough to be morally principled – you've got to be thoroughly grounded in a good knowledge of the Scriptures. You're going to need endless patience and the willingness to go the second mile with people you may not necessarily see eye to eye with. You've got to have the kind of goodness that is generous to a fault and risks being taken for a ride from time to time.

The secret of all this, of course, is walking in the Spirit and abiding in Christ. Holiness is impossible by any other means. Most of us are quite good at pretending to love other people for the sake of outward appearances, while we secretly fume at having to waste time on them. Only the Jesus-spirit can cope with the awfulness of human nature. [6:7] By the same token, if we're going to persuade people about the goodness of God in Christ, we need to practise absolute straight-talking and not use words to manipulate our hearers. Whatever gifts of personality we may have, it's not our spell-binding oratory, it's God's own power convicting and convincing them that's going to bring people to their knees in repentance and faith. Again, I've got to emphasise that we simply cannot produce these qualities by ourselves – it's got to be God's work from start to finish. Only he can fashion the heavenly armour that can equip us for defence and attack in the work of the gospel. But we've got to strap it on, and that's where our attitude is crucial.

## **Attitude**

Section Three: 'Attitude'. As we walk on the highway of holiness through this world, we are going to find our faith assaulted from every side. [6:8] How do you uproot a stake that's been driven firmly into the ground? You work it from side to side until the hole is enlarged, and then it's easy to pull it out. So don't be surprised if you are subjected to a succession of opposite experiences, as we are when we conduct our gospel campaigns. One day we're being praised to the skies for our godlike oratory; the next we're being hounded out of town as heretics and traitors. One week people won't have a good word to say about us, the next the wind of rumour will have changed and we'll be the flavour of the season. Remember what the Jerusalemites said about Jesus? One moment it was, 'He's a good man and true,' the next, 'No, he's a deceiver of the people.' [6:9] In one town you will walk down the middle of the street and no-one will recognise you; in the next you can't put your head outside the door of your lodgings without being thronged by excited crowds jabbering 'It's the preachers!'

You get exhausted by all the jostling and attention, some unwelcome, some flattering, and then the thought steals in, 'Why is God so inconsistent and paradoxical in the way he treats us?' It's like that torture where you're repeatedly thrust under the water and nearly drowned, then resuscitated at the last moment. Or being lynched by a fanatical mob: the last thing you remember is a hail of well-aimed

stones, then you wake up and find, amazingly, you're still alive. You can be beaten with rods to within an inch of your life, but they never quite finish you off completely. [6:10] It really gets to you that folk can be so unbelieving and perverse; but then something happens to cheer you up, like the Lord giving me that strengthening vision after we'd had to abandon our synagogue ministry among you. I don't know how we could have carried on without the steady undercurrent of crazy optimism that the Spirit seems to generate even at the darkest times.

You learn to operate with complete contradictory assumptions. You haven't a penny to your name in material terms, yet in the things that matter spiritually you are millionaires dispensing largesse to countless numbers. Where earthly affluence is concerned, you have no resources and no prospects; yet because you are members of the kingdom of God, you stand to inherit the whole world, and that includes not only the life to come but also the present existence.

**6:11-13** <sup>11</sup> *We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you.* <sup>12</sup> *We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.* <sup>13</sup> *As a fair exchange – I speak as to my children – open wide your hearts also.*

### **Heartfelt appeal**

[6:11] There! I've done what I swore I'd never do, written down my 'qualifications' for Divine employment. They may not be very flattering or impressive, but at least they're not trying to pull the wool over anyone's eyes. And, let me tell you, I'd rather be in this job than any other I could think of. So please forgive me for being completely honest with you. The fact is, my beloved friends at Corinth, you mean such a lot to me. I'm not being sentimental; but – this is quite hard to convey in cold print – we, Timothy and I and the others, have a huge space for you right in the centre of our hearts. We've told you exactly what we think of you – we haven't pulled our punches – but that doesn't mean we've become narrowly critical or bitter towards you. I think it's the reverse, really: it's you who have allowed your attitude towards us to harden into suspicion and rejection. It's as though you have thrown up a thorn hedge between us which we find impossible to get through. [6:13] I feel like a father (which I suppose I am where you are concerned) pleading with his recalcitrant children: 'I've allowed you to run free over the whole estate; won't you at least give me a half-acre in return where we can walk together and be friends as we always used to be? Or are you going to close me out completely?'

