

II CORINTHIANS

**The Second Letter of Paul
to the Church in
Corinth**

Introduction

We begin by reviewing Paul's connections with the community in Corinth. Paul was there from the autumn of 50 to the spring of 52 (see Acts 18:1-18). He wrote back to them from Ephesus, possibly in 53. Earlier correspondence (see 1Corinthians 5:9) has, unfortunately, not survived. In First Corinthians Paul speaks of plans to revisit the community: 'I will visit you after passing through Macedonia ... and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter'(1Corinthians 16:5-6). In the letter we are about to study we read that sometime during Paul's three year stay in Ephesus, he decided to cross directly to Corinth. He speaks of this 'second visit'(2Corinthians 13:2) as a 'painful' one (2Corinthians 2:1). It appears that when he was leaving Corinth on the completion of this second visit, he promised that when he completed his mission in Ephesus he would come straight back to Corinth: 'I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judea'(2Corinthians 1:16). When he arrived back in Ephesus, however, he changed his plans again and decided it was better to write to the Corinthians instead, and to leave his visit till after he had been to Macedonia. This letter, too, has not survived. He describes it as having been written 'out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears' (2Corinthians 2:4; also 7;8,12). In the letter we are about to read he defends his change of plans. He feels the need also to defend his ministry.

Leaving Ephesus in the summer of 55AD, Paul headed north for Macedonia (see Acts 20:1). On the way he stayed over at Troas where he received the call some six years previously to go over to Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). However his stay there was brief:

When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia.

– 2Corinthians 2:12-13

The indications are that Second Corinthians was composed in Macedonia not long after Paul's arrival there. He speaks of a grave, indeed life-threatening, situation from which God rescued him in Asia (1:8), giving the impression that it was a recent experience. This would imply that Titus reached Paul in Macedonia in the autumn of 55, not very long after Paul's arrival there. Since, as we shall see, his news was mostly good, it is likely that Paul wrote this letter so that it could be delivered before winter closed in, making the journey south impossible. After spending the winter of 55-56 among the communities which he had founded in Macedonia five years previously (Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea), it seems that during 56 he carried out a wider mission in the area. He mentions in his Letter to the Romans, written from Corinth during the winter of 56-57, that he had journeyed as far as Illyricum (Romans 15:19; Acts 20:2). The Via Egnatia would have taken him from Philippi or Thessalonica to Apollonia on the Adriatic coast. It is quite a short journey north to Illyricum (Dalmatia).

Map 4. Ephesus to Macedonia and Illyricum



Introduction

There are a number of sudden changes of mood and subject matter in this letter. Some authors see this as pointing to its being an edited compilation of various letters written by Paul to Corinth, perhaps including parts of the two letters to which Paul refers in 1Corinthians 5:9 and 2Corinthians 2:4. Different theories are advanced, some of which require considerable reorganisation of the letter as we now have it. Some scholars, however, argue that changes in mood and apparently sudden changes in topic can be explained without having to make any alterations to the letter as we now have it.

The complexities of the debate take us beyond the scope of this commentary. I am unable to find any convincing reason to disturb the first eight and probably the first nine chapters as we now have them. They form a psychologically consistent whole, and I will be treating them as such. The same cannot be said about chapters ten to thirteen. When introducing chapter ten, I will present reasons favouring the opinion that the final four chapters come from a separate letter and one probably composed after the letter containing chapters one to nine. They manifest a very different relationship between Paul and the Corinthian community than the relationship that is evident in the earlier chapters. It would appear that Titus, having delivered chapters one to nine, brought very disturbing news back to Paul while he was in Macedonia or Illyricum. Chapter ten to thirteen was Paul's response, or at least part of it, and these chapters were included as a kind of appendix when the correspondence was being organised for wider distribution.

The Structure of II Corinthians

Part One:

- a: Paul's sufferings and the comfort God has given him 1:1-11
 b: He explains why he put off his promised visit 1:12 - 2:2
 c: He tells them why he wrote an earlier letter 2:3-11

Part Two:

- Paul speaks of his apostolic commission 2:12 - 5:19

Part Three:

- a: Paul appeals to them to be reconciled 5:20 - 6:13
 b: The community as God's temple must be pure 6:14 - 7:1
 c: Paul speaks of his letter and the news brought by Titus 7:2-16

Part Four:

- Paul finalises arrangements for the collection 8:1 - 9:15

Appendix

10:1 - 13:13

The liturgical readings

1:1-7	10th Monday of Ordinary Time Year I
1:8-17,23-24	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
1:18-22	7th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B and 10th Tuesday Year I
2:1-17	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
3:1-6	8th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year
3:4-11	10th Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year I
3:12-14	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
3:15 - 4:1,3-6	10th Thursday of Ordinary Time Year I
4:2	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
4:6-11	9th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
4:7-15	10th Friday of Ordinary Time Year I
4:13 - 5:1	10th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
5:2-5	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary

Liturgical Readings

5:6-10	11th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
5:11-13	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
5:14-17	12th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
5:14-21	10th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year I
5:17-21	4th Sunday of Lent Year C
5:20 - 6:2	Ash Wednesday
6:1-10	11th Monday of Ordinary Time Year I
6:11-18	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
7:1-16	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
8:1-9	11th Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year I
8:7,9,13-15	13th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
8:10-12,16-24	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
9:1-5,12-15	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
9:6-11	11th Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year I
10:1-18	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
11:1-11	11th Thursday of Ordinary Time Year I
11:12-17,19-20	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
11:18,21-30	11th Friday of Ordinary Time Year I
11:31-33	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
12:1-10	11th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year I
12:7-10	14th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
12:11-21	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
13:1-10	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
13:11-13	Trinity Sunday Year A

The address (verses one and two) is almost identical with that of Paul's earlier letter to the same community. This time Timothy is with him (see 1Corinthians 4:17, 16:10-11), and he sends greetings not only to the community in Corinth itself, but to other Christians in the province. Once again Paul highlights his apostolic commission: he has seen the risen Christ (1Corinthians 9:10), who commissioned him to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:15-16). He founded the Christian community in Corinth as part of this commission and in obedience to 'the will of God' (also 1Cor 9:17).

As in his earlier letter, Paul refers to the Christian community as 'saints' (see 1Corinthians 1:2). The God of love has chosen them and in responding in faith they have become part of God's people who already experience God's presence and who will inherit God's kingdom. For a reflection on the significance of the terms 'Father', 'Christ', 'grace', 'peace' and 'Lord', we refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 1:1-3 in which all these terms appear. It is significant that in verse two the one preposition 'from' (Greek: *apo*) covers both 'God our Father' and 'the Lord Jesus Christ'. The communion of the risen Jesus with God is complete. They are one.

The section after the address usually sets the mood for the letter and this is no exception, though here Paul expresses his gratitude to God by way of praise. God is described by Paul as the Father of 'mercies' (*oiktirmos*). In the Greek Old Testament *oiktirmos* translates the Hebrew רחם which is related to the word for womb: 'the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him' (2Chronicles 30:9). 'In your great mercies you did not forsake them in the wilderness' (Nehemiah 9:19). God has the kinds of feelings for us and demonstrates the kinds of care which a mother has for the child in her womb. Jesus invites us: 'Be merciful just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36).

Paul also describes God as the God of all 'consolation' (*paraklēsis*). The core of this word is the verb 'to call' (*kaleō*) and Paul uses the verb *parakaleō* frequently in his moral exhortations, for he sees himself as mediating the call of Christ to his readers to live a life of love with all that this implies. We have also met the noun *paraklēsis* being used in the sense of an appeal (1Thessalonians 2:3). However, because God always responds when we call to him, the Greek Old Testament uses this word to translate the Hebrew נחם as, for example: 'I am he who comforts you' (Isaiah 51:12); 'As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you' (Isaiah 66:13). God hears the cry of the poor.

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia:

²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation

[the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation]

⁴who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

⁵For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.

⁶If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering.

⁷Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

The consolation given by God is experienced at times of ‘affliction’ (Greek: *thlipsis*). Paul used this word in his letters to the Thessalonians in reference to the persecution which they were undergoing (see 1Thessalonians 1:6, 3:3; 2Thessalonians 1:4). He used it also for his own sufferings (1Thessalonians 3:7). He sees such suffering as necessarily part of being a disciple of Jesus, for, like Jesus himself, Christians are experiencing the resistance of evil to the victory of love. The consolation which Paul experiences in his affliction teaches him how to reach out as an instrument of God’s love to others, and in particular to the Corinthians, when they are suffering and in need of encouragement.

In a daring and beautiful expression, he speaks of such suffering as ‘the suffering of Christ’. He uses a simple Greek genitive which links the two words ‘suffering’ and ‘Christ’ without specifying further the nature of the connection. To grasp the richness of Paul’s understanding of his sufferings as being the sufferings of Christ, we must go back to his conversion experience. His disciple, Luke, has Jesus say to Paul: ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’ (Acts 9:5). We recall also Paul’s words to the Galatians: ‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20). Such is the intimate communion of life between the risen Jesus and his disciples that Paul can speak of Jesus suffering when a member of his body suffers.

The general nature of the genitive construction means that it could also include the idea that the suffering to which Paul is referring is the result of his commitment to carrying out the commission given him by Christ, as well as the idea that it is through accepting such suffering in love that the reign of the Christ (the Messiah) is realised. For this reason he can speak of his afflictions as being for their ‘salvation’ (Greek: *sōteria*). As we found when reflecting on Paul’s Thessalonian correspondence, ‘salvation’ speaks of the final victory over all that keeps us bound and separates us from the fullness of communion with God for which we are created and for which we long (see 1Thessalonians 5:8-9, 2Thessalonians 2:13). As we shall discover shortly, a lot of hurt has happened between Paul and this well-loved community. Some of the internal divisions which he addressed in his earlier letter seem to be still present and some confusion has been introduced by visiting itinerant missionaries. In spite of all this, Paul’s hope (see commentary on Galatians 5:5) is unshaken.

One major reason for Paul's feeling of consolation is no doubt the news brought to him by Titus. Here, however, he gives another reason. Something happened in Asia that 'so unbearably crushed' Paul that he 'despaired of life itself'. However, God preserved him and so he is able to continue his apostolic mission and he is encouraged to believe that God will continue to rescue him. We have no information about what it was that threatened his life. All Paul says here is that it helped him to deepen his reliance on the one who 'delivered my soul from death' (Psalm 116:8). Paul concludes his prayer of praise by asking the Corinthians to hold him in their prayers. He needs to be surrounded by their love, and when they join in praying for him, the 'blessing' (Greek: *charisma*), the 'gift of grace' that comes to him through their prayers, will be a source of grace to others, for which these others, too, will give thanks.

This is the most tender and personal beginning of all the letters we have read so far. In his first letter to Corinth, Paul had written much about the 'weakness' of the cross. Here we see him sharing in that weakness, united to Christ in his sufferings, putting his trust in the Father of the one to whom he has committed his life, and sharing all this with a community to which he hopes it will unite him more closely.

The central theme of this prayer of praise has been that of comfort in affliction. John calls the Spirit 'comforter' (Greek: *paraklētos*, 'paraclete', 'advocate'). At the last supper, thinking of the loneliness of his disciples without him, Jesus promises:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate [Comforter], to be with you forever ... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you ... you will see me; because I live, you also will live ... I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

– John 14:16-20

Let us contemplate Jesus in his sufferings. Let us watch him in his agony in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46), and as he dies on the cross (Matthew 27: 45-50). We think also of the pain that afflicted his heart when he saw a leper suffering (Mark 1 :40-45), or when he wept over the city (Luke 19:41-44). Let us pray for communion with his heart as he turns to his Father for comfort and strength, and let us ask for a share in his prayer and in the Spirit that his Father sent to comfort him.

⁸We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.

⁹Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

¹⁰He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again,

¹¹as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

¹²Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God — and all the more toward you.

¹³For we write you nothing other than what you can read and also understand; I hope you will understand unto the end — ¹⁴as you have already understood us in part — that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast.

¹⁵Since I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a double favour;

¹⁶I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judea.

¹⁷Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time?

For most of the year there was regular contact across the Aegean between Corinth and Ephesus. This enabled Paul to keep in touch with the community there. First Corinthians speaks of information that reached him concerning the church in Corinth. It speaks also of a letter which he received and a delegation, and of another letter from Paul which has, unfortunately, been lost. Shortly, in this letter, Paul will refer to a visit which he made to Corinth and another letter, also lost. Though we have insufficient information to be certain how all these contacts fit in relation to one another, we attempted in the Introduction to this letter to suggest a likely chain of events. The key point is that Paul kept changing his plans. The last they heard from him he was going to visit them again before heading north to Macedonia, and now he is writing from Macedonia not having passed through Corinth.

Paul does not want his opponents in Corinth, who are accusing him of not really caring about the community there and of being untrustworthy, to use this change of plan to support their accusations. He goes to some pains to explain himself, because he sees the connection between their trust in him and their confidence in the gospel which he proclaimed to them. If they reject him, they could reject the gospel. The biggest difference between this letter and Paul's earlier one is that here he feels the need not only to explain the nature of his ministry but to defend it. Scholars offer different suggestions as to who Paul's opponents in Corinth were. Most suggest, I think rightly, that they are Jewish-Christian missionaries with similar ideas to those who were causing trouble in Galatia (see commentary on Galatians 1:7). Paul begins by stating that his own conscience is clear. His decisions have not been driven by selfish motives or ordinary human considerations, but have been made in response to God's grace. All will be revealed on the day of judgment, and Paul is confident that they will see then how proud he is of them and how much they mean to him. He really did want to come to them before heading north. This way he would see them twice. Paul is sufficiently confident in their love, in spite of the hurts, that he knows that they would see this as a 'favour' (Greek: *charis*, 'grace'), just as much as he would. Surely they know him well enough not to believe that he is one of those flatterers who say what they think people want to hear but have no intention of doing what they say.

The gospel is not abstract speculation; it is not a ‘philosophy of life’. It is about Jesus, and about what he revealed concerning the true nature of God and God’s relationships with people. It is not enough for us to hear about the good news. We have to experience it in people, and when the experience is convincing and we put our faith in the gospel that has been proclaimed to us, we experience the Spirit of the living Christ in our lives. In all his correspondence Paul is appealing to experience. He is also constantly appealing to his own example: ‘Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ’ (1Corinthians 11:1). He is therefore well aware of the fact that the quality of his relations with the Corinthians is itself a symbol of the very gospel which he, Silvanus and Timothy had preached to them (see Acts 18:5). He feels the need to defend himself against the accusation that he has been unfaithful to them, for if they believe that, they may be tempted to call into question the faithfulness of God which he has proclaimed to them.

