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2 Corinthians: Bible Study and Commentary

God's strength for our weakness

A Bible Study in *EasyEnglish* (2800 word vocabulary) on the Book of 2 Corinthians

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EasyEnglish is a system of simple English designed by Wycliffe Associates (UK).

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2 Corinthians chapter 1

Paul's second letter to Corinth

(2 Corinthians 1:1)

2 Corinthians is the second of two letters in the Bible that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. He probably wrote it less than a year after he wrote the earlier letter.

At the time when Paul wrote his first letter to Corinth, there were very **serious troubles** among the Christians there. The church members had formed themselves into opposing groups; many of them were acting in a foolish or selfish manner. A group of church leaders travelled to Ephesus so they could ask Paul how to deal with these matters.

Paul was not ready to return to Corinth yet. So, he wrote **1 Corinthians**, and he sent Timothy, and afterwards Titus, to teach the Christians there. Paul was confident that God was working powerfully among those Christians. He told them that he hoped to return to them at the end of the year (1 Corinthians 16:5-7). In the meantime, Paul hoped to remain in Ephesus until late Spring, and then to go into Macedonia.

During the months between Paul's letters, there were **great changes in the church at Corinth**. Paul's first letter had a powerful effect on the church members (2 Corinthians 7:8-11). They chose to obey God; they stopped their wrong behaviour.

At the same time, **Paul was suffering very severely**. His enemies attacked him both in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41) and Macedonia (2 Corinthians 7:5). Paul thought that he would die; but that caused him to trust God even more (2 Corinthians 1:9).

When Paul wrote this second letter, he was **preparing to return to Corinth** (in Greece) for the Winter months (1 Corinthians 16:6; Acts 20:2-3). He wrote because the Christians there had promised to send a large gift for the poor Christians in Judea. Paul wrote to ask the Christians at Corinth to get their gift ready. After he had been there, Paul intended to travel with a large group of Christians to Judea. Together, they would take the gift.

Paul's blessing for the Christians in Corinth

(2 Corinthians 1:2)

At the start of his letters, Paul often includes a **prayer** for the people who originally read the letter. Here, his prayer for the Christians in Corinth is very brief. *He simply blesses them and asks God to give grace and peace to them.* Such a prayer is called a **'blessing'**; in the Old Testament (the first part of the Bible), it was the duty of the priests to bless the people (Numbers 6:22-27).

Actually, a blessing was **both a prayer and a declaration**. As a *prayer*, the priest asked God to show kindness to the people. The priest prayed this on behalf of the people. As a *declaration*, the priest declared that God would do these good things for his people. The priest declared that on God's behalf. We can see that Paul's words here have this double purpose, too. He asked God to give grace and peace to his people. He also declared, at the same time, that God would give them grace and peace.

There is a very close relationship in the Bible between **grace and peace**. They are both gifts that God gives to his people. They are the people who have invited Christ into their lives. The peace in their lives is the result of the grace that God gives to them.

Grace means **God's kindness**. When God saves a person, that is an act of grace (Romans 3:24). However, God constantly gives grace to his people; through grace, he continuously blesses them (John 1:16).

Peace is **the calm and content attitude that comes from a right relationship with God**. Even when a person's circumstances seem terrible, God can still make that person content (Philippians 4:11-13). God is active in that person's life; God has given that person the strength to trust him in that difficult situation. That is his gift of peace.

The comfort of God

(2 Corinthians 1:3-7)

By 'comfort', Paul means **the help and support that God gives to his people**. It is in God's nature to look after his people; that is why we call him '*our Father*' (Matthew 6:9; Matthew 7:9-11).

During the past year, Paul had been particularly aware of how God had helped him. In Ephesus in Asia, Paul suffered so severely that he expected to die (2 Corinthians 1:8-10; Acts 19:23-41). Then Paul went to Macedonia, where he also suffered very much (2 Corinthians 7:5). However, for Paul, the most important part of these experiences was not how much he had suffered. It was that **God was constantly with him, to help him and to support him**.

During these difficult experiences, Paul saw that God was using his life to help other people too. **Even when Paul was suffering, God was using him to bring salvation to people**. That is, God was bringing people into a right relationship with himself through Paul's work.

God was also using Paul's life to make other Christians stronger. Across many countries, Christians were suffering because of their relationship with Christ. They very much needed the strength and courage that only God can give. God was using Paul's work to help them - and through Paul's letters in the Bible, God still does that today.

When a Christian suffers troubles, the right reaction is not fear. **God wants his people to stand firm** in their relationship with him. They cannot do that in their own strength. They must depend completely on God. See Psalm 46:1-2.

Paul's troubles at, and near, Ephesus

(2 Corinthians 1:8)

By '*Asia*', Paul meant the region of Western Turkey near Ephesus. He worked in Ephesus for more than two years. The church that he established there became important in the history of the early Christians.

While Paul was at Ephesus, he wrote 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 16:9, he briefly describes the state of his work there. Paul considered there to be a wonderful opportunity at Ephesus, but many enemies were opposing him.

In the end, **those enemies caused serious trouble in Ephesus**. Acts 19:23-41 records what happened. A crowd of many thousands of people gathered to protest against Paul's activities. They complained that he was destroying the religion of their (false) god, called Artemis or Diana.

It was a very dangerous situation, especially as the crowd had seized two of Paul's travelling companions. Paul wanted to speak to the crowd, but the other Christians would not let him. In the end, a government official managed to control the crowd and Paul left the city.

That was, perhaps, just the last incident in a series of serious incidents at Ephesus. We do not know whether anyone physically attacked Paul there. However, Paul had already suffered severe injuries because of his relationship with Christ on **9 separate occasions** (2 Corinthians 11:24-25).

Such incidents caused Paul great strain. At Ephesus, Paul expected to die. Perhaps Paul is referring to the time when he wanted to speak to that angry crowd. He did not think that he would be able to persuade them; he expected them to kill him. **Paul insists that he was completely unable to deal with such incidents in his own strength**. He did not have the courage, skill or strength of character that is necessary in such situations. All that Paul could do was to depend completely on God. God alone could rescue him.

How Paul depended on God

(2 Corinthians 1:9-10)

For Paul, life was often very difficult. People often opposed him when he was teaching God's message. Many of his enemies were very cruel. Paul knew that he was constantly in danger of death (1 Corinthians 15:30-31).

To us, Paul seems to have had extraordinary courage and strength. However, that was not Paul's opinion about himself. **Paul was very aware of his own weakness** (2 Corinthians 11:30). When he had troubles, he suffered from mental strain (2 Corinthians 11:28-29), fear (2 Corinthians 7:5) and physical pain (2 Corinthians 11:23-27).

Paul explains here how he dealt with such terrible troubles. **When the danger was great, Paul reminded himself about God's greatness and God's power**. In particular, Paul reminded himself that **God brings life to dead people**. That simple belief helped Paul very much.

Paul saw that he could depend on God completely about both his life, and his death. He had given his life wholly to God; so if Paul lived, he would use his life to serve God. On the other hand, if Paul died, he would be with Christ in heaven. That would be much better than Paul's life on this earth (Philippians 1:21-23).

Paul did not need to worry about an early death. He was very aware that the churches needed his help (Philippians 1:24-26). He knew that God had given him more work to do (Acts 19:21). However, **only God could give Paul the life, health and strength that he needed** to do that work. Like Abraham, Paul believed that God can give life even to a dead body. Because of that belief, Abraham could offer to God even the life of the son whom God had promised to him (Hebrews 11:17-19). For the same reason, Paul constantly offered his own life to God (Acts 21:13; 1 Corinthians 15:31). He depended completely on God.

The prayers of God's people are important

(2 Corinthians 1:11)

You might think that such a strong Christian as Paul would not need anyone else to pray for him. Paul, however, believed the opposite. Although Paul was praying constantly (1 Corinthians 14:15; 1 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:17), **he frequently asked other Christians to pray for him** (Romans 15:30-32; Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:3-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; Philemon 22).

Like all the first Christians, **Paul believed that God answers prayer**. Jesus taught them that they should pray with faith (active belief and trust in God). When they trusted God, God would act powerfully on their behalf (Mark 11:22-24).

Of course, God can act even if nobody prays. However, **God chooses to use the prayers of his people**. By his Holy Spirit, he shows them what they should pray for (Romans 8:26). Then, they can pray with confidence for the things that God wants to happen (1 John 5:14-15). So, when God answers their prayer, they have a reason to be grateful to God and to trust him more.

The first Christians considered it important to pray for each other (James 5:16). Especially, they prayed if one of them had a special need for God's help. When Peter was in prison, for example, the Christians gathered together to pray for him (Acts 12:5; Acts 12:12).

Paul believed that God gives each Christian different ways to serve him (1 Corinthians 12:27-30). His own special work for God was to teach God's message and to start new churches. Paul prayed much; but he could not do everything on his own (1 Corinthians 12:21-27). **God had given to many other Christians the special opportunity to support Paul's work by prayer** (for example, 1 Timothy 5:5). Paul recognised that the prayers of those people were important. He needed those prayers. He, and the people who would benefit from Paul's work, were grateful for those prayers.

Holy and sincere behaviour

(2 Corinthians 1:12-14)

People naturally try to do whatever seems best for them. That is, whatever gives them the greatest advantage. They consider it *wise* to behave like that.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Paul warned the Christians in Corinth not to behave like that. God's wisdom is different from human wisdom; now they must serve God. Christians should not try to please themselves. Instead, their desire should be **to please God**.

In 2 Corinthians 1:12, Paul explains how he tried to do that. It affected both his relationship with God, and his relationship with other people. **In relation to God, Paul acted in a holy manner**. He obeyed God, because as one of God's people, he belonged to God. **In relation to other people, Paul acted in a sincere manner**. He tried always to be honest and truthful. He refused to use clever words that would hide his true intentions (1 Corinthians 2:1). He spoke in a manner that people could understand clearly.

Paul considered it important to do these things in every situation. However, it seemed especially important to him always to act in this manner when he dealt with the Christians in Corinth. He believed that God had given him special responsibility for them, like a father's responsibility for his children (1 Corinthians 4:15). Therefore, he must behave towards them as he wanted them to behave (1 Corinthians 4:16).

Paul examined his own conscience about how he had dealt with the Christians in Corinth. He was sure that he had always acted in a holy and sincere manner towards them. However, they seemed not completely sure about that. Paul did not want to argue about it. Jesus was both his master and theirs. At Jesus' return, when he acts as judge, all these things will become clear.

Paul had not yet returned to Corinth

(2 Corinthians 1:15-18)

Paul had always dealt with the Christians in Corinth in a sincere and honest manner. They however, were not completely sure about that, because **they wanted him to visit them more often.**

After Paul had established the church in Corinth, he spent *some time* in Antioch and Galatia (Acts 18:22-23). He then remained for *two years* in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). After that, he spent *several months* in Macedonia before he wrote 2 Corinthians. In this letter he said that, at last, he would come to Corinth soon (2 Corinthians 13:1).