**6:14-16** <sup>14</sup> *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?* <sup>15</sup> *What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?* <sup>16</sup> *What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'*

### **Strong warning**

[6:14] Silence from your side. Are you deaf to all my appeals? What I'm asking you to do is to resolve to be (as you have been since the beginning) a gospel church building the kingdom of Christ in Corinth. That will mean coming back into partnership with apostolic workers such as Timothy and myself. Maybe you can't stand the thought of ploughing the field alongside us. I agree that the people you could team up with are probably a lot more attractive than we are. But before we part, I'd like to issue a strong warning.

There's a life-and-death difference between belief and disbelief. Someone who lives by the grace of God and has put themselves under the Lordship of Christ can't possibly go into spiritual partnership with someone who owes no allegiance to Christ and lives by the principles and dictates of this world alone. It

stands to reason, doesn't it? Person A is determined to live a life of holiness according to the will of God, while Person B swans along quite happily pleasing no-one but themselves. How can they even sit down and plan the next five minutes together? Person A wants to walk in the light of Christ who died to save them from sin, while Person B skulks along in the shadows hoping their questionable practices won't be detected. They're bound to split up before long. [6:15] Imagine the Lord Jesus Christ and the Devil having a cordial chat about the latest business opportunity! Well, they did meet up memorably in the wilderness temptation, and Christ told Satan to get lost not once but three times. How can two people farm the same piece of land if one wants to sow the wholesome grain of faith and the other is set on producing the wild oats of unbelief? [6:16] What's the difference between the Temple at Jerusalem and every other temple in the Graeco-Roman world? Not an idol in sight, no image of God, just the living presence of the Most High who doesn't need a man-made temple to live in.

### **New Temple**

Let's think about this 'temple'. We are the people of the New Covenant, sealed with Christ's blood. The Lord foresaw the end of the old Temple at Jerusalem, because there would be no need for it any longer; he would be raising up a new temple, the temple of his body. Look at the wording of the New Covenant in Jeremiah: 'I'm going to be their God, and they're going to be my people.' Where does the prophet get that from? Why, from deep in the heart of the Torah, way back in the law of Moses, where we find: 'I'm going to pitch my tent exactly where you are, and your sinfulness will no longer be hateful to me; I'm going to walk around freely in your midst' – and then these very same words – 'I'm going to be the God who belongs to you, your special Holy One, and you're going to be the people who belong to me, my dear, very special people.' If your teachers tell you that this refers to the Tabernacle, which antedates the Temple, which of course is technically correct, then take them to Ezekiel where the prophet picks up the very same promise and refers it to a *future* time (not in the dim distant past at all) when God is going to come down and set up his tabernacle among his true people who are going to include the Gentile nations! And as we now know, this is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom God has tabernacled among us in human flesh, has set up home right where we are, and has started to build a worldwide Temple of the Spirit where he can live for evermore to his heart's content.

Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel couldn't know this then, but you do now. Open your eyes and let the light stream in! I'm now going to explain the implications of all this theology, because it applies not only to the twisted teaching you're getting about the supreme importance of the Law, but also to the insidious moral libertinism that's creeping into your midst from the permissive brigade.

**6:17-7:1** <sup>17</sup> *Therefore, 'Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.'* <sup>18</sup> *And, 'I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.'*  
<sup>7</sup> <sup>1</sup> *Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*

### **A different people**

[6:17] It's all about how you relate to the world around you, now that you've become children of God. Travelling around in Macedonia means that I can't verify these texts in a library; but the Holy Spirit is bringing fragments of his Scriptures to mind, words and phrases that have a direct bearing on the kind of holiness the Lord intends for you and is therefore, with your cooperation, working in you even as I write this and you read it. Go with the grain of Scripture and you'll walk in the way of the Spirit.

God is always calling upon his people to be different. See what Isaiah says to the Jerusalem-in-exile folk way over in Babylon, wondering how they can sing the songs of Zion in a strange land. 'You may be

weeping your hearts out in the midst of a pagan land where everything around you reeks of idolatry and demon-worship,' says God, 'but I'm there too. You can't leave Babylon literally, but you can separate from it spiritually even when you're walking around in it day after day. You may be jostled by crowds on their way to yet another sacrifice, but you don't have to be defiled by all this multi-god stuff – you can come through clean and pure, without a stain on your souls.' How?