On the very fidelity of God, therefore, Paul insists that he has been frank with them. By Yes he means Yes, and by No, No. His thoughts go straight to Jesus. Whatever plans Paul may make, he owes obedience to Christ, and must change plans when instructed to do so. It is God’s Son (see Galatians 1:15-16; 1Thessalonians 1:10) who has revealed the fidelity of God. He is the one through whose faithful Yes (through whose obedience to God’s will), God has carried out, is carrying out, and will carry out all his promises. It is Jesus’ Yes that is mediated to the Corinthians through the Yes of Paul, Jesus’ commissioned ambassador. It is through Paul’s ministry that the Corinthians will learn this same Yes (‘Amen’), and through their fidelity give glory to God. The Hebrew ‘Amen’ (1:20) is related to the word which we translate ‘faith’. Paul reminds them that to say ‘Amen’ is to say that we accept what has been said, that we acknowledge it to be true, that we commit ourselves to make it our own and to base our lives and our decisions upon it.

Paul’s words invite us to spend some time remembering the promises that God has made to us personally, including the promises he made to us on the occasion of our marriage, or of our taking of religious vows, or of our entering a new career, or on other occasions of commitment in our life. Paul is inviting us to remember that God is faithful. He promised us something when he gave us life - and he will keep faithful to that promise: ‘Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope’ (Jeremiah 29:11).

¹⁸As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been ‘Yes and No.’

¹⁹For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not ‘Yes and No’; but in him it is always ‘Yes.’

²⁰For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’

For this reason it is through him that we say the ‘Amen,’ to the glory of God.

²¹But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, ²²by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.

²³But I call on God as witness against me: it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth.

²⁴I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith; rather, we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith.

²⁵So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit.

²⁶For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?

This faithful God, having said Yes, has revealed that he is carrying out his promises in Jesus. As we contemplate Jesus we see him responding with a ‘Yes’ to people in all kinds of circumstances. We see him responding to life with all its joys, but also with all its risks, its disappointments and its suffering. He responded with ‘Yes’ even to his passion and death, trusting that if being faithful to love brought him to lose his life his Father would see to it that he would find life even in death. That God raised him to life is proof that his faith was not in vain (see Hebrews 5:7). We can allow other people and their attitudes to determine our responses. We can be locked into memories of hurt, unable to bring ourselves to forgive. We can be paralysed by the past. Jesus teaches us that we can remain loving even when others crucify us; we can continue to say ‘Yes’ to life whatever it may bring our way. We cannot do this on our own. But we are not on our own.

It is this faithful God who has brought Paul and the Corinthians together in their shared relationship with Christ. As he wrote in his earlier letter: ‘God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (1 Corinthians 1:9). It is this same faithful God who ‘anointed’ (Greek: *chriō*; ‘christened’) them, and set his seal upon them, claiming them for himself, giving them his Spirit – the same Spirit that gave life to Jesus. This Spirit is a pledge of the fullness of communion that will be theirs, together, and with Christ, ‘on the day of the Lord Jesus’ (1:14). Let us pray to stand firm in that faith, and to learn, from Jesus and from Paul, to respond to life with a ‘Yes’ of faith, hope, and love – to respond with the ‘Yes’ of Jesus.

It is in this context that Paul finally explains why he changed his plans. It was not to suit himself. It was out of consideration for them. He judged that it would only cause them pain, and if they experienced pain, how could he experience anything else, so closely is his heart bound to them. The implication is that if he had come he would have had to speak and act firmly. He begs them not to understand this as his ‘lording it over them’ – something which Jesus warned his apostles against (see Luke 22:24-26). If he is stern with them it is only in order that they may stand fast in the faith. He wants to labour *with* them, not *over* them, and wants only that they experience the joy that comes with being in Christ.

What emerges from this passage is that instead of going first to Corinth as planned, Paul wrote to the community there, putting his side of whatever the issue was that made his earlier visit so painful. He discretely avoids giving details as the Corinthians were only too aware of the issue that was causing the problem. Some have speculated that it may have been related to the collection of money intended for Jerusalem. Whatever it was, someone in the community wronged Paul in a very serious way and the community, it seems, was swayed by what this person said. The good news is that Paul's letter led to a change of heart in the person concerned. It now appears that the community is embarrassed, perhaps because it was slow to support Paul. It is now looking forward to Paul's coming (see 7:7-8). It is this news, brought by Titus (7:6), that has brought such relief to Paul. Now, some of them are so angry with the offender that Paul has to appeal to them to exercise forgiveness.

Here we are given another insight into Paul's character, and through this into the nature of Christian love. We have already seen Paul exhorting the Christians of Thessalonica to 'admonish the idlers' (1Thessalonians 5:14). He also told them how to correct members of the community: 'Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers' (2Thessalonians 3:15). In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he told them that they would have to take a strong stand against the person who was taking pride in the fact that he was living with his stepmother (5:1-13). They were wrong to allow the continuance of such behaviour, for, as he said later in that same letter: 'love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth' (13:6).

But to be concerned with truth is to be concerned with the most important truth, namely, that God is love and that God is always calling the sinner to repentance so that he/she may live. Genuine love, therefore, corrects only in view of repentance, and when genuine repentance takes place, the sinner must know that it is possible to come back to one's father and one's father's house and be totally assured of a welcome (see Luke 15:11-24).

³And I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice; for I am confident about all of you, that my joy would be the joy of all of you.

⁴For I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

⁵But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent — not to exaggerate it — to all of you.

⁶This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person;

⁷so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

[verse seven is repeated from the previous page]

⁷so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

⁸So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

⁹I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything.

¹⁰Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ.

¹¹And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

The word translated ‘forgive’ in this passage (Greek: *charizomai*, 2:7,10) is derived from the word for ‘grace’ (*charis*). Paul is asking that they be gracious to that person – which, in a Christian setting, means to allow the grace of God to flow through them over that person. There is a similar feeling about our English word ‘forgive’. To ‘for-give’ is to keep giving ourselves for the other person even when he or she is hurting us. It is this continuing to give that makes it possible for the other to change and come back. It does not make the person come back. We know that it takes two to achieve reconciliation. We cannot just forgive on our own as though it all depended on us. But as Christians we are asked to want to forgive, to be ready to forgive, and to keep loving the person who has offended us, in the hope that that person will accept our offered love and so make true reconciliation a reality.

The word ‘console’ which sets the tone of the introduction to the letter (1:3-10) occurs again here (2:7). To avoid correcting someone whom we claim to love is to admit the poverty of our loving. To correct someone out of frustration or impatience is often counter-productive. To have the courage to take whatever action is appropriate, while making it clear that we long to be reconciled, and that we believe that the behaviour of the person being corrected can be altered, gives to that person the assurance of being loved and the courage and strength to face up to the consequences of his/her behaviour. Such love is a powerful stimulus to genuine repentance. It appears that in the case in point it was effective, and so Paul now encourages the community to welcome the offender back, lest Satan gain an advantage (2:11).

Paul is very conscious of the harm done by divisions in a community. His first letter to Corinth was largely concerned with this problem. God is love and where God is, there is love. Division involves a breakdown of love. This is the very opposite of the work of the Spirit. For the Father of all sends his Spirit to all his children to reconcile them to each other in a community of love centred on his Son Jesus. This awareness of the universality of God’s love, and therefore the central place of reconciliation is one of the powerful forces motivating Paul’s mission.

It is important to listen to what Paul has to say about forgiving other people. Jesus himself told Peter that he must be ready to forgive seventy-seven times!(Matthew 18:21-22), and in the 'Our Father' we pray: 'forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us'(Luke 11:4). The main obstacle to forgiving other people is often our inability to forgive ourselves, or perhaps the fact that we do not experience being forgiven. This means that we do not have the joy of knowing that innocence can be restored, that we can learn to love again, and that we can learn to believe in ourselves again even when we have experienced serious failure to love.

Let us spend time contemplating Jesus, watching him forgive and daring to think that what he said to the paralysed man he can say to me: 'Take heart, your sins are forgiven' (Matthew 9:3); that what he said to the woman who was a public sinner he can say to me: 'her sins, which were many, must have been forgiven or she could not have shown such great love ... your faith has saved you; go in peace'(Luke 7: 47,50). Let us make our own his words to Peter: 'I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers'(Luke 22:31-32; see John 21: 15-18) or to the thief on the cross: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). Watching Jesus loving the sinner, I might dare to believe that God is still offering me his love, in spite of my sin.

Of course forgiveness cannot happen without a change on my part. But I can get the courage to change only when I believe I am loved and am therefore lovable. Let us pray to listen to the invitation of God who is calling us to repentance and to the joy of experiencing forgiveness and the life of his Spirit welling up inside us (John 4:14). To know that is to want everyone to know it. It is to want to be reconciled and to have others know the peace of restored communion. We all need to know that our broken lives have meaning, that we are loved in our weakness and that healing is possible. Paul's attitude revealed in this passage was a beautiful example for the Corinthian community. He learned this, as he learned everything else that was important to him, from Jesus, the Son of God, the one who, knowing our weakness, 'breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven' (John 20:22) . This was the first gift from the heart of the risen Christ.

¹²When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; ¹³but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia.

Paul has just given his reasons for not abiding by his original plan which was to go to Macedonia via Corinth (1:16). Instead, he went north from Ephesus to Troas. His intention was to cross from Troas to Macedonia, following the route he had taken on his first visit (see Acts 16:8-11). An opportunity opened up for him to preach the gospel in Troas (compare 1Corinthians 16:9). However, to reinforce the fact that he did not go north because of any lack of love for the Corinthians, he tells them that it was because he was so anxious to hear about them that he did not stay in Troas, but hurried to Macedonia (see Acts 20:1), hoping to meet Titus there. It seems that Paul must have entrusted Titus with the delicate task of delivering his painful letter to Corinth and he was keen to hear Titus's report.

For some in Corinth, the fact that Paul's 'mind could not rest', and that, instead of carrying on with his ministry in Troas, he had to hurry to Macedonia, would be just one more sign of Paul's weakness. In his earlier letter he went to great pains to demonstrate that his lack of eloquence, rather than being a argument against his apostolic ministry, was an argument in its favour, for it helped to demonstrate that the wonderful things that were happening in Corinth came from the active presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ. Paul insisted that the gospel that he is sent to proclaim is 'the message of the cross' (1Corinthians 1:18).

It is the failure of the Corinthian community, as a community, to grasp this message of power in weakness, that is the root cause of the misunderstandings and hurts that continue to disturb their relationship with Paul. Having once again revealed his human weakness and suffering, Paul feels the need to insist that this weakness, which his opponents are criticising, is an essential part of his apostolic ministry. It is something which fills his heart with gratitude to God and which accounts for the outburst of praise in the following sentence.

The image is striking. It presupposes an earlier victory by Christ, when Paul, the former persecutor of the church and opponent of God's will, was conquered by God's love revealed in Jesus. We can imagine Paul thanking God for this. However, to understand the passage in this way would be to miss the exact point that Paul is making here and that is conveyed by his powerful image. Those being led in triumphal procession were being led in weakness and humiliation *to their death* – and it is this for which Paul gives thanks! He is 'a slave of Christ' (1Corinthians 7:22), walking the way of the cross, being 'crucified with Christ' (Galatians 2:19). The power of God is revealed in the love with which Jesus responded to suffering. It is to be the same for the one who is commissioned to proclaim the 'message of the cross' (1Corinthians 1:18), and Paul thanks God, not for the suffering itself, but for the sustaining power of Jesus that enables him to love through it. In this way Christ lives in him (see Galatians 2:20). Sustained by grace to love in his weakness and suffering, Paul is able to proclaim Jesus, not in words only, but in and through his very manner of living (see 4:10-11; 1Corinthians 4:9-13).

Paul draws out this point as he develops the image of the triumphal procession in which the victorious general was honoured as the incense burned before the altar of the god. The glory of God spreads in every place that comes to know of the way in which God's love burned in the heart of Jesus as he walked to his death and gave his life for us. As a minister of the gospel, Paul thanks God for the sustaining grace that enables him, too, to walk the way of the cross, and to give his life in love for those to whom he is sent to proclaim the message of the cross, 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies' (4:10).

The message of the cross reveals God's wisdom, and Paul's imagery draws on the words of Wisdom (see Sirach 24:15; 39:13-14). There is another link here, for the term 'Christ' itself carries with it a reference to the aroma of the oil poured in consecration upon the Lord's anointed one. The anointed king was to be as the perfume of God permeating the land. So it is that Jesus is the perfume of God filling our senses with the presence of God's healing and consecrating breath ('Spirit'). Paul has been '*Christ-ened*' and commissioned as an apostle by Christ, and through his ministry is spreading Christ's own fragrance. The fact that not everyone accepts Paul's apostolic proclamation is no indication of its lack of authenticity. People are free to accept or reject God's offer of grace. However, as with the Torah (see Deuteronomy 30:15-20), life or death depends on our free response (see 1Corinthians 1:18).

¹⁴But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him.

¹⁵For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing;

¹⁶to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

Who is sufficient for these things?

¹⁷ For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many;

but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.

Paul is defending his ministry. He has demonstrated that his very weakness, sustained by God's power, reveals the death and resurrection of Jesus. He moves now to a second argument. The authenticity of his ministry is demonstrated also by the very existence of the Corinthian community itself. When Moses was commissioned by God for his ministry he responded by saying: 'I am not sufficient (Greek: *hikanos*) [for these things]' (Exodus 4:10 LXX). God assured him that he would be with him and make him sufficient. Paul wishes to demonstrate that (like Moses) he is competent to carry out the exalted mission of which he has been speaking. Later he will state that (like Moses) his competence comes from God and not from himself (see 3:5).

His first proof is the fact, well known to the Corinthians, that he does not accept money for his ministry. In his earlier letter, having argued that he has the right to accept material support, he went on to say: 'Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ' (1 Corinthians 9:12). He chose to work hard at his trade so that he would share the same hardships as other itinerant tradesmen, so that he would not be a burden on the community and so that he could himself help the poor in some way. When he wrote that he was presenting his own practice as an example for the Corinthians to follow, he was saying that they, too, should forgo their rights rather than put an obstacle in the way of those for whom Christ died (see 1 Corinthians 8:9,11).

As noted earlier, here in his second letter, Paul is not only explaining his ministry, he is defending it. It seems that rival missionaries are insinuating that Paul has other motives for not accepting money. So Paul reasserts his practice and presents it as a sign of the authenticity of his ministry. We have seen that he accepts in principle the right of missionaries to be supported by the community, but when he says that he is not a 'peddler of God's word *like so many*' he seems to be questioning the motives of his opponents and to be asking the Corinthians to look carefully at their practice. He will have more to say on this topic later (see 2 Corinthians 11:7-15; 12:12-19).

He asks the Corinthians to reflect upon their dealings with him. They will know that 'in Christ' he speaks as a person of sincerity (see 7:2). His ministry is 'from God' and is carried out with God's authority. In adding 'in God's presence', he is insinuating that he does not depend on their or anyone else's approval. God is his judge and he lives his life knowing that God looks upon him with love.