During much of that time, the Christians in Corinth had been urging Paul to come to help them. They had serious problems in their church. In reply, Paul had written a long letter (the Book of 1 Corinthians), but **he had not yet come.**

That fact upset them. They still loved and respected Paul (2 Corinthians 7:7). However, it seemed as if his actions did not match his words. Paul had urged them to show love for each other (1 Corinthians chapter 13). He had insisted that he cared very much about them (1 Corinthians 4:14-15). However, when they needed him, he sent either *a letter*, or *someone else*, instead.

Paul did not need to answer these things; God knew the truth about him. However, Paul considered it right to give an explanation to them (2 Corinthians 2:1-4). Paul was not thinking about what was best for him, but for them. He had actually hoped to visit Corinth sooner, before he went into Macedonia. However, he wanted to visit them at the right time, when his visit would bring joy and not pain.

Paul had promised to come to Corinth again (1 Corinthians 16:5), **and that would happen soon.** Paul had even expressed the hope that he would be there for the whole of that Winter (1 Corinthians 16:6). That was what he actually did (Acts 20:2-3). He spent *three months* there. Then he went to Judea.

God's promises are certain

(2 Corinthians 1:19-20)

By 'yes' and 'no', Paul is referring to how people change their plans to suit their own desires. They do whatever pleases them.

That is not how a Christian should behave; and it is not how Christ behaves. **God's promises are certain; we can always trust his words.** God does not change his mind to suit the circumstances (James 1:17).

God has made his promises so that his people may have confidence in him (Hebrews 6:13-19). God fulfils (carries out) all his promises by means of Christ. For example, God promised to free his people from the power of death (Hosea 13:14). He will do it by means of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

God has made the promise, and Christ declares 'yes' to that promise. Then we reply 'Amen', to give praise to God. Here there is a reference to the form of prayer that Christians still follow today. 'Amen' means 'it is true'; it is a word to express agreement with a statement or a prayer. Paul shows us in 1 Corinthians 14:16 that the Christians in Corinth did that.

So **God has made the promise, and Christ has carried out the promise. We receive the benefit if we accept it for ourselves.** For example, God has promised to save people who turn to him (Acts 3:19). Christ died on the cross in order to carry out God's promise (Romans 5:8). We receive the benefit of that promise if we invite Christ into our lives (John 1:12).

Christ does not say 'no', because **he does not refuse to carry out God's promises.** So we can depend on God's promises. God has made the promise; Christ has carried out the promise. We only need to accept it for ourselves. God wants us all to trust him.

The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of God's promises

(2 Corinthians 1:21-22)

God has made his promise; Christ has fulfilled (carried out) the promise, and we must accept it (see my notes on 2 Corinthians 1:19-20) Then something else happens.

Some Christians in Corinth had thought that they received the complete benefit of all God's promises at once (1 Corinthians 4:8). They were wrong. **Most of God's promises are for the future age**, after Christ's return (1 Corinthians 15:50-54).

What God gives to Christians immediately is not the benefit of these promises but **the guarantee, or proof**, of them. That guarantee is **God's Holy Spirit**, who is working in the life of every Christian.

That is not the kind of proof that convinces the human mind (1 Corinthians 2:9-16). It is more like the **legal proof** of something. When people sign a cheque or a contract, nothing may seem to happen immediately. However, **the law considers that payment or that agreement to be certain.** Whatever they have agreed must happen at the proper time in the future. So, God's Holy Spirit proves that a person has the benefit of God's promises.

Paul describes the Holy Spirit's work in 4 different ways here. Each time, he emphasises that God has done this for his people.

(1) By means of the Holy Spirit, God *establishes* his people in their relationship with Christ. In other words, he gives them a strong relationship with Christ.

(2) God *anoints* his people with the Holy Spirit. To 'anoint' means to 'cover'; it was the custom to anoint Israel's kings and priest with oil, to separate them for their special work for God.

(3) God *seals* (or marks) his people with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). The purpose of the mark is to show that they belong to him.

(4) God *places* his Holy Spirit inside them, as a guarantee that they will receive the benefit of his promises.

The nature of a church leader's authority

(2 Corinthians 1:23-24)

When the Christians in Corinth wanted Paul's help *to deal with problems* in their church, Paul did not come to them. That caused some of them to think that he was not acting in a sincere manner towards them.

Paul insisted very strongly that he had acted properly. God knew the truth about these things, and Paul was responsible to God.

Paul explained why he had not come at that time. **If he had come, he would have had to deal with them very strictly.** There would have been arguments, and perhaps people would have left the church. Everywhere, Paul desired to encourage Christians and to make them stronger (Acts 18:23; Acts 20:2), and not to cause them pain. So Paul considered it better to deal with these things by letter. He also sent Timothy, and later Titus, to help the Christians in Corinth.

Then Paul added an important statement about **the kind of authority that a church leader has.** Church leaders sometimes have to *advise* people, or to *warn* them, or even to *deal strictly* with them. However, **the church leader must never try to control another person's relationship with God.** God alone is that person's master; he never gives that kind of authority to any church leader.

So, the Christians in Corinth were wrong to imagine that *Paul could deal with all their problems.* **What Paul could do was to work with them.** Paul could teach them from the Bible and he could advise them; he could encourage them and he could pray for them. However, it was the personal responsibility of each Christian to make sure that his own relationship with God was strong. Only a Christian with a strong relationship with God will stand firm when there are troubles.

2 Corinthians chapter 2

Special occasions in the history of a church

(2 Corinthians 2:1-3)

In the history of any church, there are **a few special occasions that its members can use to make their church stronger.** Such events are rare; it is important to use them well.

One such event is **the return of a former church leader** to a church that is achieving much. It is an event that should bring great joy, to the members and to their former leader alike. He will declare God's message as previously, but with the benefit of years of experience. The older members will hear again the messages that had such a powerful effect on their lives. Newer members, children and visitors will at last hear the actual words of that leader, about whom they have heard so much.

That was what Paul wanted to happen at Corinth. He was not just the *former* leader of the church; he was its **first** leader. God had changed completely the lives of many people while he was there (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). His return, therefore, should be an opportunity for great joy.

That was especially true because, in many ways, the church at Corinth (in Achaia) had done very well (2 Corinthians 7:14). The church had become stronger (Acts 18:27-28) and the Holy Spirit was very active there.

The problem was that **Paul knew about serious problems in the church at Corinth**. Groups of people in the church were opposing each other. Some members were having sex in a manner that is against God's law. Other members were going to the temple (house) of a false god to eat. The church meetings were sometimes wild; members were behaving foolishly.

If Paul visited, then of course he would have to deal with these things. **They would miss that very special occasion that would make their church stronger**. So Paul saw that it was not yet the right time for him to return to Corinth. He would deal with their problems by letter and he would send people to help them. Then, he would return to Corinth when his visit would bring *joy* to them.

Paul describes his experience as he wrote a book of the Bible

(2 Corinthians 2:4)

This is an extraordinary verse for anyone who studies the Bible. In it, **Paul describes his actual experience when he was writing the Book of 1 Corinthians**.

Paul did not write that book merely because he wanted to write a book or to be helpful. He was not trying to impress his readers with his skilful choice of words. He was not even trying to convince them that he was right.

Rather, **Paul wrote because of the love that God had given him for the Christians in Corinth**. He had heard about the serious problems in their church, and those matters upset him deeply.

Paul mentions how **he cried tears** about their situation. That probably refers to his *prayers* for them (compare Romans 8:26-27 and Hebrews 5:7). Those prayers were *desperate*, because God had given him such *love* for them (1 Corinthians 4:15; 2 Corinthians 11:28-29).

With that love, Paul felt a sense of *duty*. It was not easy for him to write 1 Corinthians; in fact, it was **very difficult**. The prophets (holy men) who wrote the Old Testament (the first part of the Bible) often described their work as a '*burden*' (for example, Habakkuk 1:1). That is, a heavy weight that they had to carry. Paul's task also felt like a burden to him, but God gave him the strength to complete it.

Paul was not just writing his own thoughts about the situation at Corinth. During prayer, **God showed him what he must write**. The authors of the Bible recorded very carefully the words that God gave to them (1 Peter 1:10-11; 2 Peter 1:20-21); therefore, the Bible is the word of God. The first Christians understood that Paul's letters were part of the Bible (2 Peter 3:15-16).

How to deal with someone who turns from wicked behaviour

(2 Corinthians 2:5-8)

Paul did not write the Book of 1 Corinthians in order to hurt anyone. However, **someone had hurt the Christians in Corinth**. That is, this person had upset them very much.

Probably, Paul was referring to **the church member at Corinth who was having sex with his father's wife** (1 Corinthians 5:11). In 1 Corinthians, Paul expressed his shock that the church had done nothing to deal with this man's evil behaviour.

Then, Paul had told them to be strict, and to hand this man over in prayer. When the devil acted against the man, perhaps the man would return to God (1 Corinthians 5:3-5).

That advice was a shock for the Christians in Corinth; they felt very sad about this matter. However, they followed the advice. The result was what Paul had hoped. **The man became humble and he stopped his wrong sex acts.** He felt deeply sad about what he had done. He decided that he would serve God properly again.

The man wanted to return to the church; but its members were unsure whether they should accept him. Paul told them that they should. **The time had come for them to forgive him.** They should allow him to join the church again, and they should act in love towards him (see Galatians 6:1).

Later in 2 Corinthians, Paul returns to the same subject (2 Corinthians 7:8-13). There, he explains that it is sometimes right to be deeply sad. It is right when God intends it. God can use it to help people to return to him, so that he can save them. However, when the process is complete, the person should not remain sad. **When God has forgiven someone, God's people should accept that person in love.**

The test for Corinth's Christians

(2 Corinthians 2:9)

Paul wrote the Book of 1 Corinthians to show the Christians in Corinth what God wanted them to do. He describes that letter as **a test**; the test was **whether they would obey**. Really he was encouraging them to obey. Paul's statement is clear, but it may surprise us. There is much advice in that letter, but few commands. Paul is constantly trying to *persuade* the Christians, not to give orders.

On the other hand, Paul described himself as a servant (1 Corinthians 3:5), or even as a slave (1 Corinthians 9:19). **He obeyed God**, and he urged the Christians in Corinth to do that, too.

Jesus also taught that God's people must obey him (Matthew 7:24-27; Mark 3:31-35). That was **a difficult lesson for the Christians in Corinth**. They liked the fact that God had made them free. They considered themselves to have the right to do whatever they wanted. They did not even want to follow God's law.

Paul had insisted that the church members in Corinth were genuine Christians (2 Corinthians 7:14). Probably, other Christians were not so sure about that. It was a great shock for them to hear how some church members in Corinth were behaving.