Ezekiel shows us a double saving process at work. 'You may think I've abandoned you, dispersed you among these irredeemably godless nations and left you to sink or swim depending on your capacity for holiness, which you've never had and which you're incapable of generating on your own. Well, sorry, but I'm still powerfully at work in your midst. Not only am I gathering my own people from all the places where I've scattered them, like a woman searching out the priceless stones of a necklace she pulled apart in a fit of anger – I'm also placarding my name of the One True Holy God before the astonished eyes of your captor nations. Yes, you're there so that they can see what I am really like!'

### **Family likeness**

[6:18] So we've got to be a distinctive people. We need to develop such a strong family likeness to the Son that people catch a glimpse of the Father's true beauty and grace. This is where another scripture comes to mind, from a rather surprising part of the Book. It comes at a crisis time for God's people, when they've forced Samuel to choose them a king. You would think God (their true King) would want to have nothing more to do with them after that, but Samuel gives them a word of unbelievable graciousness from the Lord. 'This king is going to let you and me down time and again, but I promise I shall be like a Father to him, and he will be like a son to me. This is because I have a future King in mind, who really will reflect the fulness of my love to you, and he will bring me countless sons (*and daughters* – I'm not going to neglect half the human race) who are going to make up my diamond people, each shining with a different facet of my glory.' And to show that he not only intends to do this, but is fully able to perform it, he stamps his signature on the narrative, the name of the Almighty God who reigns supreme and for whom nothing is impossible.

### **Pure gold**

[7:1] These are furnace-tested promises, my beloved friends. And you too must go through that furnace, because this Almighty Father-God wants sons and daughters who are pure silver and gold, without a single trace of staining on their character. He has destined all of us to be completely new people, whose bodies and spirits are to be uncannily like that of Jesus Christ himself – not a hint of self-seeking, or lust, or malice, or pride – flawlessly and irreversibly perfect. And if you think this is totally impossible, then listen to this: he is calling us to cooperate at every stage in the process! If it was wilful and intentional sin that messed us up in the first place, as indeed it was, it must be willed and intentional holiness that recreates us as the people of God. I hope you see the logic of this, because the fire that burns at the heart of the Almighty is both refining and cleansing; there would be nothing more terrible than to find that the goodness that gave itself to redeem me from the fire had become the very fire that finally reduced me to ashes.

*7:2-4* <sup>2</sup>Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. <sup>3</sup>I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. <sup>4</sup>I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

### **Solidarity**

[7:2] Right! I've done my warning bit. Now back to my appeal. The last thing I want is for us to part company. We want to sail on with you and not be put ashore like an unwanted passenger. Is there still a

berth for us on the good ship *Corinthians*? It's not as if we were moral lepers who've been exposed as tricksters, sharks, conmen simply on the make for ourselves. [7:3] Nor do I want it to seem as if I'm a stern and judgmental critic who is continually raking over the embers of the past to bring up old grievances. Our relationship is completely different, as I have so often stressed. We're together in Christ. If you have to go through the fires of persecution and get martyred for your faith, there we are walking with you, meeting our deaths alongside you. If you are experiencing the joys and excitement of new life in the Spirit, then again we'd want to share in that. All because we love you to bits. Separation is not an option.

[7:4] You may be asking why I've given you such a lot of stick in this letter – well, I've spoken my mind because I do very much want the best for you. You should hear the way we talk about you to people we meet on our travels! We are continually praising you to the skies. There is no 'but' about this. You may think, 'Oh, he's saying this to keep his spirits up.' Yes, we've gone through a lot of painful experiences (as I never stop telling you!) and there are doubtless more to come, but we're brim-full of optimism where you are concerned. Titus' news has made us delirious with joy, as I'm going to explain in a moment. But get hold of this: even when things have been very dark indeed, the thought of your solidarity with us has kept us going. We're still here because we know you're out there, praying for us, fighting our corner, giving us hope.

## CROSS-REFERENCES

References are listed in biblical order. Underlined: direct quotation from or reference to an Old Testament passage.

\*Asterisked: possible or probable allusion to an Old Testament passage. Some references may be anachronistic in that Paul would not have known the text referred to, but they show a similar line of thought.

**1:1** *Widest possible circulation* Col 4:16.

**1:3-5** *Praising God* Eph 1:3. *Heart of compassion* Isa 49:13. *Continuing agony* Col 1:24.

**1:6-7** *Growing pains of the kingdom* Acts 14:22.

**1:8-11** *Big trouble in Asia* Acts 19:23. *Out of the flood-waters* Ps 18:16. *Prayers are an essential part* Rom 15:30.