The rival missionaries are also trying to undermine Paul's ministry by drawing attention to the fact that he does not have letters of recommendation, whereas they do. Paul has nothing against such letters (see 1Corinthians 16:3). In fact, part of this letter performs this function (8:18-24; see Acts 18:27). His point is that his rivals need such letters. He does not. His ministry carries its own authentication. The Corinthians themselves are 'the seal of my apostleship in the Lord' (1Corinthians 9:2). They themselves are his letter of recommendation. Everyone 'knows' that it was Paul who proclaimed the gospel to them, and the more closely people look at ('read') the lives of the Corinthian Christians, the more impressed will they be with what God has done there through Paul's ministry. In a lovely touch which conveys to the Corinthians the depths of affection which he has for them, he assures them that they are written on his heart. As he will write later: 'you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together' (7:3).

They are a letter of recommendation written on Paul's heart, and Christ himself is the author. It is God's Spirit who is acting through Paul's ministry as the founder of the community. If they are looking for some sort of guarantee to authenticate Paul's ministry among them, let them look at the life which they have in Christ, and they will find there, from Christ himself, the best letter of recommendation that anyone could produce. Paul carries the image further. The letters produced by the rival missionaries are written in ink. Christ has composed his letter (the Christian lives of the Corinthians themselves) through the gift of 'the Spirit of the living God' inscribed on their hearts.

The fact that Paul speaks of the law as written on stone is not to be taken negatively. It is a powerful statement of God's fidelity to his enduring word. For all that, however, it did not have the power to change hearts – hence the promise:

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.

– Jeremiah 31:33

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.

– Ezekiel 36:26-27

It is this promise that is being fulfilled through Paul's ministry.

¹Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we?

²You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all;

³and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.

⁵Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God,

⁶who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit;

Paul has a wonderful sense of living in the presence of God and of the risen Jesus, and of the Spirit who is the bond of love which is their mutual communion. This is the communion into which Paul has been invited, and this is the communion which is the life of the Christian community. He is an ‘apostle of Christ Jesus’, and ‘by the will of God’(1:1). The church in Corinth is the ‘church of God’(1:1). The grace and the peace which Paul wants them to receive comes ‘from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’(1:2), to whom he expresses his praise (1:3).

When he is consoled it is by ‘the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation’(1:3), and it is ‘through Christ’(1:5). When he suffers he is not alone for his sufferings are ‘the sufferings of Christ’(1:5). When, against all his expectations, he avoids death, it is God who rescued him (1:10). He lives ‘by the grace of God’(1:12). He is convinced of the faithfulness of God (1:18) as demonstrated by the Yes faithfully given by ‘the Son of God, Jesus Christ’(1:19). Paul has learned from Jesus to do the same ‘to the glory of God’(1:20). It is God who has bound the Corinthians and Paul together ‘by giving us his Spirit in our hearts’(1:22). This Spirit is their bond of love and also the promise of the fullness of communion that is yet to come (1:22).

When Paul forgives the person who had caused such harm to him and to his ministry, he does so ‘in the presence (Greek: *prosōpon*) of Christ’(2:10). He is aware of Christ gazing upon him in love and inspiring him to forgive. When an opportunity for missionary activity opened up in Troas, it was the Lord who opened the door (2:12). The fragrance that permeates any place where the gospel is proclaimed is the fragrance of Jesus which gives such joy to God (2:15). When he speaks it is ‘in Christ’(2:17) and ‘standing in the presence of God’(2:17). It is Christ himself who writes on the hearts of the Corinthians with ‘the Spirit of the living God’(3:3). In this present passage, Paul states that it is Christ himself who gives him confidence as he faces towards God (3:4), and that (as with Moses, Exodus 4:12), it is God himself who makes him competent for his ministry (see Romans 15:15-19).

Paul is God’s authorised ‘minister’(Greek: *diakonos*, see commentary on 1Corinthians 3:5). He is therefore assured of all that he needs effectively to carry out his commission which is to proclaim the ‘new covenant’ promised through the prophet Jeremiah (see previous page). This covenant will consist in God’s gift of the Spirit that will change people’s hearts so that they will no longer be hard and resistant, but will listen and respond to God’s revelation. The change of heart brought about by the Spirit will ensure that the new covenant will not remain a mere ‘letter’, but will be welcomed and lived.

Paul contrasts the letter which kills with the Spirit who gives life. Some simply substitute the 'law' (the Jewish Torah) for the 'letter' and interpret Paul's saying here as a criticism of the law. They go on to explain that the law kills because it gives commands under threat of death. It demands perfect obedience and because perfect obedience is not possible, people cannot but break the law, and there is no way that the sinner can avoid its accusation and the consequent judgment. In a desperate attempt to avoid death, one can only strive for perfection in obedience. This striving leads only to despair or to the Pharisaic delusion of thinking that one is sinless. Either way, according to this interpretation, the law kills.

**for the letter
kills,
but the Spirit
gives life.**

This interpretation goes against everything we know about Paul's fidelity to Judaism and respect for the Torah as an authentic revelation of God. Paul sees Jesus as the Messiah who, far from rejecting the law, brings it to its intended goal. While going beyond the law, Jesus fulfils it in a wonderful way. It is unthinkable that Paul would accuse the law of being a cause of separating people from God, the source of life. At the same time, as will become clear in the following passages, Paul's contrast of the 'letter' and the 'Spirit' is made within the context of the 'law'. We are reminded of Jesus' words: 'It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless' (John 6:36). Beautiful as the law is, it cannot give life. Life can be given only by the Spirit. Paul is not belittling the law. He is recognising our need of the Spirit.

We are sinners, unable without the Spirit to open our hearts to the light shining upon us in the law. Because of our hardness of heart the law, left to itself, remains only a letter. It is not an instrument of death – death is the result of our disobedience. But the law needs the Spirit to make it possible for us to obey God's will and to enjoy the divine communion which is the goal of God's revelation. Recognising this, Ezekiel and Jeremiah saw the need for a new covenant in which God's own Spirit would change people's hearts so that we would listen to the revelation contained in the law and learn to obey it and so live. Paul is claiming here to have been commissioned by the risen Christ, the 'life-giving Spirit' (1Corinthians 15:45), to proclaim the gospel of the new covenant as it is made evident in the life of the Corinthian community.

Paul's words are also a reminder that the words of sacred scripture are inspired by the Holy Spirit and so are to be read in the Spirit, seeking in prayer the grace to be open to the inspired, spiritual meaning, rather than being content with the literal meaning of the words understood without reference to the Spirit. We will not find life by reducing the inspired word to marks on a page. God cannot be locked between the covers of a written document.

⁷Now if the ministry of death, chiselled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses' face because of the glory of his face, a glory [NRSV adds 'now'] set aside,

⁸how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?

⁹For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory!

¹⁰Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory;

¹¹for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory!

Focusing on Paul's weaknesses, his opponents in Corinth are challenging the authenticity of his ministry. There is nothing, they say, in Paul's ministry that can compare with the glory of God that shone on Moses' face. Let us pause to read the relevant text:

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

– Exodus 34:29-35

This comes as a climax to a series of events which are narrated in Exodus 32-34. When God first gives the people the gift of the law, God reveals his glory to the whole people. However, their hearts are hardened and they sin against God, worshipping the golden calf. Destruction is the necessary consequence of their apostasy, for they have rejected the source of life. Moses pleads with God to remain present to his people in spite of their sin. God listens to Moses, but cannot reveal his glory directly to the sinful people for that would mean their destruction. So he reveals his glory to Moses who will mediate his presence to the people. The reflected glory on Moses' face authenticates his word as the word of God, but even this reflected glory causes the people to be afraid. The veil with which Moses covers his face is God's merciful way of making it possible for him to dwell among a sinful people, through the ministry of Moses, without compromising the divine holiness. At the same time, it preserves the people from suffering the full effects of their sinfulness.

There are parallels between this narrative and that of Adam and Eve in the garden. They too enjoy God's intimacy at first. But they too sin. God is merciful, but they cannot now live in the paradise which God planned for them. The worshipping of the golden calf is Israel's equivalent of the original sin.

The narrative in Exodus 34 is about God's presence mediated through his authorised minister. The symbolism of the veil is carried over into the curtain veiling the holy of holies. God is present among his people, but necessarily veiled. Hence the longing of the people to see the face of God and the promise that one day 'you shall see and be radiant' (Isaiah 60:5). Paul is comparing God's revelation through the ministry of Moses with the new revelation through Paul's ministry. His claim is that the glory revealed through his ministry is greater, not less.

First of all, Moses' ministry was one of 'death' and 'condemnation'. As explained in relation to verse six, this is not a criticism of God's revelation through Moses. Rather, it is a statement about the hardness of the hearts that refused to welcome it. Paul's ministry is a ministry of 'justification' for through it we are united to God in a communion of life. (For a fuller reflection on justification, see the commentary on Galatians 2:16.)

Secondly, God's revelation through Moses was 'chiselled in letters on stone tablets'. This speaks of God's fidelity and the essential permanence of God's word. However, God's revelation through Paul is a ministry 'of the Spirit', written, as Paul has already stated, 'on tablets of human hearts'(3:3).

Thirdly, the ministry entrusted to Moses 'came in glory', as was demonstrated by the transfiguration of Moses' face. The ministry entrusted to Paul came in 'abounding glory', 'greater glory' - as is dramatically portrayed by Paul's disciple Luke in the scene of Jesus' transfiguration (see Luke 9:28-36).

Finally Paul says of the glory that it is 'set aside'(Greek: *katargeō*). In verse ten he is saying that the greater glory of what he earlier called 'the new covenant' is such that the glory of the old covenant is 'lost' (much as the light of the stars cannot be seen in full sunlight). However the expression 'set aside' goes back to what happened at the time when Moses had to put on a veil to cover his face. (The 'now' in the NRSV translation of verse seven is not found in the Greek.) As noted earlier, the veil was necessary to set aside the glory, because God's unveiled glory would have destroyed those who had preferred the golden calf to God. The ministry entrusted to Paul is 'permanent' for reasons that Paul is about to demonstrate in the following passage.

The 'old covenant' is no longer the place to which we are to look to find God's glory revealed. The new covenant, the covenant promised long ago, is now being proclaimed. The glory that came with the ministry of Moses had to be 'set aside', rendered inoperative by the veil, lest the 'condemnation' brought about by the people's hardness of heart should lead to their 'death'. What is being proclaimed through the ministry of Paul is something that remains. One cannot read that statement without hearing an echo from Paul's earlier letter which described love as that which remains (1Corinthians 13:13). The ministry of the new covenant is the ministry of God's saving love.

**¹²Since, then,
we have such
a hope, we act
with great bold-
ness,**

**¹³not like Moses,
who put a veil
over his face to
keep the people
of Israel from
gazing at the
outcome [NRSV
'end'] of the
glory that was
being set aside.**

**¹⁴But their minds
were hardened.
Indeed, to this
very day, when
they hear the
reading of the
old covenant,
that same veil is
still there, since
only in Christ is
it set aside.**

**¹⁵Indeed, to this
very day when-
ever Moses is
read, a veil lies
over their hearts
[NRSV 'minds'];**

The basis of Paul's 'hope' (Greek: *elpis*, see commentary on Galatians 5:5), that which enables him to place the future lovingly in God's hands and to focus on the present full of confidence, is the knowledge that it is God's saving righteousness in Christ that is being revealed through his ministry. In and through his weaknesses – this is Paul's point – he 'acts with great boldness' (*parrēsia*; we met the verb in 1 Thessalonians 2:2). This is evident in the power of the Spirit present in his ministry.

Moses needed to be veiled so that the people would not gaze at God's glory. The 'outcome' (Greek: *telos*) of such an encounter would have been judgment and death. To preserve the sinful people with their hardened hearts from gazing upon their own destruction, Moses' face was veiled. Such a veiling was not needed by Paul, for his ministry is to proclaim the good news that God, through Jesus, is giving sinners his own Spirit which can change their hearts so that they can be in communion with the Holy One and gaze upon the face of God without fear of condemnation and death.

In verse fourteen we discover the nature of the problem that is behind Paul's argument in this section. If the gospel is what Paul has proclaimed it to be, why is it that the majority of Jews continue not to welcome it? Paul's opponents are arguing that the failure of the Jews to accept Paul's proclamation is proof that his ministry is not authentic. Paul points out that this failure to open their hearts to God's revelation has been there from the beginning. It is also the subject of many a prophetic accusation. Isaiah, too, uses the image of a veil in this context: 'The Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep; he has closed your eyes, you prophets, and covered your heads, you seers' (Isaiah 29:10).

The only one who can remove the veil is Christ and the only way that a Jew can receive a new heart is 'in Christ', by allowing him/herself to be drawn by the Spirit of Christ into the communion of love that is found within the Christian community that is formed through the proclamation of the gospel; in other words, through Paul's ministry. Their failure to accept the good news proclaimed by Paul is a sign, not that Paul's ministry lacks authenticity, but that their 'minds' (Greek: *noēma*) remain 'hardened' and 'a veil lies over their hearts' (Greek: *kardia*). Note Paul's point: they are still not listening to *Moses*! What Isaiah said is still true: 'these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me' (Isaiah 29:13). If they listened to Moses, they would welcome Paul's ministry for they would recognise that through it God was offering them the promised Spirit who would give them a new heart.

The text which Paul is analysing clearly states: ‘whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off’ (Exodus 34:34). A Jew who wishes to have the veil removed must do what Moses did. He/She must ‘turn to the Lord’. How? By looking for where the activity of the Lord (the Spirit) is revealed. God promised through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart’ (Jeremiah 24:7). It is only through the active power of God’s saving love that a Jew can receive this new heart, and, as the Corinthians know from their own experience, the Spirit is given through Paul’s ministry of proclaiming the gospel. With the gift of the Spirit and a new heart they will at last be free from all that enslaves them – free to hear God’s word and to obey God’s will; free at last to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5). As Paul wrote in his earlier letter: ‘obeying the commandments of God is everything’ (1Corinthians 7:19).

We come to the end of what is Paul’s longest analysis of a scriptural text. (For a reflection on Paul’s use of sacred Scripture, see the commentary on Galatians 3:6.) He concludes with a beautiful description of the essence of the Christian life of all those who welcome the proclamation of the gospel, Jews and Gentiles. Christ is the Wisdom of God, ‘a breath of the power of God’, ‘a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty’, ‘a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness’ (Wisdom 7:25-26). Christ is the ‘mirror’, the ‘image’ of the Lord (see 4:4,6), and when ‘with unveiled faces’ we contemplate Christ, we see there ‘the glory of the Lord’. As Moses was transformed when he went into the presence of God, so are we. For us Christians, however, for ‘all of us’, it is into Christ that we are transformed. It is the Spirit of the Lord who effects this transformation (see Romans 8:11,13-15), for it is the Spirit who is ‘the source of your life in Christ Jesus’ (1Corinthians 1:30). Paul is its minister.