So, Paul made a test for them. He told them about the worst example of a church member in Corinth who was not obeying God's law (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). **He told them that they must deal strictly with him. In prayer, they must make a judgement against him. Then they must separate themselves from him.** Paul hoped for the result that this man would return to God.

The church members did what Paul had told them to do. That one decision began a real change in their attitudes. **Now they could see that they must obey God** (2 Corinthians 7:11). All of them had chosen to obey God (2 Corinthians 7:15).

Paul was pleased that they had passed his test (2 Corinthians 7:16).

It is better to forgive than to say nothing

(2 Corinthians 2:10-11)

A certain man in the church at Corinth had been guilty of wrong sex acts. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, Paul told the church to deal strictly with that man.

Now, however, that man was truly sorry. He had stopped his wrong behaviour. He had asked God to forgive him.

Paul knew how that man's behaviour had damaged the church at Corinth. So, **he urged the members that they should now forgive the man.** Paul was not telling them to act as if the man had never done those wrong things. They would have to be very careful about him (Galatians 6:1). However, they should allow him to return to the church, and they should not be bitter towards him.

Paul added that he too would forgive the man. Actually, Paul was not sure whether he needed to forgive the man; the man had done nothing against Paul. Still, Paul considered it better to forgive than to say nothing.

Paul gave his reason. **He understood how the devil uses such matters to cause trouble for God's people.** Satan is constantly looking for reasons to accuse Christians. He wants to separate them so that they oppose each other. He wants them to be bitter and angry against each other.

Paul was very aware of such matters. He often had to deal with problems in the churches. In the past, there had been problems with opposing groups in the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). When Christians use all their energy to oppose each other, they are not doing God's work. In fact, by their wrong attitudes, they make it easier for the devil to do his work.

Why Paul did not travel to Corinth from Troas

(2 Corinthians 2:12-13)

Paul was explaining why he had not yet returned to Corinth. He suffered much at Ephesus in Asia (2 Corinthians 1:8). When he left there, he wanted to go to Corinth on the way to Macedonia (2 Corinthians 1:16). He had already sent **Titus** to Corinth in order to prepare for his arrival. He wanted Titus to deal with the problems in the church at Corinth before he (Paul) arrived there.

Paul went from Ephesus to **Troas**, also in Asia. He remained at Troas for a short time. He was hoping that Titus would meet him there with some good news about the church in Corinth.

Actually, Paul could have remained at Troas for much longer. He writes that God 'opened a door' for him there. That is a word-picture; it means that God gave him a wonderful opportunity to declare God's message. Paul had used similar words to describe his success at Ephesus in 1 Corinthians 16:8-9.

Paul had decided not to return to Corinth while the troubles in the church there continued (2 Corinthians 2:1). So, when Titus did not come to Troas, Paul decided to go to **Macedonia** instead.

Paul writes this to show that **he cared very much about the troubles at Corinth**. He did not return there because he considered it wiser not to go yet. However, he was constantly thinking about their church, and he was constantly praying for them (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). God had given him a love for them in his spirit; so he could not remain at Troas. So instead, he continued with the plan that God had given to him. That was to go to Macedonia, then to Corinth in Achaia, then to Jerusalem, and finally to Rome (Acts 19:21).

The great procession

(2 Corinthians 2:14-16)

Paul had no home. For several years, he had **travelled constantly** between different towns and different countries to declare God's message. Most people would consider that a hard and unpleasant way to live.

That was not, however, Paul's opinion. He considered it **a great honour** to declare the good news about Christ in so many different places. He even compared it to **the greatest honour that the army of Rome gave** to their military leaders.

After a successful war, there would be **a great procession** to give honour to the leader of the army. For the winning army, that was a very happy occasion. They would praise their leader as a great hero. Everywhere along the procession, people would burn **incense** (a substance which burns with a sweet smell). Its smell would fill the air.

To the people on the winning side, that smell was beautiful. It expressed their great joy. However, their enemies hated that smell. It caused them to lose all hope. They only expected to die.

Paul compared himself and his message to that smell. Many people had trusted Christ to save them because they heard Paul's words. God had given them a new kind of life which will never end (2 Corinthians 5:17). That was a reason for great joy.

However, **Paul had also seen the opposite reaction**. Some people refused to serve God, and they hated Paul and his message. Paul had warned them that God was their judge. All people have offended against him, and we cannot save ourselves (Romans 3:1-20). If people refuse to invite Christ into their lives, God's judgement is against them. Such people considered that Paul was bringing a message of death to them.

Leaders who use churches for their own advantage

(2 Corinthians 2:17)

As Paul and the other apostles (the first Christian leaders) established the first Christian churches in each town, other men soon followed them. These men described themselves as teachers of God's word, the Bible. They tried to become the leaders of these new churches. They desired to have important jobs in churches where they could receive good wages. **They saw the Christian churches as a way to make profits**.

Some of these teachers were genuine Christians; others were not. Some of them taught the truth about God, although they loved money too much.

Many of them, however, taught a false message about God, and they did it on purpose. They confused people about the real meaning of the Bible in order to gain power, respect, and money for themselves. They warned the people about Paul and the other apostles. Because of their greedy and selfish attitudes, these teachers could even spoil other people's trust in Christ (Acts 20:29-30). The Book of Jude describes how wicked, selfish and greedy some of these men became.

Paul was different from those men because he was sincere. He refused to use powerful words and clever arguments in order to impress people (1 Corinthians 2:3-5). He taught God's message simply, so that everyone could understand it (2 Corinthians 1:13). Paul did not want to gain importance for himself; instead, he wanted Christ to receive honour. Paul was not trying to earn money, he was content with what God provided for him (Philippians 4:11-12).

Paul's attitude was the result of his relationship with God. He believed that God had sent him to each place. He declared the messages that God had given to him. He remembered that God was present at each meeting. So **Paul taught what he himself believed.** He urged people to do the things that he himself did.

2 Corinthians chapter 3

Letters to recommend a church leader

(2 Corinthians 3:1)

When we read Paul's letters or the account of his life, he seems very impressive. However, a few passages show that **many Christians did not consider Paul a great man.**

It seems that Paul's appearance did not impress people (2 Corinthians 10:10). People were aware of his weakness (1 Corinthians 2:3 and 2 Corinthians 12:9-10). It does not surprise us that Paul felt weak often. He worked extremely hard, and he suffered much (2 Corinthians 11:23-29).

People also complained about Paul's speeches (2 Corinthians 11:6). He gave some very long speeches (Acts 20:7-11). He tried to make them very simple (2 Corinthians 4:2), and that does not impress most people (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

Paul and his companions wrote **letters to recommend church leaders** to different churches (for example, Acts 18:27). That was a sensible arrangement. It helped the Christians to know whether they could trust that person to teach them.

Some teachers in the first churches had found *a different use* for such letters (2 Corinthians 10:12). These people were trying *to impress Christians* and by that means, *to gain power and wealth* for themselves (2 Peter 2:15). They managed to convince many Christians that they (the teachers) were truly great people (2 Corinthians 11:5). However, often these teachers taught things that were wrong, or even evil (2 Peter 2:2).

Paul brought no letter to recommend him when he first came to Corinth (Acts 18:1-4). However, **God had sent him, and Paul came in the power of the Holy Spirit.** God was at work in Corinth, and many people became Christians.

God's work is clearly more important than whether there is a letter to recommend a teacher.

The evidence that Paul worked for God

(2 Corinthians 3:2)

In 1 Corinthians 4:14-15, Paul called himself the 'father' of the Christians in Corinth. That is, of course, a word-picture. **Paul means that he was responsible for the beginning of their Christian life.** It was Paul who originally set up the first church in Corinth (Acts 18:1-4). Many of the church members at Corinth became Christians because of Paul's work there (Acts 18:8).

Many of Paul's experiences in that situation were **like a father's experiences.** He describes how he taught them as new Christians in a very careful and gentle manner. It was like someone who looks after babies (1 Corinthians 3:2). When they had troubles in their church, like a father he urged them to imitate him (1 Corinthians 4:16). Even after he left Corinth, he continued to care about them (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). He expressed the desire to give his own time and energy to provide for them (2 Corinthians 12:14-15).

The strength of their relationship with Christ was the evidence that Paul's work for God was genuine. However, **some teachers had entered the church in Corinth who opposed Paul.** They said that they were better than him; **they argued that his message about God was wrong** (2 Corinthians 11:4-5). It was necessary for Paul to argue against those men and their message (2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

Paul did not care if people considered him foolish (2 Corinthians 11:16). However, **he had to oppose those wrong teachers so that the Christians in Corinth remained loyal to Christ** (2 Corinthians 11:2). The Christians had to realise that God had really carried out a powerful work in their lives, by means of Paul. God had given them a right relationship with Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17); that is the greatest change that can happen in anyone's life.

God's message in the hearts of his people

(2 Corinthians 3:3)

Paul used an interesting word-picture to describe God's work in the lives of the Christians at Corinth. He compared them to the **letters** that churches write to recommend a Christian leader to another church.

Then Paul developed that word-picture. **Christ, of course, and not Paul, had written that letter.** It is only Christ who, by his death, can give a right relationship with God (1 Corinthians 1:13). Paul's work in Corinth was as the servant of God (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). So the wonderful change in the lives of people at Corinth (1 Corinthians 6:9-11) was not the work of Paul, but of the Holy Spirit.

Ink is not really permanent. A letter may last for a long time but, in the end, the words on the page will disappear. Job wished that he had a more permanent way to record his words (Job 19:23-24). **God has a truly permanent way to work in the lives of his people. He gives his Spirit,** and the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives will never end (Romans 8:11).

Job thought that it was better to record a message on the rock; such a message would last for many centuries. However, there is a problem. Because stone is not a living substance, it is very hard.

When God works in people's lives, **he replaces their stony hearts with living hearts** (Ezekiel 36:26). The reference is not, of course, to their physical hearts, but to their inner thoughts, their true desires and their attitudes. Before they trusted God, they were unable or unwilling to change their attitudes. They were like the hardest stone, where it is extremely difficult to make a mark. Now, however, they are willing to accept God's message; in fact, they accept it with great joy. So God places his law in the hearts of his people; or, to use the word-picture, **he writes his law on their hearts** (Jeremiah 31:33).

God works by means of his servants

(2 Corinthians 3:4-5)

At the end of 2 Corinthians 2:16, Paul asks a very important question. He has just described the powerful effects when someone declares God's good news in a new region. **God's message changes the lives of people completely** (2 Corinthians 5:17). It saves those people who accept it. They receive a right relationship with God, and life that never ends. However, for the people who refuse it, it is a message of death. God's judgement is against them.

Then Paul asks his question: *who is sufficient for these things?* He means: **who is capable to have such a great effect on the lives of people?** It seems too great a responsibility for any person to accept.