**1:12-14** *Sincerely wrong* Prov 16:2, Rom 10:2. *Justifiable pride* 1 Th 2:19-20.

**1:15-17** *Paul medicine* 1 Cor 4:19.

**1:18-22** *God's word can be trusted* 1 Th 5:24, Heb 10:23. *From one opinion to another* 1 Ki 18:21. *Can't you remember* Acts 18:5. *Ordaining a sacrifice* Heb 9:18. *God's Amen to us* Rev 3:14. *Every priest* Exod 28:41. *Every king* 1 Ki 1:38. *Anointed One* Ps 2:2, 45:6-7. *Lions' den* Dan 6:17. *Special possession* Mal 3:17, Eph 1:14. *Change his mind* Jas 1:17.

**1:23-2:4** *Opened up those wounds afresh* 1 Cor 4:21. *That stern letter* 2 Cor 7:8, 12. *Wreathed in smiles* 1 Cor 4:21.

**2:5-11** *The person at the centre* 1 Cor 5:1-2, 13. *A great adversary* Acts 5:3, 1 Pet 5:8.

**2:12-13** *About to leave Asia* 2 Cor 1:23. *Gives me peace* Phil 4:6-7.

**2:14-17** *Crisis was resolved* 2 Cor 7:5-7. *Other plans* Acts 8:5, 26. *Some evangelists I know* 1 Cor 9:12, 2 Cor 11:7. *Jesus crucified* 1 Cor 2:2.

**3:1-3** *Carved in stone* Exod 31:18. *Incised on the heart* Jer 31:33.

**3:4-6** *Whole human race* Isa 49:6.

**3:7-11** Mount Sinai Exod 34:29-35. *Reinforces human sinfulness* Rom 7:7-12. *Sun of righteousness* Mal 4:3.

*Light of the world* Jn 8:12. *Jeremiah told us so plainly* \*Jer 31:31.

**3:12-16** *Inability to keep the Law* Exod 24:3. *Area of their brains has atrophied* Rom 10:2-4. *The people's righteousness* Jer 23:5-6. *Rips that curtain down* Mk 15:38. *Every single believer in Christ* Eph 3:12.

**3:17-18** *Written on their hearts* \*Jer 31:33. *Ezekiel echoes his words* \*Ezek 11:19-20, 36:26-27. *New, living people* Ezek 37:3, 14. *Power not their own* Jn 15:5. *Peace instead of anxiety* Gal 5:22. *Through grace shares with us* Col 3:4, 1 Jn 3:2. *Glorious new creation* 2 Cor 5:17, Col 1:27, Rev 3:4. *He will do it* Ps 37:5, 1 Th 2:12, 5:24.

**4:1-2** *Ally within called conscience* 2 Cor 1:12. *Way you ought to go* Isa 30:21. *Never tire of telling people* Acts 6:14.

**4:3-6** *Saying earlier* 2 Cor 3:14. *Prince of this world* Jn 12:31. *Referred to him earlier* 2 Cor 2:11. *Very powerful rationale* Eph 6:12. *True character of God* Rev 12:9. *Light of the world* Jn 8:12, 1:4-5. *Movement and life* Gen 1:3. *Like a new creation* 2 Cor 5:17, 1 Pet 1:23.

**4:7-12** *Space in which to operate* Acts 14:3. *Never run out of options* Acts 16:6-10. *Never throws us to the wolves* Acts 17:9-10. *Turn up trumps time and again* Acts 17:14-15. *Never trampled to death* Acts 14:20. *Fruit-tree to blossom* Jn 12:24.

**4:13-15** *As I was saying just now* 2 Cor 4:4-5. *One of the Psalms* Ps 116. *From certain death* Ps 116:3, 8. *Can only get from God* Ps 116:10. *Brings glory to you* Ps 116:11-17.

**4:16-18** *Refreshed by the presence* Acts 3:20. *Glories ahead of us* 1 Pet 5:10. *Brighter by contrast* Ps 23:4, Prov 4:18. *Never be extinguished* Rom 8:38-39.

**5:1-5** *At some length* 1 Cor 15. *Herod's Temple* Mk 14:58. *Parthenon at Athens* Acts 17:24. *Ashamed* Gen 3:10. *Redemption of the body* Rom 8:23. *Sure guarantee* 2 Cor 1:22, Eph 1:14. *Seal on that grave* Mt 27:66. *Always promised to do* Acts 2:18, 33. *His own intended people* Rom 8:9.