The redeeming, healing and saving love of God revealed in the heart and on the face of Jesus, invites us to look upon him with faces unveiled. Daring to believe the good news proclaimed by Paul, we contemplate Christ and are bathed in his light. He gives us his Spirit who purifies our hearts. The Lord God, whose glory we contemplate on the face and in the heart of Christ, is the Spirit who purifies our hearts, and transforms them into the heart and the mind of Christ. It is in the Christian life of the minister of the new covenant, and in the Christian lives being lived in their own community, that the Corinthians are to see the radiance of God’s glory.

¹⁶but when one turns to the Lord the veil is removed.

¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another;

for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

¹Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not grow slack [NRSV 'lose heart'].

²We gave up any idea of hiding things (which would be shameful) [NRSV 'We have renounced the shameful things that one hides'];

we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Paul has been accused of being remiss in carrying out his pastoral duties by not keeping his word and visiting Corinth on his way to Macedonia as promised. In verse one he is defending himself against this accusation, hence the translation of the Greek *egkakeō* by 'grow slack', rather than 'lose heart'.

In verse two he goes further. From the very beginning of his apostolic ministry Paul determined not to try to attract people to the gospel by any means other than the power inherent in the gospel itself. He is determined never to falsify the message to make it more palatable. It would be shameful to hold back elements of the good news that people might find challenging and off-putting. Once again (see 2:17) he insists on his openness in stating the truth. He does so in the presence of God and in such a way that it should be obvious to anyone who observes his practice without bias.

It is true that not everyone sees the gospel for what it is. This, says Paul, is not because he is hiding anything when he proclaims it. Rather, it is because those who do not respond to the proclamation with faith are blind. This world has become their god, and they worship what this world has to offer (compare Philippians 3:19). No wonder they fail to see the resplendent light of the good news which radiates the glory of Christ who is the image of God. He is the true Adam, the one who shows what a human being was always meant to be (see Genesis 1:26-27). He is 'a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness' (Wisdom 7:26). In the words of an early Christian hymn: 'He is the image of the invisible God ... for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:15,19).

Paul is not promoting himself through his ministry. Christ is their Lord, and because of the commission given him by Christ, Paul is their 'slave', committed heart and soul to their needs and ready to serve them with his life. This is what Jesus asked of his disciples:

Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

– Mark 10:42-45

We recall Paul's exhortation to the Galatians: 'through love become slaves to one another' (Galatians 5:13). Also his words in an earlier letter to the Corinthians when he says that in order to win more people to Christ 'I have made myself a slave to all' (1Corinthians 9:19).

For a fuller reflection on the significance of 'Lord' see the commentary on Galatians 1:3. In the present context Paul has spoken of God as 'the Lord' to whom we must turn in order for the veil to be removed (3:16). He has said: 'the Lord is the Spirit' (3:17). And now he speaks of Jesus as 'Lord'. We can never comprehend the transcendent mystery of the divine being, and the only true knowledge that we can have of God is the knowledge that comes through communion in love. When we are in communion with Christ and with his Spirit, it is the Lord Yahweh with whom we are in communion.

Paul has 'seen Jesus our Lord' (1Corinthians 9:1). 'God revealed his Son to me' (Galatians 1:16). When Paul looked upon the face of Christ, it was God who enlightened him to know that it is God's own glory that he saw there. He came to see that 'out of darkness', the darkness of the cross, shines the face of Christ resplendent with the glory of God, for in the weakness of a death inflicted on him by the 'powerful' of this world, Christ revealed that the only true power is that of love – God's faithful love, given to the end. It is on the open statement of this truth that Paul's defence of his proclamation of the gospel rests.

⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves;

we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

'For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' (Genesis 1:3) who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

God's glory on the face of Christ

Paul has been accused, it seems, of preaching himself. Is this because of his exhortation that they imitate him (1Corinthians 4:16; 7:7; 11:1)? His reply is that he, a slave of Christ (1Corinthians 7:22), has become their slave as well. He is dedicated heart and soul to them. He is giving his life in their service that they may be transformed by their obedience to the gospel and may come to see God's glory in the face of Christ.

The passage we have just studied is among the most beautiful and most powerful passages of the whole of the New Testament. We are being invited by Paul to contemplate Jesus on the cross, and to see on his face the glory of God. Paul believes that if we do this we will be transformed into the very image of God that we contemplate.

We are reminded of the same invitation offered us by John when he tells us to look upon Jesus, his heart pierced with the lance, and to see the water and blood flowing from his side (John 19:31-37), knowing that 'from his breast flow fountains of living water' (John 7:38), seeing in his heart the source of the Spirit (7:39).

For Paul, as for John, it is not a matter of silent contemplation alone, for when we contemplate, we are moved to believe, and so we are moved to action; we are moved by the Spirit of God to be ministers of the gospel. We are invited, like Thomas, not just to look upon the one we have pierced, but actually to put our finger into his wounds and our hand into his side (John 20:28). The wounds are the wounds of the world that is loved by God (John 3:16). We are invited to commit ourselves to his mission, and this commitment will open our eyes and our heart to be able to say with Thomas: 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28). Our faith, like that of Paul, will shine in our hearts. Nothing will be able to veil it. In this way we will give to each other 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'.

The glory of God *is* manifest in Paul's ministry, for the gospel which he proclaims is the gospel of God's love as revealed in Jesus, and this gospel, as the Corinthians from their own experience well know, has extraordinary power. They should not be disturbed by Paul's obvious human weakness. It is precisely through this weakness that they can see that the glory is not Paul's but God's. This is in keeping with all that Paul wrote in his earlier letter about the paradox of the cross (1Corinthians 1:18; 2:2).

Paul readily acknowledges the weaknesses that are there for all to see, but he reminds the Corinthians that in every case God has carried him through the trials that constantly beset him: 'in danger every hour' (1Corinthians 15:30). He speaks of these trials as a 'dying' (Greek: *nekrōsis*). The recent experience from which God delivered him is a good instance (see 1:8). He asks the Corinthians to see in this suffering, and in the way Paul bears it in love, a manifestation of Jesus' own dying on the cross. He wants them also to see in God's carrying him through these sufferings a manifestation of Jesus' resurrection. Paul will write to the Philippians: 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death' (Philippians 3:10). Here he goes further. He is not only reliving Jesus' life through becoming like him; their intimacy is such that he knows that just as he makes his own the sufferings of Jesus, so Jesus suffers Paul's suffering. Did not Jesus reveal himself to Paul with the words: 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting' (Acts 9:5)? As Paul wrote to the Galatians: 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19-20).

When they see Paul's human weakness, they are seeing the weakness of the crucified Jesus (see 2:14). When they see the extraordinary power of Jesus' Spirit manifested through Paul's ministry, they should recognise the life of the risen Jesus in Paul. This is the treasure in the clay jars. This is the glory being revealed through Paul's ministry. They need look no further than the extraordinary power of the Spirit present in the life of their own Christian community to find proof of this. Paul does not lack confidence when it comes to carrying out his ministry (see 1:15; 3:12; 11:21). Yes, death is at work in Paul – but it is Jesus' life-giving, love-giving, self-giving death that they are witnessing, and they are experiencing its fruit in their lives.

⁷But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

¹⁰ always carrying in the body Jesus' dying [NRSV 'the death of Jesus'],

so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

¹¹For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake,

so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.

¹³But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture – ‘I believed, and so I spoke’ (Ps. 116:10), — we also believe, and so we speak,

¹⁴because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.

¹⁵Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶So we do not grow slack [NRSV ‘lose heart’]. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,

¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

Through the suffering and the hardship that Paul has just described, he shares the faith of the psalmist who through his suffering was able to proclaim God’s glory. We could fruitfully pause here and read the whole of Psalm 116 (in the Greek, Psalms 114 and 115 - see opposite page). The psalmist describes his distress and anguish as the snares of death encompassed him, and how he cried out to the Lord who delivered his soul from death, his eyes from tears and his feet from stumbling. The first part of the psalm (LXX 114) opens with the words ‘I love the Lord’. The second part of the psalm (LXX 115) opens with the words quoted by Paul: ‘I believed, and so I spoke’, and ends: ‘Praise the Lord’.

In earlier writings Paul gives the impression that he expects to be alive at the parousia (see 1Thessalonians 4:17; 1Corinthians 15:51-52). We can perhaps detect signs of the same expectation earlier in this letter (1:9-11) and Paul will state this hope again shortly (5:4). It has been suggested that his being so near death in Asia (1:8) has caused Paul to think more about the possibility of his own death. He believes that if it happens that he does die, God, who raised Jesus to life, will also raise him (see 1Corinthians 6:14). The key point which he is making here is that he knows that he will be ‘with Jesus’ (see 1Thess. 4:17). There is another beautiful touch here: Paul is sustained by knowing that he will also be ‘with *you*’, with his beloved Corinthians. These are the sentiments of a loving pastor and a zealous missionary.

It is Paul’s faith that sustains his zeal, and so he does not slacken off (see 4:1) in carrying out his commission. It is true that in his ‘outer nature’, that is to say, in what the Corinthians and others can observe, he shares in the weakness that is part of the human condition (as, of course, did Jesus). If they could see his ‘inner nature’, how he really is in spirit, they would see one who is in process of being constantly renewed by grace (see 3:18). He is already experiencing the glory that has its source in the realm of God, the realm of the ‘eternal’, as he is ‘being transformed from one degree of glory to another’ (3:18). He is being prepared for the fullness of glory that will be his with Jesus and with the believers of Corinth (1Corinthians 15:43; Romans 8:17-18; Philippians 3:21).

Psalm 116

Part 1: Psalm 114 in the Greek and Latin Versions

I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications.
 Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
 The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
 I suffered distress and anguish.
 Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, I pray, save my life!'
 Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful.
 The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me.
 Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.
 For you have delivered my soul from death,
 my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.
 I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

Part 2: Psalm 115 in the Greek and Latin Versions

I kept my faith, even when I said ['I believed and so I spoke']
 'I am greatly afflicted';
 I said in my consternation, 'Everyone is a liar.'
 What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?
 I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord,
 I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.
 Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.
 O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant,
 the child of your serving girl. You have loosed my bonds.
 I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord.
 I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people,
 in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem.
 Praise the Lord!

¹For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

²For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling —

³if indeed we put it on [NRSV ‘when we have taken it off’] we will not be found naked.

⁴For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

⁵He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

Thinking still of ‘the eternal weight of glory’(4:17) that God is preparing for him, Paul says that even if he or other Christians die before the coming of the Lord (the ‘parousia’) and their earthly material body is thereby ‘destroyed’, they will be given a body that is ‘eternal’, that is to say, a body that belongs to the sphere of the divine and is not subject to the vicissitudes of space and time. In speaking of the body as a ‘tent’, he seems to be echoing the words of the Book of Wisdom: ‘a perishable body weighs down the soul, and this earthy tent burdens the thoughtful mind’(Wisdom 9:15).

The ‘groaning’ which we experience now is not only because of the suffering that is part of the human condition; it is also a longing for the fullness of life that we will experience in our risen bodies. Paul returns to this theme in his Letter to the Romans: ‘not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies’ (Romans 8:23).

Whichever way we translate verse three (and most early manuscripts have ‘put *on*’, not ‘put *off*’), Paul is stressing the fact that we are not destined by God to exist in a bodiless state. He still hopes that he will be alive at the parousia. He wants to put his heavenly dwelling on over his present one; he hopes not to be ‘unclothed’; he hopes that his present mortal body will be ‘swallowed up by life’ when God gives him the immortal body of the risen life without his having to pass through death and corruption (see 1Corinthians 15:54). His faith, as distinct from his hope, is that whether we die or are still alive at the coming of the Lord, God is preparing a heavenly body for us. As he said in his earlier letter: ‘this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality’ (1Corinthians 15:53). The proof of this is that already our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (see 1:22).

One of the eternal realities that Paul continues to contemplate (4:18) is that God has prepared for him a ‘spiritual body’(1Corinthians 15:44) which will be a perfect expression of the communion which he has with the Spirit. His experience of the Spirit, of communion with Christ, assures him of future glory with him. His missionary apostolate is oriented, not to glory here, but to the ultimate goal of the imperishable, eternal, unseen life with his Lord, and with all who share his faith.

Paul tells the Corinthians how much he longs for heaven. It is true that we are already living ‘in Christ’, but this is not the same as enjoying the fullness of communion that will be ours when we are in the presence of his ‘visible form’ (Greek: *eidos*). This is the glorious life that God has prepared for us, when we, too, can give and receive love in the perfection of communion that will be ours in our risen bodies. Though we now enjoy divine communion, Paul still feels like an exile and longs to be at home with the Lord in God’s eternal embrace.

In Paul’s Thessalonian correspondence and in his earlier letter to the Corinthians, his focus was on the coming of the Lord (the ‘parousia’) when death would finally be conquered (1Corinthians 15:26). At the same time he insisted: ‘God has destined us for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him’ (1Thessalonians 5:9-10). Here in Second Corinthians Paul’s whole focus is on this communion (see also Philippians 1:21). There is no sense here of death being a kind of ‘sleep’ (see 1Thessalonians 4:13-15) in which we are waiting for a future parousia to receive the gift of the risen body.

Paul’s reflections remind us not to lock ourselves into thinking in terms of time as a dimension of our existence beyond death, as though the dead would have to wait for a future parousia. Of course, the structure of our human experience means that we are unable to imagine anything without imagining it existing in space and time. But it is this passing world that is ‘temporary’ (4:18). There is no space or time beyond death. Throughout this section, Paul expresses his confidence that death cannot break his communion with Jesus and that, should he die, he would receive the new creation of a glorified body from God and ‘be with Christ’ (Philippians 1:23). When we die we enter into the sphere of the eternal, beyond the realm in which space and time are relevant. We will all be transformed at the coming of the Lord (1Thessalonians 4:17). If he is to die, Paul seems to envisage the Lord coming to him at the moment of death and taking him with him into glory.

What matters, in view of the judgment we all have to undergo (1Corinthians 3:13-15; 4:5), is to do God’s will here ‘in the body’. Paul feels the need to stress here, as he did in his earlier letter, the practical nature of being a disciple of Jesus. It is about doing good not evil, and doing good involves all our mind and heart and soul, but also all our body. Paul is concerned with lifestyle not just with good thoughts and intentions.

6So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord —

7for we walk by faith, not in the presence of his visible form [NRSV ‘not by sight’].

8Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

9So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

10For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

¹¹Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences.

¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart.

¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

The expression ‘the fear of the Lord’ occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and in Acts 9:31. The Book of Proverbs expresses its meaning well in the following texts:

The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance ... I hate.

– Proverbs 8:13

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

– Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life.

– Proverbs 14:27

Isaiah speaks of the fear of the Lord as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 11:3), and writes: ‘The fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure’ (Isaiah 33:6). The fear of the Lord is the opposite of ‘pride and arrogance’. It is ‘knowing the Holy One’: knowing that God is the creator and sustainer of life, the redeemer and saviour. It results in a commitment to seek and to carry out God’s will, knowing that all our hope is in God, the ‘fountain of life’.