After that, Paul described how **God had worked by means of him at Corinth**. It was as if God had written a letter to recommend Paul's work. By that 'letter', Paul meant the lives of the people that God had saved at Corinth (2 Corinthians 3:2-3). In other words, God had changed their lives; he made them into his own people (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Paul has answered his own question, and that fact seems to astonish him. Perhaps he could hardly believe that God would do such great things by means of people like him. **He was doing this work as a mere servant of God, but God was actually recommending Paul's work.**

Paul was very careful to emphasise **what God had done**. God's servants are capable to declare God's message only because *God* has sent them to do that. Paul could only speak with confidence about his own work because *God* had approved of it. God's servants are weak in themselves; they must depend completely upon him (2 Corinthians 12:10).

God's new covenant

(2 Corinthians 3:6)

Paul says that God has appointed him to be a '*minister of the new covenant*'.

A **minister** means *a servant or a worker*. Paul has chosen a word that refers particularly to the servant's relationship to his work. Paul's work was to bring God's new covenant to people, so that they could receive a right relationship with God.

The '**covenant**' means *God's promises to his people*. The '**new covenant**' is a reference to Jeremiah 31:31-34. Paul also referred to that passage in 2 Corinthians 3:3; clearly, he was thinking about that passage as he wrote these words. Hebrews chapter 8 repeats the passage from Jeremiah. God's new covenant is *what God did by means of the death of Christ* (Hebrews 9:15). That was the message that Paul taught at Corinth (1 Corinthians 2:2). Because of Christ's death, people can have a right relationship with God and receive the benefit of his promises.

'The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life'. **It is by the Holy Spirit that God gives life to people** (John 3:5-8). By the Holy Spirit, people can understand the promises of God (1 Corinthians 2:9-13). Christians should live by the Holy Spirit, and they should allow the Holy Spirit to guide their lives (Galatians 5:16-18).

There is another way to understand God's words, but the result is death. We can *refuse* to allow God's Holy Spirit to work in our lives. Instead, we can just look at the letters and words on the page. Many people were trying to do that with God's law. However, **God's law declared his judgement against them**, because they could not completely obey it (Romans 3:9-23; Galatians 3:10-12).

For that reason, **people need the new covenant.** They need God to write his law in their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). They need Christ's death, so that God can forgive their evil deeds (Hebrews 9:15). They need God's Holy Spirit to give them life that never ends.

The words that brought death, and the Spirit that brings life

(2 Corinthians 3:7-10)

Paul is referring to Exodus chapter 34. That was when Moses saw **God's glory** (the beauty of God's perfect character). For the second time, God gave Moses his 10 commands, which he wrote on stone.

As Moses returned to Israel's camp, **his face was still shining** because of God's glory. The people were afraid to see it, so Moses later covered his face. However, whenever Moses went to speak to God, Moses uncovered his face.

God gave his law so that people can learn how to have a right relationship with him (Galatians 3:24). He was showing people that they must turn from evil deeds to serve him. However, when people do not turn from their evil deeds, **the judgement of the law** is against them. So, the commands of the law bring them death instead of life (Romans 7:10-11). The proper punishment for evil deeds is death (Romans 6:23).

Most of the people whom Moses led died in the desert because of their evil deeds (1 Corinthians 10:5). We must not blame God's law for that. It is holy, and it came with God's glory. We must not blame the commands; they are holy, right and good (Romans 7:12). **It is people's own evil deeds that bring judgement against them.**

God gave his law by Moses; he showed his love and truth through Jesus (John 1:17). By God's Spirit, he gives his people life that never ends (John 7:37-39). Even the words that brought death came with great glory. Clearly then, the Spirit that brings life comes with much greater glory.

Temporary and permanent experiences of God's glory

(2 Corinthians 3:11)

Perhaps a lesson from *science* can help us to understand the meaning of this verse.

The moon has no light of its own. That fact is clear because we only see the full moon for a short period each month. For the rest of the month, much (or all) of the moon is in darkness.

The explanation is that the moon's light actually comes from the sun. The moon only shines when it passes through the sun's light. Only the part of the moon that is in the sunlight can shine. It may be night on earth, but the moon is far enough away for the sun to shine on it.

So, the moon's light is temporary because the moon merely passes **through** the sunlight. However, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:41, the sun's own light is quite different. The sun is constantly **in** the light, whenever we see it. That is because light comes from it, permanently.

In the same manner, Paul distinguishes between **a temporary experience of God's glory (greatness), and a permanent one**. In the original language, Paul says that the temporary experience passes 'through' God's glory; but the permanent experience is 'in' the glory.

Paul's reference to the temporary experience refers back to Moses' experience in verse 7. Moses passed **through** God's glory when he met with God. Moses' experience is a word-picture for the laws that he received. In particular, Moses received laws that declare God's judgement against evil deeds. The laws are permanent (Matthew 5:17-19) and so is the judgement (Revelation 21:8). However, the present state of this world is not permanent, because people's evil deeds will end (Revelation chapters 21-22).

However, God's people are '**in**' his glory, and it is constantly changing them, to make them like him (2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2). What God is doing in the lives of his people is permanent (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

Speak boldly!

(2 Corinthians 3:12)

'We are very bold', writes Paul. His word for 'bold' refers particularly to **bold speech**. So, his meaning is that he used bold words - or rather, **plain words**. He explained God's message in a **clear and simple** manner.

In Paul's letters to Corinth, he often showed how important that principle was for him. Although many people considered it foolish, **Paul declared the simple message of Christ's cross** (1 Corinthians 1:17-25). Paul actually refused to use clever or impressive words (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul again reminds the church about this. He wrote nothing that they could not understand (2 Corinthians 1:13). He showed them clearly his true intentions (2 Corinthians 1:18). He insisted that he would only speak in an honest and sincere manner (2 Corinthians 4:2).

It was very bold for Paul to speak in such a way. He was an intelligent man who had studied much (Acts 26:24). It was usual for teachers to try to impress people with their great knowledge (1 Timothy 1:3-7). **Paul really did have great knowledge** (2 Corinthians 11:5-6), **but he refused to use it to impress people**. The result was that many people did not respect Paul (2 Corinthians 10:10). However, Paul did not care about that. He did not want to speak bold words about himself, but only about Christ and his cross (Galatians 6:14).

Paul mentions his 'hope' here. That is a reference to the wonderful things that God is doing in the lives of his people (2 Corinthians 3:11 and 3:18; Romans 8:18-25). Like all the first Christians, Paul did not use the word 'hope' to mean something uncertain. They believed strongly that God's promises are certain.

God's promises of heaven and the New Jerusalem are certain (Philippians 1:21-23; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18; Revelation chapter 21). Therefore, Paul could speak boldly about what God is doing.

Why people do not believe God

(2 Corinthians 3:13-15)

Paul returns to the event in Exodus 34:29-35, which he referred to in verse 7. After Moses had met with God, his face was shining. The people were afraid to see it, so Moses covered his face. **They were afraid of the power that they saw in God's commands.** They were afraid of his judgement against their evil deeds.

On the other hand, **Paul was not ashamed of the power that he saw in God's message, the gospel** (Romans 1:16). He wanted everyone to see it (Galatians 3:1), although many of them only laughed at it (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). So Paul declared about Christ and his death to everyone (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

That did not mean, of course, that everyone believed. God's message, his good news, is for everyone, but some people cannot see it. God's judgement is against those people because of their evil deeds (2 Corinthians 4:3). Paul gives two separate explanations of this. He may be referring to different groups of people, but the same reasons are true about both groups.

(1) 2 Corinthians 3:14-16 refers to people who hear God's words in the Bible. Paul refers especially to some people from Israel who did not believe God. However, many people who consider themselves Christians also do not believe God; these words are true about them too. **They hear the word of God, but they refuse to believe it.** It is as if something covers their minds. They cannot see (understand) the truth. Paul says that their minds are too hard. It is like when someone tries to cut a message into hard rock with a knife. It seems impossible to make any impression on their minds.

(2) 2 Corinthians 4:4 refers to people from all nations who cannot see (understand) God's message. It is as if **the devil has made them blind.** So they cannot see the things that should be very clear to them. They cannot see how beautiful and wonderful is God's message about Christ.

God desires very much for people in both groups to turn to him.

Turn to Christ, and God will be your teacher

(2 Corinthians 3:16)

In verses 15 and 16, Paul contrasts strongly two different attitudes towards God and his word.

In verse 15, the person reads from the books that Moses wrote. Those books are the first 5 books in the Bible. Therefore, they are part of the word of God, and they are extremely important (2 Timothy 3:16). Their message will change the life of a person who truly understands them. However, this particular person does not on this occasion understand them; **he merely reads them.** Of course he ought to understand them, because God's message in those books is clear. When something covers a person's eyes, he cannot see properly. In the same manner, **this person has something that seems to cover his heart** (his mind). So he cannot understand properly.

A very wonderful thing happens in verse 16. Paul is still describing the same person, but **a wonderful change happens in that person's life** (2 Corinthians 5:17). Now the person is not merely reading words on a page. Instead, he has turned to the Lord. In Paul's letters, 'the Lord' usually means Christ. **This person has invited Christ into his life; he is now allowing God to change him.**

The result is that, **suddenly, the person can understand.** Of course he cannot understand the whole Bible at once. However, the reality of his life and his experience of God has changed. He now knows what he must do to serve God. He understands how God wants him to behave. The Bible is not just a set of books that he cannot understand; instead **God himself teaches him** through it (Psalm 119:102).

So, in his heart, **that person is now able to know God** and to serve him.

The freedom that God's Spirit gives

(2 Corinthians 3:17)

In these chapters, Paul develops his ideas very quickly. Often, his method is to emphasise different meanings of the same word. So, the 'Spirit' could mean the Holy Spirit, or Christ, or the true meaning of God's word. That fact causes difficulties in verses 17 and 18 for some readers. However, there is no real problem; Paul is thinking about all these possible meanings as he writes.

The Lord is the Spirit, Paul writes. He could be referring to the fact that the Holy Spirit is God. Or, that the Lord (Jesus) is Spirit, even as God is Spirit (John 4:24). Or, Paul could be saying that Jesus is the true meaning of God's law (compare 2 Corinthians 3:6; Romans 10:4). Paul believed all these things.

Paul then speaks about **the freedom that God's Spirit gives.** That was an important subject for the church in Corinth; Paul writes much about it in his first letter. In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, he writes about the Christian women in Corinth who refused to cover their heads. They would not dress in the traditional manner for women because the Holy Spirit was working in their lives. They considered themselves free to do whatever they wanted.

They had not understood what freedom really is. True freedom is not the right to do whatever we want. **True freedom is when we turn to Christ** (2 Corinthians 3:16). At that time the Holy Spirit frees us from our evil deeds and from the devil's power. However, that is just the beginning of God's work in our lives (2 Corinthians 3:18). By his Spirit, God has given his people the freedom to become his children (Galatians 4:1-9). Before, it was as if something covered our minds. So, we could not understand God's word properly (2 Corinthians 3:14). Now, God's Spirit takes away that problem, and we are **free to serve God** properly.