**5:6-10** *Every day of our mortal lives* Mt 28:20. *Good and faithful servant* Mt 25:21. *Expect special treatment* 1 Pet 4:18.

**5:11-13** *Sanctified, justified* 1 Cor 6:11. *Through the fire-test* 1 Cor 3:13. *Out of his mind* Mt 10:25, Mk 3:21. *Like possessed people* Acts 17:18, 26:24. *When we need to be* Acts 26:25. *Combat the sceptics* 1 Pet 3:15.

**5:14-15** *Sins of the people* Isa 53:8. *Logical?* Rom 12:1.

**5:16-17** *Bad news for the Romans* Acts 1:6. *Filled with the Holy Spirit* Acts 9:17-18, 22:16. *Christ-in-me* Gal 2:20. *Human history redesigned* \*Isa 43:18-19, \*65:17.

**5:18-20** *Before the world began* 1 Cor 2:7; 2 Tim 1:9. *Corners of the earth* Acts 1:8.

**5:21** *Any self-seeking* Isa 53:9b. *Displeasure and rejection* Isa 53:4, 10. *Scapegoat* Lev 16:21-22, Rom 8:3. *A world's sin* 1 Jn 2:2. *Called us his friends* Zech 13:6, Jn 15:15.

**6:1-2** *Out in the open* Tit 2:11. *Magnificent chapter* Isa 49. *Chosen messenger* Isa 49:3-4. *Israel herself* Isa 49:7. *These resounding lines* Isa 49:8. *Everything is now ready* Lk 14:17. *Doors will have to be closed* Mt 25:10. *On the true gospel* Gal 1:6.

**6:3-10** *Recommending myself* 2 Cor 3:1. *Judicially beaten* Acts 16:22, 2 Cor 11:24. *Feet put in the stocks* Acts 16:24. *Stoned by rioting mobs* Acts 14:19, 2 Cor 11:25. *Make ends meet* 2 Th 3:8. *Death-threats from my enemies* Acts 9:25, 17:10. *Gone without necessary food* Acts 9:9, 2 Cor 11:27. *Completely out of the question* 1 Th 4:6, 1 Tim 5:2. *Knowledge of the Scriptures* 2 Tim 3:15, 2 Pet 1:5. *See eye-to-eye with* Mt 5:41, 2 Tim 4:2. *Generous to a fault* 1 Cor 13:4. *Impossible by any other means* Jn 15:5, Gal 5:22-23. *Manipulate our hearers* 2 Tim 2:15. *In repentance and faith* Acts 2:37, 16:30. *Got to strap it on* Eph 6:13. *Heretics and traitors* Acts 14:12, 19. *Deceiver of the people* Jn 7:12. *Still alive* Acts 14:19-20. *Finish you off completely* Acts 16:23. *Abandon synagogue ministry* Acts 18:5-10. *The present existence* Jn 10:10, Mt 5:3, 5.

**6:11-13** *Haven't pulled our punches* 2 Tim 4:2. *Where you are concerned* 1 Cor 4:15.

**6:14-16** *Three times* Mt 4:1-11. *Temple to live in* Acts 17:24. *Sealed with Christ's blood* Lk 22:20. *Temple of his body* Mk 13:2; Jn 2:19-22. *In Jeremiah* Jer 31:33 [39:33 LXX]. *Law of Moses* Lev 26:11-12. *Take them to Ezekiel* Ezek 37:26-28. *In human flesh* Jn 1:14. *Temple of the Spirit* 1 Cor 3:16. *You do now* Mt 13:16-17.

**6:17-7:1** *See what Isaiah says* Isa 52:11. *Ezekiel shows us* Ezek 20:34, 41. *Surprising part of the Book* 2 Sam 7:14. *Half the human race* Isa 43:6, 49:22. *Facet of my glory* Zeph 3:20, Mal 3:17. *Signature on the narrative* \*2 Sam 7:8 (2 Ki 7:8 LXX). *Furnace-tested promises* Ps 12:6. *Silver and gold* Mal 3:3. *Reduced me to ashes* Heb 12:14, 29.

**7:2-4** *Done my warning bit* 2 Cor 6:13. *Explain in a moment* 2 Cor 7:6, 13. *Praying for us* 2 Cor 1:11.

Mark Greenstock  
Sherborne  
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