Paul admits that he does bring persuasion to bear in his preaching, but not in the way claimed by his opponents (2:17; 4:2-5). In his earlier letter he explained why he did not use ‘plausible words of wisdom’ (1 Corinthians 2:4). He wants to persuade people of the gospel of the cross as a revelation of God’s love, but he does so ‘knowing the fear of the Lord’. He appeals to their memories (their ‘conscience’) as well, and wants to protect the community against the accusations made against him by his opponents, who are more concerned about appearances (literally, the ‘face’) that they are with reality (the ‘heart’).

He contrasts behaviour that appears to be reasonable (‘in our right mind’) with behaviour that appears to be under some non-rational impulse (‘beside ourselves’). From Paul’s earlier letter we know how impressed the Corinthians were with ecstatic behaviour of one kind or another. Paul tells them not to be looking for such externally visible things – that is God’s business. He directs their attention to something far more ‘ordinary’, namely, the kind of day to day loving care (compare 1 Corinthians 14:2) that he has learned from Jesus. This kind of loving care is quite compatible with weakness. In fact, as was the case with Jesus, it is in the weakness that the glory of God shines out so beautifully.

The Greek *sunechō* denotes constraining by surrounding. What Paul seems to be saying in verse fourteen is that everywhere he looks he is surrounded by Christ's love which gives meaning to his life and determines his decisions. We find the related noun used in this way in the Book of Wisdom:

The spirit of the Lord has filled the world, and that which holds all things together (*sunechon*) knows what is said.

– Wisdom 1:7

In his earlier letter Paul wrote: 'As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' (1Corinthians 15:22). Here his focus is on the new Adam, Christ. When Christ died, he gave his life for everyone. If we welcome this gift we will be able to say with Paul: 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:19-20).

In giving his life for all, Christ made it possible for all to live his life, a life centred not on self but on the gift of self in love. Paul is echoing something he said in his previous letter: 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body' (1Corinthians 6:19-20; see also Romans 14:7-9). Our assurance of this is that God raised Jesus to life and it is God's will that all share in this life.

We also find expressed here something that is at the heart of Paul's understanding of his ministry – a key topic in all his correspondence with the Corinthians. It was God's will that Jesus accept in his humanity the consequences of sin (5:21). Jesus embraced God's will in this as in everything (8:9). This involved him in suffering, and when it did he continued to give himself in love through the suffering. Jesus is God's suffering servant (see reflection on Galatians 1:10). Paul understands his ministry as continuing that of Jesus. He does not seek suffering, but he will not stop loving because of it, and in his ministry he does not live for himself 'but for him who dies and was raised' for him. Paul's ministry is for Jesus; it is commissioned by him; and it is carried on with the power of Jesus' Spirit. Paul finds joy in being, like Jesus, God's suffering servant. He calls the Corinthians to experience something of this same joy as they learn the art of self-giving.

¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.

¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Paul seems to be referring back to his period as a persecutor of the church before he came to know Christ personally (1Corinthians 15:9). Whatever of the past, now he sees things from a totally new perspective. In the scroll of Isaiah there is promise of a new order after the return from exile (Isaiah 43:18-19). This is expanded in later texts where it is a new created order that is envisaged (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). Paul has already interpreted this new creation as having been inaugurated by the love of Jesus in giving his life for us (Galatians 6:14-15), and it is this new life that Christ shares with those who live in communion with him. 'In Christ' each believer is already beginning to experience this new creation in anticipation of the final and complete transformation in the resurrected life (see 3:18; 4:16).

God the Creator is the source of this new creation. As sinners we have broken communion with God. To enjoy the new creation which God wants for us, therefore, we need to be reconciled and God has made this possible through Christ. Of course we must accept God's offer, an offer made through Paul's proclamation of the gospel.

Petty accusations have been made against him by people who can produce letters of recommendation, and can boast of their extraordinary powers, whether of eloquence or of miracle-working or of externally startling 'spiritual' gifts. Paul's one concern in his ministry is to proclaim the gospel of the love of the crucified and risen Jesus by word and by his way of living.

Paul's apostolic ministry is as universal as the love of the one Creator-God, the Father of all (1Corinthians 8:6), who 'in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself'. The ministry entrusted to Paul is not about self-glorification, or boasting, or fermenting division. It is a 'ministry of a new covenant' (3:6), a 'ministry of the Spirit' (3:8), a 'ministry of justification' (3:9), a 'ministry by the mercy of God' (4:1), a ministry impelled by Christ's love (5:14), a 'ministry of reconciliation' (5:18).

Paul has just concluded a long section of his letter in which he has been speaking of his ministry as an apostle and defending it against his accusers. Those who are dismissing his ministry are also threatening the gospel itself. Now Paul moves from explanation and defence to exhortation.

It is as Christ's ambassador whose words are the words of God himself that Paul appeals to the Corinthians to 'be reconciled with God'. The authority with which Paul makes his appeal is the authority of Christ whom God 'made sin' in the sense that he shared with us the consequences of the human condition, and in the sense that he was, like us, a victim of sin, for it was sin that crucified him (see Romans 8:3 where Paul speaks of Jesus' 'sinful flesh'). Jesus experienced alienation from God, including the alienation that culminates in death. He knew what it means to share our weaknesses, our temptations, our disappointments, our suffering and our dying. He embraced us in our sin, he took our part, he stood beside us, he ate and drank with us. Yet in all this he remained sinless. He refused to stop loving. He refused to be distracted. He refused to seek substitutes. He did not give in to temptation. He kept believing in God and he kept believing in people. He kept loving, unto death. That is why he can appeal to us, knowing that we know that he understands our condition and that he has shown us that there is another way to be human. We do not have to sin. Through his love and the gift of his Spirit we, like him, can be filled with the righteousness that God is offering us.

To dare to believe that God wishes us to be filled with this righteousness, we needed to be loved convincingly by one who, in God's name, embraced us in our sin. Jesus did not sin: he continued to do his Father's will and to respond in love to the circumstances of his life, including those brought upon him by human sinfulness. Though himself innocent of sin, he embraced sinners and was condemned to death by people who accused him of being one. Because he bore our condition without sinning, and because he loved us so intimately as to share with us the communion of love which he experienced in the Spirit, we can believe that, in union with him we are invited to share his righteousness. This is the message of the cross. This is the gospel preached by Paul.

The Corinthians can live in the right relationship to God (see Galatians 2:15-21). In his previous letter, Paul said that God made Christ their righteousness (1Corinthians 1:30). Here he tells them that by union with Christ they can experience this same righteousness that is from God, and that always remains God's, for it always remains God's gift to them.

²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

¹As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

²For he says, 'At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.'
(Isaiah 49:8)

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

³We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,

⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities,

⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots

Paul is cooperating with God's grace by faithfully carrying out his commission as the ambassador of Christ as he proclaims the good news of God's offer of justification and reconciliation through Christ. He pleads with the Corinthians (the 'you' in verse one is emphatic) to cooperate by welcoming the grace that is being offered to them. It is true that God will not change, and so we can be certain that God will continue to offer us his love to the last moment. But if we are not open to listen now, we cannot be at all confident that we will be open to listen tomorrow. This is the problem with putting off the time of conversion: our hearts can grow so accustomed to darkness, that we cannot bear the light. Jesus himself warned us: 'What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life? Or what shall you give in return for your life?' (Matthew 16:26). What a tragedy it would be to continue wasting precious days that could be filled with love. What a tragedy it would be to spend our days halfheartedly when we could have our hearts filled with his love.

Having defended his apostolic commission, and having used it to summon them to repentance, Paul is not afraid to remind them of all that he has had to endure. He presents it as proof of the authenticity of his commission, and as proof of his love for them. He does so to strengthen their affection for him, in order that their faith in the gospel which he preached to them may be more secure. Just as Christ endured suffering in faith, hope and love (see 2Thessalonians 3:5), so Paul, as God's servant (*diakonos* commissioned to proclaim the 'message of the cross' as the revelation of God's 'power to save', must endure weakness and suffering in love (see 1:6; 2:14-16; 4:7-12; 1Corinthians 4:9-13).

He speaks first of his 'afflictions'. He referred to his 'afflictions' when writing to the Thessalonians (1Thessalonians 1:6; 3:3ff), and he has already spoken of them in this letter (1:4), both the afflictions he met with in Asia (1:8), and the afflictions he has suffered because of the pain caused him by the Corinthians themselves (2:4). He has spoken, too, of his 'hardships' (1Thessalonians 3:7; 1Corinthians 7:26). Both words are used by Paul of the struggle that precedes the approaching final judgment. Luke records a flogging that Paul endured at Philippi (Acts 16:23,37) where Paul was also imprisoned. In fact this is the only imprisonment of which we have any record to this point of Paul's life, though it is likely that he was imprisoned in Ephesus (see Introduction to Philemon). Luke records many occasions on which Paul was caught up in scenes of mob violence, including Corinth (Acts 18:12) and Ephesus (Acts 19:29).

Paul's 'labours' include his constant hard work to secure a living (1Thessalonians 3:5; 2Thessalonians 3:8; 1Corinthians 4:12), but refer also to the way in which he has applied himself to his ministry (1Thessalonians 3:5; 1Corinthians 15:10). This has meant sleepless nights and going hungry.

'Purity' refers in a total way to the quality a person has by virtue of the presence of the Holy Spirit. It speaks of reverence and awe, as well as of moral probity. 'Knowledge' refers especially to Paul's knowledge of God in Christ (see 2:14). 'Patience' and 'kindness' are the two primary qualities of divine love as listed by Paul in his previous letter (1Corinthians 13:4). They are also fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22), who empowers Paul's ministry (see 3:8). Throughout this letter Paul has been assuring them of his 'genuine love' (2:4; 5:13) and 'truthful speech' (1:12; 2:17). If we should translate the latter expression as the 'word of truth', Paul would be referring to the gospel which is about the truth of God's love revealed in Christ (see 1Thessalonians 1:5; 1Corinthians 1:18; 2:4).

The Corinthians have experienced 'the power of God' in Paul's ministry because of the action of the Spirit. Paul has carried out his commission, as they well know, because of the communion which he experiences with God. This is his 'righteousness'. This is the power that he wields and this is his defence however others may treat him and whatever others may think of him.

He points out the failure of his opponents to see who he really is. He has been accused of being an imposter, lacking the proper letters of accreditation (3:1), and perhaps also mishandling money (see commentary on 2:5-11; 12:16). People have made fun of the Corinthians for taking notice of one who is not a famous public speaker. His life has been in danger from others, and perhaps also from his own physical condition. These things are judged to be signs of divine disapproval and are seen as punishment. Paul's language here echoes Psalm 118:17-18. They see his sorrowing; they fail to see his joy in suffering (see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:6). They see him as spiritually deficient and materially of no consideration, yet he enriches many and there is nothing that is not his. As he wrote in his earlier letter: 'All belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God' (1Corinthians 3:22-23).

**labours,
sleepless nights, hunger;
⁶by purity,
knowledge,
patience,
kindness,
holiness of spirit
[or 'the Holy Spirit']
genuine love,
⁷truthful speech
[or 'the word of truth']
and the power of God;

with the weapons of
righteousness for the
right hand and for the
left;
⁸in honour and dis-
honour,
in ill repute and good
repute.

We are treated as im-
postors,
and yet are true;
⁹as unknown,
and yet well known;
as dying,
and see – we are alive;
as punished,
and yet not killed;
¹⁰as sorrowful,
yet always rejoicing;
as poor,
yet making many rich;
as having nothing,
and yet possessing
everything.**

¹¹We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you.

¹²There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours.

¹³In return — I speak as to children — open wide your hearts also.

Paul is appealing to them with all his affection to win them for Christ. The feeling takes us back to the opening verses of the letter (1:3-11). It is a cry from the heart of a father to his spiritual children (compare 1Thessalonians 2:7-12; 1Corinthians 4:14). He speaks openly to them, and from a heart that has expanded as he has enfolded each of them in love. If there is a restriction of affections it is on their part, not on his. He pleads with them to respond to him with similar affection.

Paul is not admonishing the Corinthians to have no association with unbelievers. He clarified this point in his earlier letter (1Corinthians 5:9-13). They must live in this world. However, it is one thing to associate with people who do not have faith, and it is another to *yoke* oneself to them, to be so bound up with them as to be pulling in the same direction. The believer should be in the world as Christ was in the world, loving the world, manifesting another possibility of living by bringing to bear the redeeming power and love of God's Spirit. The believer, however, must not live by the values of unbelievers, who are trapped in lawlessness and darkness. The Christian lifestyle should be characterised by 'righteousness' and 'light'.

Members of the Christian community should have already turned from worshipping the god that this world worships (4:4; see 1Thess 1:9; 1Cor 10:19-22). Beliar is a variant of Belial, a word commonly found in late Jewish writings. The Rabbis understood it as coming from the Hebrew *beli* (without) and *'ol* (yoke). It referred to the evil one who threw off the yoke of God's law. This is probably why Paul has chosen this name as a variant for the more usual 'Satan' (see 2:11). In verse sixteen, Paul supports his claim that God has chosen to dwell in the community of believers, by combining texts from the law (Leviticus 26:12) and the prophets (Ezekiel 37:27). Both texts are concerned with the covenant.

He goes on, in verse seventeen to quote from Isaiah 52:11. Earlier he called them to be reconciled to God (5:20). This is the same call, put in terms of purifying God's temple. In the second half of verse seventeen and in verse eighteen, he quotes from Ezekiel 20:34 and then from 2Samuel 7:14. The original text is in the singular, referring to David's son. Paul underlines the applied meaning by changing it to the plural 'sons' and also by adding 'daughters', against his normal practice which is to use the masculine term inclusively. Addressing them as 'beloved' and speaking as one of them, Paul stresses the importance of being cleansed from defilement, for it affects not only our body – our relationship with the world – but more importantly our relationship with the Spirit (see 1Cor 7:34). We are to live a life of 'holiness' (see 1Thess 3:13; 1Cor 7:34), full of reverent awe, and in the presence of God (see 5:11).

¹⁴Do not be mismatched ['misyoked'] with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? ¹⁵What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever?

¹⁶What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God and they shall be my people.' [Lev 26:12; Ezekiel 37:27]

¹⁷Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean (Isaiah 52:11) then I will welcome you (see Ezekiel 20:34), ¹⁸and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty (2Samuel 7:14).

¹Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.

²Make room in your hearts for us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one.

³I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together.

⁴I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our affliction.

Perhaps the reason for the presence of the passage on the previous page in this context is that Paul considered that their close association with unbelievers was at least partly responsible for their failure to open their hearts to him. They were losing a sense of their identity as Christians, and so were vulnerable to the accusations and insinuations being made by Paul's opponents. Here in verse two, he picks up from what he said in 6:12 and once again asserts his innocence. The language raises the suspicion that the key accusation may have had to do with his handling of money (see also 12:17).