We see the glory of the Lord, and it changes us

(2 Corinthians 3:18)

God's Holy Spirit is working in the lives of his people in an astonishing way. **He is changing them;** he is making their character and attitudes like his own. That is a very wonderful thing - but especially for people, who formerly were evil and enemies of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Romans 5:8-10).

This wonderful thing happens only **because of Jesus**. *We see the glory of the Lord*, Paul writes; *and it changes us*. When Paul writes about 'the Lord', he usually means Jesus. That is the meaning here too, as 2 Corinthians 4:6 shows. 'Glory' means his splendid and beautiful character. Of course, we do not now see Jesus with our eyes, but with our hearts, mind and spirits.

Also, he does not change our bodies yet - but that will happen in the future (1 Corinthians 15:51). **He changes our hearts, minds and spirits**. He changes our inner thoughts, our character and our attitudes.

God is making his people more like Jesus, his Son. In the future age he will adopt them as his children (Romans 8:18-24). They will share his glory (Revelation 22:3-5; Hebrews 2:9-11).

In Exodus chapter 34, Moses saw the glory of God for a short time. Afterwards, his face was shining with light because of God's glory. He covered his face because people were afraid to see it.

God's people now have true freedom. **They do not even need to cover their faces when they see the glory of the Lord**. That can be their constant experience. That glory enters their lives. Once they were very unlike Jesus in their thoughts, attitudes and actions. Now, however, they too are starting to show his wonderful character through their own lives. That process will continue until God has completed his work in their lives (Philippians 1:6).

2 Corinthians chapter 4

Why we must teach the Bible in an honest manner

(2 Corinthians 4:1-2)

Paul describes how he always taught, at Corinth and elsewhere, in an **honest and sincere manner**. He considered it his duty to behave in such a manner, even if he suffered for it - and Paul did suffer greatly, as 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 shows. His reason was simply that God, in his kindness, had given Paul this work to do. God was the master, and Paul was the servant - so of course Paul obeyed.

Because of God's wonderful promises, Paul acted boldly (2 Corinthians 3:12). Paul often felt weak, but God gave him the strength to continue (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). Paul always considered it a wonderful honour to declare God's good news.

However, there were teachers, even in the church at Corinth, who behaved in a very different manner (2 Corinthians 11:1-6). **They made every effort to impress people, because they wanted to control people's lives**. They taught people only those things that they (the people) wanted to hear. Perhaps those teachers thought that they were being clever. Really, however, they were behaving in a wicked manner.

The Bible, God's word, is holy. **Therefore, church leaders and teachers must teach it honestly** (James 3:1). They must never try to get better results by methods that God does not approve of. It is wrong and evil to use lies to persuade people to come to church. God loves the truth, and his people should love the truth also.

Paul had decided always to speak the truth. In their conscience (inner thoughts), people would know that they were dealing with an honest man. If they acted cruelly towards him, they themselves would recognise their own actions to be evil. If they accepted him, they too could learn to serve God in a sincere manner.

Why many people hate the gospel

(2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

God caused **his law** to be great and wonderful. However, many people still refused to believe him and they would not obey his commands. It was as if something covered their eyes. They were unable to see (understand) the message that God had given to them (Isaiah 6:9-10).

The gospel is the message that, because of Christ's death, God can forgive our evil deeds (John 3:16). It is even more great and wonderful than God's law (Hebrews 3:5-6). Christ himself, God's Son, brought that message to us; Christ himself died to save us (Galatians 2:20).

We might expect that everyone would gladly receive such a wonderful message of God's love to us. There seems no proper reason to refuse God's offer to forgive our evil deeds. **However, very many people not merely refuse it; they actually hate the gospel.**

Clearly, we cannot blame God for that. He has made his gospel so easy to understand that even a child can accept it (Matthew 18:3). Paul too was careful to explain God's message in the simplest possible manner (2 Corinthians 4:2).

Paul said that 'the god of this world' was responsible for this problem. He means the devil; the devil is the god whom most people serve in the present age. In other words, **people believe the devil's messages** and they refuse to believe God's message. So, they are acting as if the devil is their god.

They have given the devil control over their lives. The devil uses that power to hide God's wonderful message, the gospel, from them. **However, their situation is not yet hopeless.** At the present time, God still urges them to turn to him (2 Corinthians 6:2; Hebrews 4:6-7). If they do that, he will help them (2 Corinthians 3:16). He will change their lives completely (2 Corinthians 5:17). Then they will see, and know, how wonderful the gospel really is.

Church leaders should behave in a humble manner

(2 Corinthians 4:5)

It is wrong for church leaders to care about their own importance. Paul had very strong opinions about this matter. He considered himself to be only a servant of God; he was teaching people to accept God as their Lord, that is, their master. **Paul did not want people to believe him, but to believe Christ** (1 Corinthians 1:13). Paul spoke about his own weakness; but he spoke about the power of Christ (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Some of the men who taught in the church at Corinth had very different ideas (2 Corinthians 10:12). They were trying to establish their own authority (2 Corinthians 11:20). So, **they tried to prove that they were important people, with great knowledge.** They wanted everyone to respect them.

Even Christ did not behave in that manner. Although he is the Lord of heaven and earth, he came to this world in a humble manner (2 Corinthians 8:9). He declared God's message to poor people; he showed God's love for weak and ill people (Luke 4:18). He died so that evil people could receive a right relationship with God (Romans 5:8).

Christ taught his disciples (special students) that **they too should behave in a humble manner.** They should serve other people, as he did (John 13:1-15).

That was how Paul chose to behave at Corinth (1 Corinthians 9:15-23). He tried to help slaves, weak people and people from every nation as he brought God's message to them. Paul really was a great man; but many people considered him foolish to behave like that. Paul could have used his many skills to make himself wealthy and important. Instead, he chose to live in a humble manner and to serve God.

The glory of God shines into the hearts of his people

(2 Corinthians 4:6)

When Moses spoke with God, Moses' face shone with light because of the glory (splendid beauty) of God (2 Corinthians 3:7; Exodus 34:29-35).

There was only one occasion on earth when Christ's face shone with the glory of God (Matthew 17:2). However, **Christ, as God's Son, has much greater glory than Moses**, who was God's servant (2 Corinthians 3:7-11; Hebrews 3:1-6). At the present time, we do not see Christ's glory with our eyes (see 1 Corinthians 13:12; Revelation 22:4). It is our *hearts* (our minds and spirits) that see his glory.

The effect of light is to give us knowledge. We do not know about things that we cannot see. Because of the light, we can know and understand things clearly.

So, **if God's glory shines in our hearts, it gives to us the knowledge of God.** People who do not believe God cannot know him; it is as if their minds are blind (2 Corinthians 4:4). The gospel is the message that God can forgive people's evil deeds because of Christ's death. It is a clear message, so everyone should be able to see (to understand) its truth. However, the devil takes God's word away from the hearts of many people (Matthew 13:19).

God created the light (Genesis 1:3). That passage refers to natural light. However, in 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul may be referring to God's declaration in Isaiah 9:2. There, **a light would shine into the lives of people who were living in darkness.** The darkness meant that people did not know God and his word (Isaiah 8:20-22). So, God declared that he would send Christ into their lives (Isaiah 9:6-7). Christ would change their lives in the most wonderful manner (2 Corinthians 3:18 and 5:17). They would be like people who walked out of darkness into the most wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Why God works through weak people

(2 Corinthians 4:7)

2 Timothy 2:20 refers to the vast collection of jars, pots and similar objects that rich people had in their houses. Some of these were gold or silver, others were of wood or clay. Clay is a kind of earth that people bake to make cheap pots.

Rich people needed these objects in order to store the things that they had bought. Of course, they would choose a gold or silver jar to store a very precious thing. Cheap pots were for the cheapest things. Such pots were not beautiful and they broke very easily.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7, the idea of *a pot that someone makes from the earth* interested Paul. Genesis 2:7 says that God made the first man from the earth. Genesis 3:19 says that, at death, the human body returns to the earth. **Like a cheap clay pot, the human body is very weak.** Paul had suffered much (2 Corinthians 11:23-30). He understood how weak he really was.

Christ is present in the lives of God's people (2 Corinthians 4:6; Colossians 1:27). Paul compared that fact to a very precious object, as Jesus did in Matthew 13:44-46. Then Paul said that God has done something extraordinary. **God has placed Christ in the hearts of his people. He is precious** (1 Peter 2:4), **but they are weak, like clay pots.**

God has a purpose for everything that he does. Therefore, there is a reason why God's power works through weak people. It is **so that other people can clearly see the power and greatness of God** (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). If God only used powerful and impressive people, then other people would give honour to them, and not to God (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). However when God shows his power through weak people, he alone receives the honour.

Paul's proof that God works through weak people

(2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

This is **Paul's proof that God works through weak people like him.** We do not mean that Paul was a weak person; clearly he was strong both in his mind and body. We mean that even the strongest person is really very weak. Even the most healthy person can die suddenly, and we all have constant troubles. Paul suffered more troubles than most people do (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). Those troubles showed Paul's weakness; but at the same time, God showed his strength through Paul (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Paul's words in this passage are extremely powerful. People used similar words to describe **men who were fighting.** Paul's situation often seemed desperate; his complete defeat and death seemed certain. However, **each time God acted powerfully to rescue him,** as Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10. This happened very many times (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). In 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 Paul describes these experiences in 4 different ways:

(1) Paul's enemies caused him great troubles. It was as if they **pressed against him from every side.** For Paul, this was not just a word-picture - Paul often had this actual experience. However, they could not defeat him. God *provided space* for him (compare 2 Corinthians 10:13-16).

(2) In his troubles, Paul seemed **like someone who had lost his way.** However, *he had not lost* his struggle. He did not give in to despair. He may have lost everything; but God provided what he needed (compare Philippians 4:11-13).

(3) Paul's enemies opposed him cruelly. On many occasions they **chased him away** - but even then, he was *not alone*, because God was always with him (compare Romans 8:35-39).

(4) Even when Paul seemed to suffer complete defeat, God was still working in him. Paul's enemies **threw him to the ground;** in Acts 14:19, they thought that they had killed him. However, God still had more work for Paul to do (compare Philippians 1:21-25). So Paul *remained alive.*

Life that comes from death

(2 Corinthians 4:10-12)

In Mark 8:34, Christ said that **people must take up their crosses to follow him**. He was referring to the way that soldiers from Rome forced criminals to carry crosses to the place of their death. Christ meant that, in this cruel and evil world, his people would not be able to save their own lives. Instead, they must give their lives to God, and they must be willing even to die for him (Mark 8:34-37).

However, **the result of such an action is not death, but real life**. Only the person who gives his life to God can live always with him in heaven (John 12:25). Everyone must die, of course, anyway; nobody can protect his life from every danger (Ecclesiastes 9:1-4). **We can find real safety, and real life, in God alone** (Psalm 62:1-2; Psalm 91:1-2). That safety, and that life, is not for the body, but for the spirit. God's people have a home in heaven (John 14:2; 2 Corinthians 5:1-2), where the troubles of this world cannot affect them.