Paul has completed what he wants to say about his ministry. Once again he expresses his deep affection for the Corinthians. Earlier he wrote of 'the abundant love that I have for you' (2:4). He spoke of the sufferings that he was undergoing so that there may be 'life in you' (4:12). He spoke of his confidence that in being raised with Christ he would also be 'with you' (4:14). And here he writes: 'I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together'. With the intense expression of appreciation, consolation and joy in verse four we are back with the feeling with which Paul began this letter. Let us read his opening paragraph again, for it sets the mood for the passage which is to follow:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

– 2Corinthians 1:3-7

Paul picks up from where he was before his long defence of his ministry:

When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia.

– 2Corinthians 2:12-13

Even when he arrived in Macedonia his physical hardships continued. The word translated ‘bodies’ in verse five is the Greek *sarx*: Paul is focusing on the weakness and vulnerability of the human condition. His afflictions were not only physical. Luke tells us of the kinds of ‘disputes’ that confronted Paul when he first came to Macedonia (see Acts 16-17). Perhaps he had to put up with a repetition of these. There is no indication that he had any troubles with the Christian communities. His ‘fears within’ seem to have been mainly about how things were going in Corinth.

Then comes the explanation we have been waiting for, the reason for Paul’s unusual opening to his letter with its stress on consolation, and the reason for his return to the theme in 7:4. God, who ‘will have compassion on his suffering ones’ (Isaiah 49:13), lifted Paul’s anxiety by bringing Titus safely to him with the good news that the Corinthians were longing to see Paul to restore their earlier close relationship. They regretted that their past treatment of him had hurt Paul so much that he didn’t feel that he could visit them as planned. They were sorry that they had been so slow to discipline the person who was behind the attack on Paul.

Paul is sorry that his letter hurt them, but glad he wrote it since God moved them to fear of what Paul might be forced to do, and this fear led them to a change of heart. Paul is relieved that they did not reject his letter and so run the risk of rejecting the gospel which he proclaimed. He sees their repentance as leading them to salvation.

⁵For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way — disputes without and fears within.

⁶But God, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus,

⁷and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was consoled about you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

⁸For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it (though I did regret it, for I see that I grieved you with that letter, though only briefly).

⁹Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance; for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us.

¹⁰For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.

¹¹For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter.

¹²So although I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong, nor on account of the one who was wronged, but in order that your zeal for us might be made known to you before God.
¹³In this we find comfort.

In addition to our own consolation, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his mind has been set at rest by all of you. ¹⁴For if I have been somewhat boastful about you to him, I was not disgraced; but just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting to Titus has proved true as well.

¹⁵And his heart goes out all the more to you, as he remembers the obedience of all of you, and how you welcomed him with fear and trembling.

¹⁶I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you.

Titus's report has assured Paul that the Corinthians have done everything to show that they were not party to whatever it was that hurt Paul so badly. They are indignant (with the guilty person for implicating them?), and alarmed (at how seriously Paul judged their behaviour and its possible consequences?). They are longing to see Paul and they have done everything to discipline the guilty person. From what Titus has told him, Paul can find no fault with their behaviour.

However, as we have seen, not all Titus's news was encouraging. Paul still felt the need to explain his change of travel plans, and to defend his ministry, and he still has concerns that the involvement of some of them in the public life of the city could involve them in idolatry. Furthermore, he still felt the need to defend his handling of money as a necessary step to getting the process of the collection restarted. Nevertheless, with all these reservations, he is still greatly encouraged by Titus's report.

In light of how things have turned out Paul sees a deeper purpose in the painful letter which he sent them (2:2-3). God must have wanted to use it to make the Corinthians aware of how keen they were to follow the directions of their pastor. Paul assures them how comforting he finds this and of what this meant to Titus as well. Though Paul had been anxious as to how they would receive the painful letter which he had sent earlier from Ephesus, he had assured Titus when sending him with it that everything would work out well, because he knew the quality of the community in Corinth and was confident that they would respond properly to grace. He is delighted that his judgment has been vindicated.

Paul assures them of the love which Titus has for them and how impressed Titus was with the way they all recognised the presence of God acting through him, and were so obedient to Paul's direction which he conveyed to them (see 2:5-11). 'Fear and trembling' – an expression found also in 1Corinthians 2:3 – refers to the fear that comes from God, a gift of the Spirit that alerts us to our sinfulness and causes us to turn to God in reverent awe (see Exodus 15:16; Isaiah 19:16).

In his first letter to the Thessalonians written some five or six years previously Paul referred to the persecutions which they were suffering (see 1Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14). Now, back in Macedonia the ‘severe ordeal of affliction’ of which he speaks may be a continuation of this. It would seem that the churches in Philippi and Berea are also suffering. In spite of the ‘extreme poverty’ of the churches in Macedonia, they have insisted on making their contribution to the collection which Paul is organising for the needy Christians in Judea. One gets the impression here that in consideration of their situation Paul was not requesting their help, but that it was they who insisted. They saw the opportunity of ‘sharing’ (*koinōnia*) in this ‘ministry’ (*diakonia*) as a ‘privilege’ (*charis* – a ‘grace’). Because of the way in which they gave themselves, Paul too sees it as a ‘grace of God’.

It was the way in which the Macedonians saw their contribution as a gift of themselves to God and to Paul that convinced Paul that what was happening was an expression of God’s will. And it was this that encouraged him to urge Titus to return to Corinth in order to try to reactivate the collection which he had begun to organise there. He referred to it in his earlier letter:

Concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

– 1Corinthians 16:1-4

If we are correct in thinking that the hurt which Paul has been referring to earlier in this letter was over matters of money, this would be enough reason to explain why the collection would have fallen through. Paul is encouraged by Titus’s news to bring it up again. He acknowledges again their special gifts, and includes their special expertise in financial matters (Greek: *spoudē*). As their father and affectionate pastor, he adds that they excel also in another gift – the gift which Paul himself has given them in the love which he has for them (see the commentary on 6:11-13).

¹We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia;

²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have over-flowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means,

⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints –

⁵and this, not merely as we expected;

they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous under-taking among you.

⁷Now as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete expertise [NRSV ‘utmost eagerness’], and in our love for you — so we want you to excel also in this generous under-taking.

⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.

⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something — ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.

¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has — not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

¹⁵As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little’(Exodus 16:18).

In view of the delicacy of the matter, Paul anticipates possible misunderstandings. First, he wants them to know that they are entirely free in this matter to give or not give as they decide. He is making a suggestion and a request, but it is in no sense a command. In fact, as his words about the Macedonian churches indicate, the kind of contribution he is asking is one that is an expression of a gift of themselves. It must be free. To encourage them, Paul reminds them of the self-giving of Jesus himself whom he offers as an example. Though rich in the fullness of his communion with God, he did not seek to avoid the poverty of the human condition, but gave himself in love even to death (see 5:14-15; Philippians 2:8).

He reminds them how eager they were the previous year to be part of the project, and urges them to complete what they began. However, here he wants to avoid a second misunderstanding. He is not expecting them to give beyond their means. If it is to be a gift of themselves, it must be a gift of their real selves. They can only give what they have, not what they do not have. Their Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem are now in material need, and this is an area in which the Corinthians are in a position to help. However, they, too, have needs, and in a discrete way Paul seems to be reminding them of the spiritual wealth they have received from the Jerusalem community, the mother church of Christianity.

One of Paul’s most passionate convictions is the need for communion (*koinōnia*) between the churches, and in a special way between the largely Gentile communities which he was founding and the Jewish churches of Palestine. When he was asked by James, Peter and John to do what he could to help the poor in Jerusalem, he was eager to do so (see Galatians 2:10). This was an opportunity not only to reach out to the poor in love, but to bind the Gentile converts to their Jewish brothers and sisters, and to show the Jewish Christians who felt insecure and perhaps threatened by what was happening in the Gentile churches that, through the differences, there was a communion in love – a sure sign of the action of the Spirit of the risen Jesus.

Paul is sending Titus back to them to supervise the collection (see 2:13; 7:6). Paul assures them that Titus is keen to undertake the task and that he has the kind of diligence and efficiency in handing money (Greek: *spoudē*) that they would expect of a person with this responsibility (see 8:7). The words ‘that I myself have’ in the NRSV of verse sixteen are not in the Greek. To assist Titus, Paul is sending someone with a reputation throughout Macedonia for his proclaiming of the good news. This is not someone chosen by Paul. Rather he has been appointed (see Acts 14:23) by the churches to accompany Paul to Jerusalem with the collection. Paul recognises that it is not enough that he himself be above reproach in the handling of money. It must also be obvious to all that processes are in place to ensure that the contribution is handled properly. As Paul wrote in his earlier letter, he expects the Corinthians also to appoint someone to supervise the taking of their contribution (see 1Corinthians 16:3). We have already seen how sensitive Paul is when it comes to the handling of money (2:2-4,17; 6:8).

Paul himself has chosen the third member of the party, also known for his ability in handling money. Luke mentions four men from Macedonia who were part of the group accompanying Paul to Jerusalem: ‘Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Beroea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe’ (Acts 20:4). Paul may be referring here to two of these.

He commends Titus to them as his partner (*koinōnos*) and ‘co-worker’ (*sunergos*) – a term he used to describe Timothy in an earlier letter (see 1Thessalonians 3:2). The others are ‘messengers’ (*apostolos*), sent by the churches. In referring to the messengers of the churches as the ‘glory of Christ’, Paul is using official diplomatic language. He wants them to be treated with the respect due to ambassadors of Christ.

16But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness for you [NRSV adds ‘that I myself have’].

17For he not only accepted our appeal, but since he is more eager than ever, he is going to you of his own accord.

18With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming the good news; 19and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill.

20We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, 21for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of others (Proverbs 3:4),

22And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found eager in many matters, but who is now more eager than ever because of his great confidence in you.

23As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service; as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ.

24Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.

¹Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints,

²for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them.

³But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be;

⁴otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated — to say nothing of you — in this undertaking.

⁵So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

The reasons advanced by some scholars to suggest that this is part of a later letter are not persuasive. Paul's opening remark indicates his embarrassment in having more to say about this delicate matter. He does not want to give the impression that he doubts their eagerness. However, there is a further reason why he hopes that they will respond favourably.

Before he received the news from Titus that they had discontinued their interest in the collection, Paul had assumed that they were continuing the project which they had commenced the previous year. He had told the Macedonians about what they were doing in Corinth, and this was part of the reason why the Macedonian communities had been keen to be involved. Paul would be embarrassed to have to tell the Macedonians that things were not as he had explained. Even more importantly, it would bring embarrassment on the relatively well-off Corinthians, if the extremely poor Macedonians contributed while they did not.

There is no basis in the text for the cynical interpretation that Paul is playing one community off against the other. We should assume that his concern for the reputation of the Corinthians is genuine. He is genuinely embarrassed that he has unwittingly been in error when speaking about them to the Macedonians and wants to be open about it with the Corinthians. He does not want to be the cause of their embarrassment, and can see no way of avoiding it except their changing their mind and re-instigating the collection.

He does not want them to give because they feel cornered, and that is why he is sending ahead some discreet and competent organisers, so that when he arrives with the Macedonian delegation the Corinthians won't feel under duress, but will have had time to make their own arrangements as they see fit.

Paul uses well-known proverbial sayings, variations of which can be found also in the Book of Proverbs, to encourage a generous contribution. The most profound motive which he offers is that their generosity is itself a witness to their obedience to the gospel.

In verse eight, the expression ‘having enough of everything’ (Greek: *autarcheia*, ‘self-sufficiency’) is a typically Stoic term.

In verse twelve and thirteen their offering is called a ‘ministry’ (*diakonia*). What they are doing is a religious act carried out in obedience to God and as a continuation of the mission given them by Jesus. In verse twelve it is defined as a *leitourgia* (whence our English ‘liturgy’). What they are doing is a ‘public service’, a religious act on behalf of the community. In verse thirteen it is defined as a ‘sharing’ (*koinōnia*) – an expression of their communion in Christ with the Jerusalem community.

Their offering will mediate God’s gracious love to the Christians in Jerusalem, who will be moved to give thanks to God and to pray in their turn for the Achaians. The material prosperity enjoyed in Corinth is, in this way, a gift from God which can be their contribution to the communion of saints.

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly (compare Proverbs 11:24), and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (compare Proverbs 22:8).

⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

⁹As it is written, ‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever’ (Psalm 112:9).

¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

¹¹You are [NRSV ‘will be’] enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;

¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others,

¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you.

¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Appendix : Second Corinthians 10-13

I find persuasive the opinion of those who state that these chapters and chapters 1-9 cannot belong to the same letter. While both sections show that the relations between Paul and the Corinthians have been strained, chapters ten to thirteen, as the following chart demonstrates, indicate quite different perceptions by Paul of the circumstances prevailing in Corinth and so of the current state of the relationship between himself and the Corinthian community.

2Corinthians 1-9

‘You stand firm in the faith’(1:24)

‘I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed’(7:4; see 1:3-7).

Titus told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me’(7:7).

‘I rejoice because your grief [caused by Paul’s letter] led to repentance’(7:9).

‘What earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter’(7:11).

‘I have complete confidence in you’(7:16).

Paul feels free to encourage them to be generous in the collection for Jerusalem (8-9).

‘With Titus we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming the good news; and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill’(8:18-19).

2Corinthians 10-13

‘Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith’(13:5).

‘If I love you more, am I to be loved less?’(12:15).

‘I fear that when I come, I may find ... that there may perhaps be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder’(12:20).

‘I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me’(13:10).

Paul feels need to defend himself against false accusations in reference to his use of money (12:16-18).

‘I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?’(12:18).

In chapters one to nine the prevailing tone is one of relief at the change of heart that Titus found in Corinth, and has just reported to Paul. By contrast the prevailing tone of chapters ten to thirteen is one of profound hurt and disappointment. Though the matter is still debated among scholars, it seems to me that the evidence points to chapters ten to thirteen being composed after the earlier chapters. Titus and his companions returned to Corinth late in 55 to get the collection under way again, according to the plan enunciated by Paul in 2Corinthians 8-9. However, troublesome ‘apostles’ had arrived in Corinth in the meantime and had stirred up anti-Paul feeling. Titus met up with Paul somewhere in Macedonia, and probably in 56, and reported the deteriorating situation to him, and chapters ten to thirteen are Paul’s response (or part of it). Because chapters ten to thirteen do not belong to chapters one to nine, and because in all likelihood they postdate the earlier chapters, we must avoid using them to throw light on the earlier chapters. It is highly probable that those whom Paul refers to as ‘false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ’(11:13), and as ‘superapostles’(11:5; 12:11), are not the same as those who were causing the problems in Corinth to which Paul refers in chapters one to nine.

Paul explains to the community the complexities of the apostolic ministry. It is not for himself that he does this; he wants them for Christ. He is afraid that the personal attack on him will lead to the community drifting not just from him, but from the Good News which he has given them. His ‘anxiety for all the churches’(11:28) urges him to show the ring leaders up as deceivers. We call to mind the strong words spoken by Jesus against those who claimed to lead the people, and exercised power over them, but who filled them with fear and cluttered their lives with observances, keeping them from the love of God. Paul expresses similar sentiments here.

These counterfeit apostles seem to have launched an all-out attack on Paul’s personal integrity and authority. They claimed that he lacked their ‘spiritual gifts’, and that he acted only ‘according to human standards’(‘according to the flesh’, 10:3). He may have sounded strong and assured in his letters, but when he came in person ‘his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible’(10:10). Paul keeps insisting that he has never asked for money from them. The troublemakers accuse him of not loving the Corinthians as much as he loves the Philippians from whom he was known to accept financial help (11:7-11). They also accused him of getting money in a round about way through the collection which he claimed was for the poor in Jerusalem, but which he was using for himself (12:16-18).

Paul sets out to expose these men and, in his most personal outburst, he pleads with the community which he loves so much, to come to their senses. The fact that Paul spent the winter of 56-57AD in Corinth as a guest of Gaius, and had sufficient peace to be able to compose his Letter to the Romans may indicate that his letter succeeded.

**¹I myself, Paul,
appeal to you by
the meekness and
gentleness of Christ
— I who am lowly
[NRSV ‘humble’]
when face to face
with you, but bold
toward you when I
am away! —**

**²I ask that when I
am present I need
not show boldness
by daring to oppose
those who think we
are acting according
to human standards.**

**³Indeed, we live as
human beings, but
we do not wage war
according to human
standards;**

**⁴for the weapons of
our warfare are not
merely human, but
they have divine
power to destroy
strongholds. We
destroy arguments
⁵and every proud
obstacle raised up
against the knowl-
edge of God, and
we take every
thought captive to
obey Christ.**

**⁶We are ready to
punish every diso-
bedience when your
obedience is com-
plete.**

Those who are trying to undermine Paul’s authority in the Corinthian community accuse him of being very brave when he is absent, but of no account (Greek: *tapeinos*, ‘low’) when face to face with them. In an emphatic way (‘I myself, Paul’), he appeals to the community to understand his ‘weakness’ as an expression of the meekness and gentleness of Jesus (compare Philippians 2:8). He does not act ‘according to human standards’ (*kata sarka*, see 1:17, 5:16), that is to say, without regard to the Spirit. Has he not already written to them of his ‘always carrying in the body the putting to death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies’ (4:10)?

The virtue of ‘meekness’ (*praütēs*, see Galatians 5:23) shows itself in the bearing of burdens with strength and gentleness without giving way to impatience. Paul has already used it in his first letter (1 Corinthians 4:21). It occurs in Zechariah 9:9, which is quoted by Matthew in relating Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem riding on an ass (Matthew 21:5). Jesus speaks of himself as being ‘meek and lowly of heart’ (Matthew 11:29), and includes this virtue among the beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth’ (Matthew 5:5). ‘Gentleness’ (*epieikeia*) is the virtue of one who has the power to impose sanctions, but who is able to see beyond the letter of the law to its spirit and to exercise clemency.

Whatever the nature of the opposition which Paul was facing in chapters one to nine, the opponents here are rival missionaries who have come from outside the community (11:4). The nature of their opposition to Paul will become clearer as the letter progresses. The vehemence of Paul’s criticism is immediately apparent with his sustained imagery of siege warfare. He is determined to destroy the obstacles which these missionaries in their pride are throwing up against the gospel proclaimed by Paul, and his weapons are not ‘merely human’ (Greek: *sarkikos*) We are reminded of similar imagery used by Jesus himself when he said that not even the gates of death itself (Hades) would be able to hold out against the power of the church (Matthew 16:18).

Paul is not confident in the obedience of the community (see also 12:21; 13:2; contrast 7:15). When he is assured of it, he will punish anyone who fails to obey. The obedience of which he speaks is, of course, obedience to Christ, but it is shown in acceptance of Paul as the apostle sent to proclaim the gospel to them.

This passage gives us an important insight into Paul's manner of relating to the community when among them. The accusation would have been impossible if he was authoritarian in any way. He must have witnessed to the meekness and humility of the heart of Jesus who did not wish to bring any pressure on people other than the pressure of love, and who refused to meet aggression, whether verbal or physical, on its own ground. No one with eyes open should have mistaken the meekness of Jesus for weakness. Witness, for example, the power of his love in standing up to the religious leaders. Nor should anyone have mistaken Paul's humility, for he was determined to destroy 'every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God'. The point of this passage is that his method of destroying that opposition, while it ran the risk of his being accused by 'stronger' people of being weak, was in fact his way of imitating his Lord.

The three virtues mentioned in this passage as being typical of Jesus – humility, meekness and gentleness (clemency) – are all central to the life of a disciple of Jesus. Humility as lived by Jesus, and by Paul, is essentially the virtue of one who accepts to be a child of God, and who is confident in the love of the 'Abba, Father'. Entrusting ourselves in this way to God's love, we are free to find security in this truth, and not need the kind of security that is looked for in a life of self-reliance. If we are humble, we are free to turn our attention to others, to delight in them, and to invite them, too, to entrust themselves to God in childlike faith. No wonder Jesus said: 'Anyone who brings himself down [like a little child] will be raised up [as by a Father]' (Matthew 23:12). No wonder he replied to his disciples when they asked him who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven: 'Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18: 3-4).

How often we lose patience. In itself, this is understandable. But then, instead of attempting to look into ourselves to discover why we react in this way rather than in the many other ways that are possible, we tend to presume that other people are to blame for our impatience, as though it is they who determine our responses. To dare to look at ourselves we need to be very gentle with ourselves, and this is possible only when we believe we are loved – is not this the central message of the gospel? Only thus can we learn the meekness that can bear with the sins of others and keep responding in love.

In our insecurity, we tend to judge others without sympathy, without understanding, without clemency. It is understandable that we might find it hard to accept our own limitations; but there is no excuse for lashing out at others, either to blame them for who we are or what we do, or to impose on them our own limited judgment. We should pray for the joy to admire others when they excel, to thank God for it; and when they fail, let us recall how little we know of the pressures that have formed them in the past or under which they are now labouring. This does not mean that we are to seek to excuse other people's behaviour, but it does mean that we are called to judge their behaviour (we are never to judge the person) with compassion.

7Look at what is before your eyes. If you are confident that you belong to Christ, remind yourself of this, that just as you belong to Christ, so also do we.

8Now, even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down (Jeremiah 1:10), I will not be ashamed of it.

9I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters.

10For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.'

11Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present.

In verse eight Paul speaks of boasting (Greek: *kauchēsthai*), a word that he will use over and over throughout this letter. In his First Letter to the Corinthians he was critical of the kind of boasting that was going on in Corinth, and quoted Jeremiah 9:24 which reads: 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord' (1Corinthians 1:31). He will quote this text again shortly (10:18). When towards the end of that letter he spoke about how much he boasts about them, he was careful to add: 'a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord' (1Corinthians 15:31).

In his Second Letter he wrote: 'I often boast about you; I have great pride in you' (7:4) – which explains the sense in which Paul uses the word. He is referring to that in which a person takes pride. Only once did he express pride in an aspect of his own behaviour:

Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God — and all the more toward you.

– 2Corinthians 1:12

He 'boasted' in this way in order to defend his ministry with a view to defending the gospel which he was commissioned to proclaim (see 2Corinthians 2:14 - 5:19). Everything in the context assures us that this was a boast which he made 'in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

This present letter (chapters 10-13 of 2Cor) is full of the kind of 'boasting' which is expressed in the passage just quoted. Paul is ill at ease in doing so, but, faced with the criticism of his detractors, and their false boasting (2Cor 11:12-21) – a boasting which is winning over the Corinthian community – he feels 'forced' (2Cor 12:11) to detail the ways in which God has graced him. His motive is expressed well in Second Corinthians: 'We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart' (2Cor 5:12).

Paul must assert his authority, for it has been given him by Christ in order to build the community up – something that he has already said can be done only in love (see 1Corinthians 8:1). He spoke of his weakness and of his lack of rhetorical skills in 1Corinthians 2:3-4. In both First and Second Corinthians he took some trouble to expound the profound theology of the 'weakness' of the cross, as being God's way of revealing his love. He assumes that here and focuses on exposing the false missionaries.

Paul seems to be speaking about the same group whom he spoke about in his earlier letter as needing ‘letters of recommendation’ (2Corinthians 3:1). The more aggressive tone in this letter is probably because of the way in which Second Corinthians was received in Corinth. These rival missionaries are having a lot more influence than Paul realised when he sent Titus off with chapters one to nine. He points out how silly his critics are to be praising themselves for their appearance and eloquence. He points out further that they have no business interfering with his missionary work outside the area of their competence. They are interfering in a community which Paul founded (1Corinthians 4:15) and which comes under his jurisdiction as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul still feels called to nourish the faith of the Corinthians. He hopes that it will grow sufficiently for him to be able to leave them and ‘proclaim the good news in lands beyond you’. From his Letter to the Romans composed in Corinth shortly after, we find out that he has in mind to go to Spain (see Romans 15:24,28).

Since so much ‘boasting’ is going on, Paul once again (see 1Corinthians 1:31) quotes Jeremiah. It is worth quoting the text more amply:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 9:23-24

Paul expressed the same basic conviction in his earlier letter when he was arguing that his weaknesses did not indicate that he was not competent to carry out the ministry given him: ‘Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God’ (2Corinthians 3:5).

¹²We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense.

¹³We, however, will not boast beyond limits, but will keep within the field that God has assigned to us, to reach out even as far as you.

¹⁴For we were not overstepping our limits when we reached you; we were the first to come all the way to you with the good news of Christ.

¹⁵We do not boast beyond limits, that is, in the labours of others; but our hope is that, as your faith increases, our sphere of action among you may be greatly enlarged, ¹⁶so that we may proclaim the good news in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in someone else’s sphere of action.

¹⁷Let the one who boasts, boast of the Lord’.

¹⁸For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends.

¹I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me!

²I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

³But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

⁴For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough.

⁵I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles.

⁶I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you.

⁷Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I proclaimed God's good news to you free of charge?

⁸I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.

⁹And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for my needs were supplied by the friends who came from Macedonia. So I refrained and will continue to refrain from burdening you in any way.

Paul has just pointed out the foolishness of boasting in anyone but God (10:17), so he is not about to do that. However he does sense the need to counter the attacks being made against him by his opponents, lest the Corinthians, being persuaded by them in regard to Paul, will also be won over to another Jesus, another Spirit, another gospel (see Galatians 1:6-7), and so be 'led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ'. Paul is their father, and, having promised them to Christ, it is his responsibility to keep them pure till the day of their marriage.

He likens the rival missionaries to the serpent who deceived Eve (Genesis 3:13). In Paul's day the serpent was interpreted as being Satan (see Wisdom 2:24). Paul is insinuating that they are doing the devil's work.

Referring to the intruders sarcastically as 'super-apostles' (see also 12:11), Paul does not defend himself on the grounds of rhetorical ability. Rather, he challenges the Corinthians to remember his teaching. He is not lacking in the knowledge of 'God's good news'.

Then he moves on to a topic that comes up again and again throughout his Corinthian correspondence: his determination not to accept material support from them. As we noted in the commentary on 1Corinthians 4:12, one reason for his insistence on this in Corinth may be the system of patronage that was prevalent there. To have accepted financial support may, in the minds of the well-off in Corinth, have put Paul in a position whereby they could 'boast' of 'owning' him. This he was absolutely determined to avoid. He worked at his own trade to pay his own way, and when he was in need, it was the Macedonians who helped him out. In no way has Paul burdened the Corinthians and he is resolved to keep it that way.

There is no way that Paul's opponents are going to copy Paul in supporting themselves. They are quite comfortable in accepting the hospitality of the churches in which they carry out their mission. Their way of turning Paul's refusal of such support into a criticism is to suggest that it is a sign that Paul does not love the Corinthians as much as he loves the Macedonians.

By contrast with his own dealings with them, he points out that his opponents are 'false apostles, deceitful workers'. He makes explicit what was implicit when he referred to the serpent who deceived Eve, by speaking of them as Satan's ministers masquerading as ministers of Christ. The allusion is again to the temptation in the garden of paradise.

Behind everything that Paul is saying here is the judgment that the gospel which these 'ministers' proclaim is not the 'message of the cross' (1Corinthians 1:18). Whoever it is that they claim has authorised their mission, it is certainly not Christ, for they are 'enemies of the cross of Christ' (Philippians 3:18). They are, indeed, 'ministers' (*diakonoi*), carrying out a work given by another; but the other is Satan. The 'righteousness' which they proclaim is not from God, and to welcome it will not put one in the right relationship to God for it is not through Christ. When it comes to the judgment, these pseudo-apostles will receive what they have earned.

Paul tries to wake the Corinthians up to 'look at what is before your eyes' (10:7). These self-acclaimed 'super-apostles' are making slaves of them (contrast Paul, 1:24; 4:5). They are preying upon them, taking advantage of them, putting on airs, and insulting them. Paul cannot understand how the community can fall for such impostors.

¹⁰As the truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia.

¹¹And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

¹²And what I do I will also continue to do, in order to deny an opportunity to those who want an opportunity to be recognised as our equals in what they boast about.

¹³For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

¹⁴And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

¹⁵So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds.

¹⁶I repeat, let no one think that I am a fool; but if you do, then accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little.

¹⁷What I am saying in regard to this boastful confidence, I am saying not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool;

¹⁸since many boast according to human standards, I will also boast.

¹⁹For you gladly put up with fools, being wise yourselves!

²⁰For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face. ²¹To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

Paul's passionate love

As in all Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians, it is the depth of his love for them that comes across most powerfully. Besides the solemn avowal, he also claims to have God's own 'jealousy' for them. He loves them so intensely that he is not going to allow charlatans to win their affection by trickery, and turn them from 'sincere and pure devotion to Christ', the one to whom they are betrothed. Like God himself he holds them so dear to his heart that he will do anything to hold on to them. He is even willing to indulge in something that could appear to be personal boasting if that can help to bring them to their senses.

Paul's words here give us a clearer picture of his opponents. They are boasting of being true representatives of the Hebrew race, the religion of Israel and the faith of Abraham. The implication is that Paul is defective in this regard, an accusation he dismisses (compare Philippians 3:5). Paul has already accused them of being ministers of Satan (11:14-15). Since they claim to be ministers of Christ, Paul states that he has greater grounds for the claim and lists what he has been through in the course of his ministry.