Because of his many enemies, Paul was in constant danger of death (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). However, the result of that was not death, but life. **People saw Paul's weakness, but they saw the power of Christ**. Paul loyally spoke about Christ whenever God gave him the opportunity, even in the greatest danger (compare Luke 21:12-15).

The result was that people in every town were trusting in Christ. They too chose to give their lives to God; they too were receiving from God the real life that never ends. **As Paul suffered in danger of death, God was giving new life to people**.

'I believed, therefore I spoke.'

(2 Corinthians 4:13)

'**I believed, therefore I spoke.**' Those words come from Psalm 116:10. There are different opinions about what the author of that Psalm meant by those words. However, it is clear that Paul considered his experience similar to the author of Psalm 116. Both of them had been in such great danger that death seemed certain. **In those circumstances, they were unable to help themselves, and they did not trust in any person**. Instead their belief and trust was in God; and God acted powerfully to rescue them.

People believe with their hearts (Romans 10:9-10), that is, with their minds and spirits. **Their words are the result of what is happening in their hearts** (Luke 6:45). Christ is present in the hearts of his people (2 Corinthians 4:6; Colossians 1:27). They speak with the faith (active belief and trust in God) that God has placed in their hearts.

Of course, people do not always speak what they believe. They speak lies, or they try to confuse people about the truth. The author of Psalm 116 considered that to be part of the nature of people (Psalm 116:11). **He had to choose to act in a different manner. He believed, therefore he spoke.**

Paul too had made that choice (2 Corinthians 4:2). Many leaders and teachers in the churches were not acting in a sincere manner (2 Corinthians 11:12-15). They probably thought that, by that means, their lives would be more comfortable. They tried to please people with their words (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

As God's servant, Paul did not consider that he had the right to choose his own words. He spoke the message that God had given him (compare Acts 4:20). **He spoke the words of faith that God, by his Holy Spirit, had placed in his (Paul's) heart.** So, even in the greatest danger, Paul was speaking what he believed. His faith was in God, and God rescued him (2 Corinthians 1:9-10).

The Holy Spirit will raise God's people from death

(2 Corinthians 4:14)

Even in situations where death seemed likely, Paul believed God (2 Corinthians 4:8-13). In verse 13, he told us about the fact that he believed. In verse 14, he explains *what* he believed. In other words, he explains **the particular belief that gave him strength** in such difficult circumstances.

Paul considers that to be not just a belief, but **clear knowledge**. In other words, it was not just an idea; it was certain. God himself had given Paul that knowledge (2 Corinthians 4:6). So of course Paul believed it; and because he believed it, he spoke it.

That belief, or rather, that knowledge, is that **by his own death, Jesus defeated the power of death** (Hebrews 2:14-15). The same Spirit that rose Jesus from death now lives in God's people (Romans 8:11). **Therefore, even as Jesus rose from death, so all God's people will rise from death** (1 Corinthians 15:12-22).

Therefore, **death could not defeat Paul, and it cannot defeat any of God's people.** Jesus lives in them, so they with Jesus will overcome death, to live with him always (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; Revelation 21:1-7).

If death could defeat Paul, then Paul would be afraid of death. Even if he himself felt no fear, he would be afraid to see the defeat of God's plan for his life. However, death had no power to overcome Paul. **Death was only able to separate his body from his spirit. At that moment, the Holy Spirit would bring Paul's spirit into heaven, where he would at last be with Jesus** (Philippians 1:20-22). Then Paul would know the end of all his weakness, and life that never ends (2 Corinthians 5:6-9).

That is God's promise not just to Paul, but **to all God's people.** God gives them life that never ends (John 3:16); death can never defeat them (1 Corinthians 15:51-57).

Everything is for God's people

(2 Corinthians 4:15)

'*All things are yours*', Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:21. Now he says '*all things are for your benefit.*' He means that **everything is for God's people.** These seem the most extraordinary statements until we understand the plans and purposes of God.

When God created the world, **he gave the first people authority** over it (Genesis 1:26-30). Everything was for their benefit; everything was theirs. Of course God did not intend that they should use their power in an evil manner. That happened later, after people chose not to obey God.

When the first people decided not to serve God, **they handed over their authority to the devil** (Luke 4:5-6). The devil has great power over this world (Ephesians 2:2), but God's power is much greater (Romans 8:31).

God sent Christ into the world to destroy the devil's power, and to save the people whom he (God) had chosen (Ephesians 1:2-14).

In the present world, God's people suffer the same kinds of troubles as other people (Ecclesiastes 9:1). However, **God is already working powerfully in their lives** (2 Corinthians 3:18). God showed his grace (kindness) to them when he brought them into a right relationship with himself. His grace is constantly active in their lives (2 Corinthians 13:14). He uses the circumstances of their lives to bring about his plan for them (Romans 8:28). So, God is working, and using, all things for their benefit.

God's final plan is to show his glory (his honour) in these people, who are his children (Romans 8:18-21). Already, they bring him glory as they thank him for his work in their lives. In the future, God will adopt them as his children (Romans 8:23), so that all things will be theirs (Romans 8:32). That will not take glory away from God, because they will always give the honour to God (Revelation 21:3).

Where Paul's strength came from

(2 Corinthians 4:16)

'We do not lose courage.' Paul repeats his words from the end of verse 1. He had known the kind of experiences that would cause most people to lose courage (verses 8-9). However, he insisted that he had no proper reason to be in despair. God was working powerfully in his life (verse 6). Paul trusted God (verse 13). Paul knew that, after the death of his body, he would be with Jesus in heaven (verse 14). He considered his troubles slight because God was doing such wonderful things for him (verse 17). So Paul remained loyal to God and he continued to declare God's message (verse 2).

Paul distinguished between what he called the *'inner man'* and the *'outer man'*.

By the *'outer man'*, he meant **the human body**. Daily, he saw and felt that his body was suffering (2 Corinthians 11:23-29). His troubles were both serious and constant; he only expected them to end with the death of his body. Even if these severe troubles did not continue, he would certainly die one day. Paul understood that really, the human body is very weak.

However, Paul insisted that **the human spirit** is much more important than the body. By the *'inner man'*, he meant the spirit that each person has. If a person has a right relationship with God then, at the death of the body, that person's spirit will go to heaven. However, the person's spirit is very important before death, too. When a person has a right relationship with God, Christ is present and active inside that person, in their spirit (2 Corinthians 4:6; Colossians 1:27).

That was what gave Paul strength in such difficult circumstances. **Paul's strength came not from himself, but from Christ** (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Every day, God was at work in his life. Every day, the Holy Spirit gave him more life and more strength (see Isaiah 40:31). Paul's body might be dying daily (1 Corinthians 15:31); but his spirit was daily receiving the kind of life that never ends.

The greatness of the glory that God's people are receiving

(2 Corinthians 4:17)

God is doing something great and wonderful in the lives of his people. Because of that, even the worst troubles in their lives seem minor. **God's people will have a home in heaven, and they will live with God always.** That is so wonderful that the troubles of this life hardly seem to matter (Revelation 21:1-4).

'Glory' means something that is great, beautiful and wonderful. Really, all glory belongs to God (Revelation 19:1), but he shares it with his people. In the Hebrew language, the words for 'weight' and 'glory' are the same. So, Paul writes about a 'weight of glory' here and he emphasises it extremely strongly. **The glory, that God's people will have, will be very, very great.**

People sometimes describe their troubles as a great weight that they must carry (compare Matthew 11:28). For Christians, however, **that 'weight' becomes light because they have Christ's help** (Matthew 11:30). They do not need to struggle. Even during the worst troubles, God supports them.

Paul was speaking from his own experience. He had suffered some of the worse troubles that we can imagine (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). These troubles had not made Paul's trust in God weaker - in fact, they made him stronger. Paul writes that these troubles 'work' (bring about) for us this great glory. He does not mean that we earn the glory by our troubles. Our troubles have no value when we think about the glory (Romans 8:18). Paul means that **the Holy Spirit uses our troubles to bring God's glory into our lives** (compare 1 Peter 1:7).

Paul's troubles continued for several years - in fact, until the end of his life. However, those troubles seemed to be **only for a moment**. God's glory in his people's lives will last **always**; it will never end.

Concentrate on the things that will really last

(2 Corinthians 4:18)

Paul contrasts the things that we can, and cannot, now see. **The things that we can now see belong to this present world and the present age.** However, both our present world, and the present age, will end (2 Peter 3:7; 1 John 2:17).

The present age means the time when evil forces continue to have power over the world. God permits that now, so that evil people may have an opportunity to turn to him (2 Peter 3:9). However, of course God will not always allow evil forces to continue their evil work. **Christ will return, and that will be the beginning of the new age.**

The new age is when Christ will rule all things. He will begin his rule on this earth but then God will create a new heaven and earth (Revelation chapters 20 to 22). Christ's rule will be perfect, and it will never end. **'The things that we cannot see', therefore belong to the new age and the new world.**

Paul has been discussing the troubles that God's people have in this life. Those **troubles** are therefore the main meaning of 'the things that we can see'. However, we can think of so many things that Paul's words could describe. Our troubles belong only to the present world; they cannot last. The power of evil and cruel rulers belongs only to the present world; it cannot last. Even our possessions belong only to the present world, and so they will not last.

We need to concentrate on the things that really will last (Matthew 6:19-21). Paul refers especially to **the glory**, the splendid beauty and true greatness that God has prepared for his people (1 Corinthians 2:7-9). That belongs to the new age when Christ will rule. So, it will never end.

2 Corinthians chapter 5

The bodies of God's people

(2 Corinthians 5:1)

In the previous verse, Paul wrote these words: *'The things that we see are temporary. The things that we do not see will last always.'*

Here, Paul shows how those words have special reference to **the human body**. In 2 Corinthians 4:16, he mentioned the outer and inner man, by which he meant a person's body and spirit. God created people to have both a body and a spirit; but the nature of the body and the spirit is different.

Our bodies in the present world belong very much to this world. They are like a tent: a temporary home in which we live. **We all know that these bodies are only temporary: death will certainly destroy them.** For that reason, all that is most valuable for us, should be in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21).

Paul taught that **the bodies of God's people will live again** (1 Corinthians chapter 15). Then, they will have a new kind of life, which comes from heaven and not from the earth. That is the meaning of *the house that (human) hands did not make*. A tent is temporary; but now Paul is referring to the type of building that is permanent. **The new bodies of God's people will never die; they have life that never ends.**

Their bodies will be like Christ's body after he rose from death. It is interesting that Christ made similar statements about himself (John 2:19-22; Mark 14:58). In those passages, he described his body as a temple (the house of God). Paul expresses the same idea about the bodies of God's people (1 Corinthians 6:19). Their bodies are holy, because God lives in them by his Spirit.