'Labours' include his missionary activities as well as the hard work that he continues to do so as not to be a burden on others (see 6:5; 11:27). Though Luke mentions only one imprisonment at this stage of Paul's life – the one in Philippi (Acts 17:23-40) – Paul speaks of 'imprisonments' in the plural (as in 6:5). It is this that encourages this commentary to suggest that Paul wrote Philemon and Colossians from prison in Ephesus. He lists his 'countless floggings' (also 6:5). Five were at the hand of Jews, when he received the thirty-nine lashes allowed by the law (Deuteronomy 25:1-3). We have here another indication of Paul's determination to continue proclaiming the gospel to his Jewish brothers and sisters. Three were at the hands of the Roman authorities. Luke mentions one of these in Philippi (Acts 16:37; see 1Thessalonians 2:2).

Luke also mentions the fact that Paul was stoned at Lystra (Acts 14:19). That was one occasion when Paul was 'near death', and it seems that there were other times as well on the occasion of the dangers which he continually faced because of his commitment to the ministry given him by Christ. Christ had said to Ananias concerning Paul: 'I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name' (Acts 9:16). The listing of his sufferings here helps explain Paul's image of himself as one who is being led to his death (2:14) and who is 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus' (4:10). If the Corinthians need signs to authenticate ministry, they should reflect on the way Paul was graced to bear these sufferings as he walked the way of the cross for them. It is to this aspect that he now turns.

21^bBut whatever anyone dares to boast of — I am speaking as a fool — I also dare to boast of that.

22Are they Hebrews?

So am I.

Are they Israelites?

So am I.

Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.

23Are they ministers of Christ?

I am talking like a madman — I am a better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death.

24Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

25Three times I was beaten with rods.

Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea;

26on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters;

27in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

²⁸And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.

²⁹Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?

³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

³¹The God and Father of the Lord Jesus (blessed be he forever!) knows that I do not lie.

³² In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

There is plenty of evidence in Paul's Corinthian correspondence of the anxiety which he felt towards the community there. Other churches that gave him grounds for concern were those of Galatia. We can be sure that his written word contains only a very small amount of what he speaks of here as 'daily pressure'. Verse twenty-nine reminds us that his concern was not just with the communities and their perseverance in faith, it was also with individual members whom he had grown to love, and whose sufferings he felt. We might recall his words from an earlier letter:

I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews ... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

– 1Corinthians 9:19-22

Paul is only really at home 'boasting' about his weaknesses, for, as he has said again and again in his letters to the Corinthians, it is these, more than anything else, that reveal the 'power of Christ' (12:9). He begins by describing the humiliating way he had to escape from Damascus. Luke also mentions this incident:

The Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

– Acts 9:23-25

Luke mentions that it was after this that Paul made his first visit to Jerusalem as a disciple. We know that King Aretas IV died in 39/40AD. Some say that Aretas could not have exercised control over Damascus before the death of the emperor Tiberius in 37AD. Others dispute this and mention, as perhaps being relevant, that we have discovered no Roman coins minted in Damascus between 34AD and the death of Aretas. Paul's account does not exclude some Jews having been involved in the plot.

Paul's only reason for mentioning this episode here is to highlight his 'weakness'. Unlike the courageous soldiers who were recognised for being the first to scale the walls of an enemy city, Paul has a laugh at his own expense: he is heading the other way, and in a basket!

Though this is the only time that Paul uses the word ‘vision’ (Greek: *optasia*), he has already written to the Corinthians: ‘Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?’ (1Corinthians 9:1). In his letter to the Galatians he referred to revelation (*apokalupsis*) through which he received the gospel which he proclaims (see Galatians 1:12). He also spoke of going up to Jerusalem ‘in response to a revelation’ (Galatians 2:2). In an earlier letter to the Corinthians he used the word ‘revelation’ in reference to divine communications received in prayer (see 1Corinthians 14:6,26).

Here he speaks of an experience which he had about the year 42, during the period when he was working somewhere in the province of Syria-Cilicia, before his call to Antioch. It was obviously an exceptional experience for Paul or he would have chosen a more recent example. Some writings contemporary with Paul speak of ‘paradise’ as the place where the righteous dead await the final judgment, others as the place of ultimate, eternal bliss. Some speak of five or seven heavens, others of three. Paul’s view is indicated by his combining of the words ‘paradise’ and ‘the third heaven’. Paul is emphasising that he was taken right into the presence of God. His language is reminiscent of his words to the Thessalonians in referring to the *parousia*:

We who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

– Thessalonians 4:17

He is obviously reluctant to mention this experience and does so only because his opponents are boasting of having such experiences. The key point here is to notice that Paul is using it as an example of something that had nothing to do with any achievement on his part. Furthermore, he is presenting it in such a way as to make the point that experiences such as this do not authenticate apostolic commission. If they need to make an assessment of Paul in comparison with the rival missionaries, he would prefer them to remember the ‘ordinary’ experiences which they shared when he was among them.

¹It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

²I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows.

³And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — ⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

⁵On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.

⁶But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

^{7b}Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.

⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,

⁹but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'.

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

¹⁰Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ;

for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

There is much speculation about the 'thorn in the flesh' of which Paul speaks here. A number of things are clear. First, it is something which he associates with 'Satan' – an experience, therefore, which, in itself, is destructive of life rather than nurturing of it. Secondly, it is a humiliating experience. Thirdly, it is chronic: he has prayed to be free of it, but it continues to pester him. He may be referring to a chronic physical condition that hampers his apostolic work. If this is true, his extensive travelling alone is all the more credit to his energetic commitment to the commission given him by Christ, without even taking into account the hardships which he has listed earlier in the chapter. It is more likely that he is referring to the abuse and opposition which is constantly following him and trying to undermine his work. In an earlier letter he spoke of being reviled, persecuted and slandered (see 1Corinthians 4:12), and there is plenty of evidence in this present letter of the opposition which continues to hound him.

If we have been wondering what the point of this long section of 'boasting' is, it becomes clear in verses nine and ten. He is 'content' to experience these 'weaknesses', and these 'insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities'. He suffers them because of the commission given him by Christ, and in order to be more conformed to the pattern of his crucified and risen Lord. As he has said to them on numerous occasions, it is in our weaknesses born with patience and with love that the 'power of Christ' is revealed (see commentary on 2:14-16 and 4:7). So long as the 'power' (Spirit) of Jesus continues to 'dwell' in him (as in a tent, Greek: *episkēnoō*), so long as Jesus continues to surround him with his 'grace', Paul is content.

We recall the prayer of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in his 'Contemplation for obtaining love':

Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, whatsoever I have and possess. You have given all these things to me; to you, O Lord, I give them back: all are yours, dispose of them all according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for this is enough for me.

And the words of Saint Teresa of Avila:

Let nothing disturb you; let nothing dismay you: all things pass; God never changes. Patience attains all that it strives for. The one who has God finds he lacks nothing: God alone suffices.

Paul apologises for having to say all the things he has just said. His apology contains a gentle reprimand too. He hoped that they would have known him better and would have defended him, thus saving him the embarrassment of having to do it himself. He knows he is nothing: all he has is because of the power of Christ that rests on him. But being nothing, does not put him lower than these ‘super-apostles’ (also 11:5) who are commending themselves and deceiving the community. We are reminded of his words in a previous letter:

I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them — though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

– 1Corinthians 15:9-10

Paul’s opponents are boasting of the ‘signs and wonders and mighty works’ that they perform. Paul reminds the Corinthian community to recall what happened when he was there with them. He writes to the Romans about what: ‘Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God’ (Romans 15:8-9; see also Galatians 3:5; 1Corinthians 12:10,28,29). Luke gives examples of miracles that happened through Paul’s preaching and prayer in Lystra (Acts 14:8-10), Philippi (Acts 16:16-18) and Ephesus (Acts 19:11-12; see also Acts 15:12). However, extraordinary things can also happen through the working of Satan (see 2Thessalonians 2:9). They must be constantly tested by the criterion of love (see 1Corinthians 13). What are the ‘signs of a true apostle’? Most important are the ways in which true apostles manifest that they are instruments of the redeeming love of God as revealed in Jesus’ gift of himself on the cross. Of supreme importance is faithful love, maintained under pressure, and bearing fruit in the wonderful life of the Spirit.

That Paul would complete this section by returning to the subject of his refusal to accept their financial support indicates his determination to continue this practice. It also reinforces the suspicion that the main area of misunderstanding and hurt between Paul and the community has been false accusation about his misuse of money.

**¹¹I have been a fool!
You forced me to it.
Indeed you should
have been the ones
commending me, for
I am not at all inferior
to these super-apostles,
even though I am
nothing.**

**¹²The signs of a true
apostle were per-
formed among you
with utmost patience,
signs and wonders
and mighty works.**

**¹³How have you been
worse off than the
other churches, except
that I myself did not
burden you? Forgive
me this wrong!**

¹⁴Here I am, ready to come to you this third time. And I will not be a burden, because I do not want what is yours but you; for children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children.

¹⁵I will most gladly spend and be spent for you. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

¹⁶Let it be assumed that I did not burden you. Nevertheless (you say) since I was crafty, I took you in by deceit.

¹⁷Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you?

¹⁸I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

The most straightforward way of reading 'this third time' is to understand it as referring to Paul's initial eighteen month stay from 50 to 52, his brief 'painful' visit from Ephesus in 54 or 55, and the visit he is intending to make before the winter of 56 (see 13:1-2).

That he once again speaks about money (see 11:7-11; 12:13) reinforces the comment made in reference to the previous verse (12:13). That this constant reference to his concern over money in chapters 10-13 does not fit well with his words recommending the collection in chapters 8-9 is an argument for seeing this as a separate letter.

As their father (10:14; 11:2; see 1Corinthians 3:2; 4:15), it is Paul's responsibility to do all he can to meet their needs. He is not asking them to meet his, except, of course, his need for their love. Verse fifteen expresses how well he has learned from Jesus the art of loving (see 5:14). They should not doubt that he loves them (see 11:11). We recall his words in his previous letter:

I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

– 2Corinthians 2:4

You excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you.

– 2Corinthians 8:7

Verse seventeen alerts us to another way in which the rival missionaries are twisting Paul's motivation with a view to discrediting him. They are suggesting that while he does not accept financial assistance directly, he obtains it either through his co-workers, or else through the collection supposedly intended for Jerusalem. Paul rejects any such suggestion (compare 7:2) and appeals to their own experience of himself as well as of those, especially Titus, who were acting for him. Verse eighteen could be referring to Titus's first visit to Corinth to begin organising the collection (see 8:6). It could also refer to Titus's follow up visit (see 8:6,16-17). If, as seems likely, 'the brother' is the one mentioned by Paul in 8:18-19, we have another indication that 2Corinthians 10-13 was composed after and not before the letters contained in chapters one to nine.

In anticipation of his impending visit, Paul forewarns them that he still has concerns about the moral behaviour of some in the community, and that he will certainly be confronting them in this area on his arrival. The concerns which he expresses here over the behaviour that he fears he might find when he arrives in Corinth does not fit with the delight over their reported repentance which he expressed in 7:8-13. This is yet another indication that we are dealing with a separate letter.

As in his earlier letter (see 2Corinthians 7:1), so here, he addresses them as 'beloved'. His moral exhortations and admonitions are the overflow of the love of a concerned father. Though the sins listed are nearly all found also in the list in Galatians 5:19-20, and though the first four are found there in exactly the same order, we should not assume that Paul is simply repeating a traditional listing of sins. Those which he has selected are typical of a situation in which cooperation and trust have broken down. The situation has been made worse by outsiders who are setting out to undermine Paul and so have introduced further divisions into a community that has already suffered from lack of unity, as Paul's First Letter clearly demonstrates. That letter also speaks of quarrelling (1:11; 3:3), jealousy (1:3), conceit (4:6,18-19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4), and disorder (14:33). In it Paul had to give strong warnings also about sexual immorality (see 5:11; 6:9). As he will mention in 13:2, challenging their behaviour was one of the things he had to do on his previous visit.

¹⁹Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? We are speaking in Christ before God. Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up.

²⁰For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

²¹I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, and that I may have to mourn over many who previously sinned and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness that they have practised.

¹This is the third time I am coming to you. 'Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses.'

²I warned those who sinned previously and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if ('when') I come again, I will not be lenient —

³since you desire proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you.

⁴For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

⁵Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test!

⁶I hope that you will find out that we have not failed.

Paul alludes to the regulation of Deuteronomy 19:15 to warn them that if they are found guilty the third time he will be forced to pass sentence on them. What is more, the sentence he will deliver will be that of the risen Christ himself. Paul has been accused of being weak. He reminds them that Christ was weak, in that people were able to crucify him – but they know that Christ is risen now (see 1Corinthians 6:14), and, as Lord, exercises the power of God (see 12:9). It is this power that Paul will administer as Christ's apostle, for 'Christ is speaking in me'.

As we saw when examining the concept of the anger of God (1Thessalonians 1:10), God's constant, unfailing love has no place for pretence. When we act irresponsibly, we must suffer the consequences of our choice. Forgiveness is always offered and always possible, but always dependent on repentance (see 12:21). There is no short cut out of sin. We might attempt to fool ourselves, but God is concerned for the truth, and cares enough even to use the effects of sin as a means of shocking us back to a life of faith, and so of virtue. There is nothing soft about Paul's love, and this letter is meant as a stern warning.

Rather than spending their time criticizing Paul, they should have a good look at their own lives, personally and as a community. Paul asks them to test their 'faith'. Are they basing their lives on the gospel (see 2:9)? Are they taking seriously the fact that the Lord Jesus is among them calling them together as a community, and that he is in them, giving them life by his Spirit (1Corinthians 3:14)? Of course, Paul has to examine his life in the same way. He hopes that when he comes they will see that he has not failed the test himself.

Paul's primary concern, however, is not himself. It is the Corinthian community. He is concerned with the revelation of who God really is: the revelation made in Jesus and declared in the gospel which he, Paul, has been commissioned to preach. Even if it appears that he has failed, his prayer is that they may 'do what is right'. He rejoices that he is 'weak' (see 12:9-10), for then the power of Christ can work through him to make them strong. His prayer is that they be 'perfect' – perhaps, better, 'restored'. The word used by Paul, *katartisis*, is a medical term used for resetting a broken bone. Things in Corinth are in some ways out of joint. Paul's hope is that his stern letter may stir them to respond to God's grace and allow God's Spirit to heal them and to set them right.

In verse ten Paul sums up his purpose in writing. It is a good summary of chapters ten to thirteen, but not of chapters one to nine – yet another indication that we are dealing with a separate letter.

Paul's fatherly care for the Corinthians finds a beautiful conclusion. Nowhere else in his writings does he speak of God so simply as 'the God of love'; and nowhere else do we find such a rich final sentence. He prays that they will enjoy that 'communion of the Holy Spirit' which has its source in God's love and which is the grace offered to them by the risen Christ. It is the communion which Jesus himself enjoys and to which he invites us all.

The richness of this conclusion is an indication of the earnestness of his prayer that they will accept his appeal as coming from his genuine love for them, and that they will heed it.

⁷But we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong — not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.

⁸For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.

⁹For we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may be restored [NRSV 'become perfect'].

¹⁰So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

(see Jeremiah 1:10)

¹¹Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

¹²Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the saints greet you.

¹³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.