A Christian's deepest desire

(2 Corinthians 5:2-4)

Christians desire, more than anything else, **that their relationship with God will be complete and perfect.** That cannot happen in this world, where their present bodies suffer so much. What God has promised to them is very different from the experiences of their bodies now (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

However, Christians do not desire death, even as they would not desire to be without clothes. Instead, they desire **to be with Christ** (Philippians 1:23), and so to have life that never ends. God will cause their bodies to live again with a new kind of life. Paul compares that to someone who puts on new clothes (1 Corinthians 15:53-54). In other words, it will still be the same person, but God will change that person completely.

God's people wait eagerly for that wonderful future event. Until then, because of that deep desire, they 'groan' (2 Corinthians 5:2-4; Romans 8:23). So does everything that God has created (Romans 8:22). So does the Spirit of God (Romans 8:26). They all deeply desire that future age when the relationship between God and his people will be complete (Romans 8:18-21; Revelation 21:1-5).

Romans 8:22-26 and 2 Corinthians 5:2-4 repeat Paul's word for 'groan', *STENAZO* in the Greek language. Perhaps 'groan' is not an ideal translation. 'Groan' means to make a deep, low sound, in order to express a sad feeling, or to complain. However, *STENAZO* means **to have such a deep, sad feeling that we cannot express it**. God's people know great joy in God, but the state of this world makes them deeply sad. They have a deep desire that only God can satisfy (Matthew 5:3-6). He will not disappoint them. He has prepared the most wonderful things for them (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). He will certainly complete all his promises to them (2 Corinthians 1:19-20).

The Holy Spirit is the guarantee

(2 Corinthians 5:5)

It is **God** who is working in the lives of his people. In fact, he is not just working; he is *achieving* his purpose. Through all the troubles of their lives, **he is bringing them into a perfect and wonderful relationship with himself** (Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 4:17).

What God has begun, he is able to complete (Philippians 1:6). Although their bodies may die, his people will have *life without end* (John 11:25). Although there may be no place for them in this world, they will have *a place of great honour* in the future world (John 14:2; Hebrews 11:36-40; Revelation 21:1-4). God will declare them to be *his children*, and they will *live with him* always (Romans 8:18-23).

God's people do not have all these things yet. However, God has given them a guarantee, or proof, of these things. **That guarantee is the Holy Spirit**, who lives in them (1 Corinthians 3:16). The same Spirit, who raised Christ from death, lives in them (Romans 8:11). So, as Christ raised to life, all God's people will rise to new life (1 Corinthians 15:22; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

Because the Holy Spirit lives in God's people, they already recognise him as *their Father* (Galatians 4:6). So, by the power of the Spirit, **even now they are aware of their true relationship with God** (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

Paul previously described *the Holy Spirit as a guarantee* in 2 Corinthians 1:22. He repeats it in Ephesians 1:13-14. Clearly he considered this important. Christ had not left his people alone in this world. God sent his Spirit to them, to guide them and to help them. The Holy Spirit will remain in their lives always, to bring them into the complete relationship that God has for them (John 14:15-17).

Christians' attitudes towards life and death

(2 Corinthians 5:6)

Verses 6 and 8 discuss **a Christian's correct attitudes towards life and death**. Such matters become especially important when that person's life is in great danger. That was Paul's recent experience, and these thoughts are perhaps the direct result of that experience.

A person is, of course, 'in the body' **during their life in this world**. It is only natural that we do not wish to leave either our bodies, or this world. We belong here, as a person belongs at home. Even if we do not feel content here, we desire to be content here.

However, we all know that **we cannot remain permanently here**. If our body is like a home, it is more like a tent than a permanent building (verse 1). Death will separate us both from our bodies and from this world.

However, as Christians we can have courage, even when we are in danger of death. We only belong in this world for a short time, but **we belong with Christ always**. We may feel at home in this world, but our real home is with him. Of course we do not want death to separate our spirits from our bodies. However, we would much prefer our spirits to be with Christ; that is clearly much better than anything in this world (Philippians 1:23).

Paul's great courage during those terrible troubles impresses us very much. However, we need to remember where Paul got that great courage from. He confesses that he himself felt fear (2 Corinthians 7:5) and weakness (2 Corinthians 11:30). It was *God* who helped Paul in his troubles (2 Corinthians 1:3 -5). It was *God* who gave Paul strength in his weak state (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). **Paul's courage came from God; and therefore that same courage is available to every Christian.**

'We walk by faith, not by sight'

(2 Corinthians 5:7)

'We walk by faith, not by sight'. By the words 'we walk', Paul means how we live (compare Psalm 1:1). Therefore, the meaning is: **'We live by faith, not by sight'**.

That may seem an extraordinary way to live. God gives us both our sight and our faith. Our sight guides us through this present world. It directs very many of our decisions. However, what we see is not always the truth. Our sight can confuse us; it can even cause us to make wrong and foolish decisions.

The problem with sight is that it only shows us the surface of things. It gives us an impression; **it does not show the reality to us**. For example, our sight may show us our present troubles in this world. However, it cannot show us the wonderful things that God has prepared for us in heaven.

Clearly, we cannot depend upon our sight alone. Paul says that **God has provided something better to guide us: faith**.

Faith can mean belief; however, Paul was very aware of the dangers of wrong beliefs. He would never encourage anyone to trust in anything that was not true. So therefore, **by 'faith', Paul means trust in God**. We can always trust in God; all that God does is completely true and right. He will always guide us in the right way to live (Psalm 43:3).

That kind of faith is like sight, because by it we see (know) things. By sight, we see our present circumstances. **By faith, we see how God is working**. By sight, we see our troubles in the present world. **By faith, we see what God has prepared for us in heaven**. By sight, we see an impression of the present state of things. **By faith, we see the reality**. So *we choose to trust God*; and that is how we, God's people, live.

The right ambition

(2 Corinthians 5:8-9)

The ambition of most people is *to be successful* during their lives in this world. Of course, people have very different ideas about what success means. People may desire most to be rich or healthy, famous or powerful; or they may desire for their families to do well. Their ambition may be good or evil. However, all these ambitions have something in common. **We can only achieve these things during our lives on earth.** When we die, therefore, we will lose these things. Even a person who gains the whole world will lose everything at his death (Matthew 16:26).

So, **God's people need a different kind of ambition.** In heaven, they will be with Christ, and they will remain with him always. They will no longer suffer the pains and troubles in their present lives (see Revelation 21:4). It will be much better to be in heaven (Philippians 1:23).

You might think, therefore, that Paul's ambition was *to reach his home in heaven*. Paul clearly eagerly desired that. He knew that God would give it to him in the future. However, Paul was careful not to make it his ambition. He knew that God had given him work to do on earth, first (Philippians 1:22-24).

So, **Paul made it his ambition simply to please God.** During this life on earth, or in heaven, Paul wanted to please him always.

Paul knew that God has rewards for his loyal servants (2 Corinthians 5:10). He understood how carefully God will test each person's work (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). God will test their attitudes, and not just their actions. So Paul was careful to make sure that his ambition was also correct.

If we try to please ourselves, nothing can really satisfy us in the end. **However, if our ambition is to please God, God himself will satisfy us completely** (John 4:13-14).

God will reward his servants for their work

(2 Corinthians 5:10)

God is the judge of all people (Revelation 20:11-15). He will test whether we are truly his servants. Only those people who are loyal to him will have a place in heaven and the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:7-8). However, nobody can earn that place by their own deeds. They receive it because of their faith (trust) in Christ. Christ died so that God could forgive their wrong and evil deeds.

God is also the judge of the deeds that his servants carry out in their work for him. That is the judgement that Paul seems to refer to in 2 Corinthians 5:10. By the words *'we all'* in that verse, he seems to mean *all Christians*.

In that judgement, **God wants to reward his people for their loyal work for him.** However, God, who knows everything, cannot approve of all our actions. Even when we do the right things, we may act for the wrong reasons, or with wrong attitudes (1 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 1:15-17).

Paul discusses this judgement further in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. **It is possible for someone to fail this test but still to receive a place in heaven** (1 Corinthians 3:15).

Although that person is a genuine servant of God, he will suffer the loss of everything. His work for God, his master, was completely unsatisfactory; but still God, in his love, will save that person.

By God's standards, all people are weak. It astonishes us to think that God wants us to work for him. Again, it astonishes us that God can consider our work to be valuable. It astonishes us to know that God wants to reward us for our deeds for him. In 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, Paul expresses that thought by reference to his own experience.

A right kind of fear

(2 Corinthians 5:11)

As Christians, we recognise Christ as our master and king (John 13:13). We are called his servants, or even his slaves (Philippians 1:1). Therefore, we have a duty to obey Christ. We are responsible to him.

Christ will be the judge of whether we have served him properly (2 Corinthians 5:10). It is right to have a sense of **fear towards someone who deserves it** (Romans 13:7). We fear a judge because of his power and authority over us. That kind of fear is a way to respect the judge.

A servant who does not obey his master ought to fear the master. That servant's fear should be greater because he has not served his master loyally. He should have always respected his master; now the servant should actually be afraid of him. His master will be angry, and he may punish the servant.

Paul did have a proper sense of fear towards Christ, and therefore he obeyed him. Christ had given Paul his (Christ's) message, called *the gospel*, to declare. So Paul was very careful to declare it in a clear and plain manner (2 Corinthians 4:1-2). As he did it, he persuaded many people to serve Christ too.

Christ would see all these things when he made his judgement about Paul (2 Corinthians 5:10). However, of course, God already did see all these things.

The Christians in Corinth had also seen how Paul had behaved as God's servant. It was Paul who originally brought the gospel to their city. They had seen that he had declared the gospel loyally. Therefore, they should have confidence in the gospel that he had declared. Other teachers were now declaring a very different kind of message about God in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:4-5; 2 Corinthians 11:12-15). God's people, however, must continue to follow the true gospel and to serve God loyally.

A right kind of pride

(2 Corinthians 5:12)

There is a right kind of pride as well as a wrong kind of pride. It is good when we have a right kind of pride towards our churches and their leaders.

However, we probably speak much more about **the wrong kind of pride**. People can become proud and greedy when they speak about their churches, as about themselves. They think that they are superior to other people; they even laugh at those other people. Christians should never allow themselves to behave like that. They must be humble towards God, and they must be ready to serve other people on his behalf (Mark 10:43-44; John 13:14-15; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

People speak in that wrong manner about their churches when they want to impress someone. They emphasise how great and important their church is. They are trying to make themselves seem greater than the other person.

The right kind of pride, however, impresses nobody. It is right to have pride in a church leader who explains God's message *clearly and simply* (2 Corinthians 4:1-2). We should have pride in a leader who declares the greatness of God, but *his own weakness* (2 Corinthians 12:5-9). We should have pride when our church leaders choose to obey God, *and not to impress people* (2 Corinthians 11:1-20).

The wrong kind of pride makes us feel greater. **The right kind of pride causes us to recognise God's greatness.** We recognise that our leaders truly are God's servants; so, we can trust the message that they bring to us from God. Then we have a reply to those people who try to impress us with their clever words, but wrong ideas. God carried out a wonderful work in our hearts, by the message that his servants brought to us. Therefore, we must not accept a different message, however impressive it may seem (compare 2 Corinthians 11:4).

Was Paul mad?

(2 Corinthians 5:13)

Wherever Paul went, people talked about him. His actions seemed quite extraordinary to them. He was clearly an intelligent man who had studied much (Acts 26:24).

He could have become rich and important. Instead, he freely chose to suffer the loss of all things (Philippians 3:7) so that he could declare the message about Christ. That message seemed very strange to most of the people who heard it. They considered it weak and foolish (1 Corinthians 1:21-23). However, because of that message, Paul was constantly putting himself in danger.

There were two main opinions about Paul, and they were opposites. **Some people argued that Paul had lost control of his mind.** His actions were the wild and foolish actions of a mad man, they said. **Other people argued that Paul was controlling himself too much.** Because of his religion and strict discipline, he was behaving like a slave to his own ideas.

Paul was not afraid of either opinion, although neither of them was correct. It did not matter if people considered Paul mad. People had thought King David foolish when he danced to give honour to God (2 Samuel 6:20). **If God received honour, Paul was happy for people to consider him a fool.**

Paul did not worry about people who had the opposite opinion, either. It was true that he had made himself like a slave (1 Corinthians 9:19). However, **people were wrong about the reason.** He did not do it because his religion was *too strict*. He did it *because he cared* about other people (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). He wanted to help them, so that they too could benefit from Christ's death for them.

It was the love of Christ that, in fact, controlled Paul's actions (2 Corinthians 5:14). Christ had both shown great love to Paul, and had given Paul great love for other people. That was the real explanation of why Paul acted in that extraordinary manner.

The love of Christ changes us

(2 Corinthians 5:14)

When we truly know the love of Christ, that love changes us. We can no longer allow our own selfish desires to control our lives. We can no longer care only about the people who care about us. Instead, it becomes our deepest desire *to love other people as he loved us* (1 John 4:7-12).

The greatness of his love astonishes us. He did not die for his friends, but for us who were his enemies (Romans 5:6-10). He did not die only for the people from his nation, but for people from every nation (Matthew 28:19-20; Romans 5:17; 1 Corinthians 15:22). His love was a love for the whole world (John 3:16). Every person who trusts in him receives the right to become a child of God (John 1:12-13).

Christ died to suffer the punishment for our sins (evil deeds). We must confess our sins to God, and we must invite Christ into our lives. It is as if we have died with Christ (Romans 6:1-11). Our old lives, when by sin we served ourselves, have ended. We begin **a new life** (John 3:3), when we live to serve God (2 Corinthians 5:17).

So, our right relationship with God begins. It starts when Christ gives us that right relationship with himself. That is when we become Christians. All Christians do God's work when they obey him. However, to some Christians God gives the special work to bring other people into a right relationship with him (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). They do that as they declare the message about Christ and his death (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). That is God's message, called *the gospel*. Other messages may have a great effect on people's lives; but only the gospel can change a person's life completely (2 Corinthians 5:17). **Only by the message of the gospel can a person truly know Christ's love for them.**

Christians should live for Christ

(2 Corinthians 5:15)

Christians should not still live for themselves. That is, they should not live in a selfish, proud and greedy manner. God hates such attitudes (Proverbs 16:5), but that is not the only reason, or even the main reason. Christians should not behave like that **because of the astonishing change that Christ has made in their lives.**

Christ died so that God can forgive our evil deeds. However, this is not a way for us to continue the same evil behaviour without punishment. Instead, it is **the beginning of a completely new life**, where we can live to please God. God gives to us his Holy Spirit, so that we can do that (Galatians 5:16).

Christ died and rose again to give people that new life. So people must also die and rise again to receive it. Here, however, we refer not to the death of the person's body, but to the astonishing change in the person's attitudes. **People must consider their former lives, when they lived to please themselves, to be dead (Romans 6:11). They must then accept the new life that God gives to their spirits (John 3:3-7).** That is how a person becomes a Christian. The result is that God considers that person to be alive. Formerly, because of that person's evil deeds, God considered that person *already dead* (Ephesians 2:1-5). That was so even while they were still alive in this world. That was because *the only possible result of their life, was death* (Romans 6:23). However now, as God's people, they have *life that never ends* (John 3:16; Romans 6:20-23).

Therefore, with grateful hearts, they should turn completely from their former evil behaviour (Romans 6:12-13; 1 John 1:9). God has made them free so that they can live for him.

Changes of attitudes when a person becomes a Christian

(2 Corinthians 5:16)

Before we became Christians, our attitudes were different. Formerly, we dealt with people in a very different way. Perhaps we did not then realise that we were doing anything wrong. We believed that we were simply *acting in a natural manner* towards other people.

Perhaps we wanted to help other people, but without God's help we were unable to have any real effect. Or perhaps we tried to make ourselves more important. **We may have even tried to control other people.** In other words, we used people who seemed weaker than us for our own benefit. If someone else became richer or more powerful than us, perhaps we became jealous of that person. When we saw an opportunity, perhaps we took unfair advantage of other people. We may have even thought that we had a right to behave like that. *Other people would behave like that towards us, if we permitted it.* That was what we thought.

For some of us, our thoughts became so wicked that **we even tried to deal with Christ like that.** Although he is God's Son, we actually tried to control him for our own advantage. We wanted the benefits of religion without a right relationship with God. We wanted to benefit from God's love, but not for him to deal with our evil deeds. We tried to come to God in our own way, and not in God's way.

Now that we truly know God, we think about our former thoughts and attitudes with shock. We recognise that such ideas are completely evil (Galatians 5:13-21). Our desire now is to turn from such behaviour completely. It belonged to our former life; it has no proper place in the new life that God has given to us.

Now we desire **to show true love** to other people (1 Corinthians chapter 13). We want our lives to produce the attitudes that God's Holy Spirit creates in us (see Galatians 5:22-23). Towards God and towards Christ, we are humble. **We want to do what God desires.** We want to serve him loyally in all things. We have no desire for the proud, cruel and selfish attitudes which once seemed so important in our lives.

How a person's life can change completely

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Sometimes **people have tried to make a great change in their lives**, because they wanted to be better people. Usually, their efforts have failed completely, even by their own standards. It is hard to us to change our habits and our behaviour. It is even harder to change our thoughts and attitudes. By our own efforts, we can usually achieve very little.

Even if we could change ourselves completely, it would not satisfy God. In John 3:3, Jesus said that **people need to be born again**. Ezekiel 18:31 says that people need *a new heart and a new spirit*; Ezekiel 36:26 says that *only God* can give us those things. It is the work of *God alone* to save us (Psalm 62). *Only God* can give us a right relationship with himself. So we need to receive Christ into our lives, and to put our trust in him (John 1:12).

It should astonish us that God wants to change us in such a wonderful manner. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, **Paul compares this change to God's actions to create the world**. God is creating a new holy nation of people who will belong to him completely (1 Peter 2:9-10; Hebrews 8:10-11). His work in their lives is the beginning of his actions to create a new world (Romans 8:18-21; Revelation 21:1-5).

Perhaps now we can start to understand why the death of Christ is so important. It was necessary for God to deal with all our sins (evil deeds) completely so that we could receive a right relationship with him. **Christ, who had no sin, took upon himself our sins on the cross**. He suffered the punishment that we deserve. So, we can receive the right relationship with God that Christ has (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The change is great, but **God can do it in our lives at once**. He urges us not to delay (2 Corinthians 6:2). Today we must turn from our sins, and we must trust Christ to save us. We must humbly allow him to carry out this wonderful change in our lives.

The task of reconciliation

(2 Corinthians 5:18-20)

The word for 'reconciliation' in the original Greek language is *KATALLAGE*. It means **to make enemies into friends**. That was the special work that God had given to Paul. Paul had to arrange for the people who were God's enemies to become his friends.

It was like when some of the king's officials had left the country to fight against their king. The king would consider it his right to punish those men in a most severe and cruel manner. However, suppose that, in an act of great mercy (kindness), the king wanted to forgive those men. The king would choose some of his most loyal and honourable officials (called *ambassadors* in verse 20). Those loyal officials would go to the king's enemies, and try to make arrangements for them to return in peace.

Paul did not consider that he deserved to carry out such an important task on God's behalf (1 Corinthians 15:9). However, God had appointed him. For that reason, **Paul tried to persuade people to accept God's offer** (2 Corinthians 5:11).

There were two things in particular that Paul urged people to do. **They should accept God's kind offer** that they can have a right relationship with him, because of Christ's death (2 Corinthians 5:20-21). Also, **they should make sure that God's kindness has the proper effect on their lives** (2 Corinthians 6:1). The result should be that they turn from every evil act to serve God in a holy manner (2 Corinthians 7:1).

It is very wonderful that God is willing to forgive our evil deeds (Romans 5:6-11). Christ, God's Son, died to suffer the punishment for our evil deeds (2 Corinthians 5:21). Of course we should accept God's kind offer. Of course we should not delay (2 Corinthians 6:2). We should allow God to do everything that he wants to do in our lives. We should accept his friendship, then we should live as the friends of God ought to live.

Christ, who had no sin, became sin for us

(2 Corinthians 5:21)

Sin means *our wrong and evil thoughts, words and actions that are against God's law*. It includes our wrong attitudes and desires. **We are all guilty** (Romans 3:23).

Since the first people chose not to obey God, only one person has been without sin. **Christ, God's Son, was perfect in every way** (1 Peter 2:22). He obeyed God the Father completely. Although the devil tempted Christ to do wrong things (Luke 4:1-13), Christ never carried out any evil or wrong act (Hebrews 4:15). Even in his deepest thoughts and desires, he never offended against God's law.

For that reason, Christ was able to offer his own life, upon the cross, for our sins. The proper punishment for sin is death (Romans 6:23); but **Christ suffered the punishment that we deserve** (Isaiah 53:4-6). He died so that God can forgive our sins.

God forgives our sins when we invite Christ into our lives (Revelation 3:20). We must turn from our sins (Acts 2:38) and we must put our trust in Christ (Acts 16:31). When we do that, God makes an astonishing change in our lives (2 Corinthians 5:17). That is what it means to be born again (John 3:3).

Paul says that, by the death of Christ, **we can have the righteousness of God**. That is an astonishing statement. *Righteousness means a right relationship with God; even as sin means a wrong relationship with God*. We have done nothing to deserve a right relationship with God, and we can do nothing to earn it. We can only receive it as **the free gift of God** (Romans 4: 1-8). We can receive it only **because Christ died for us** (Romans 5:8).

2 Corinthians chapter 6

Do not receive God's grace in vain

(2 Corinthians 6:1)

Paul has just emphasised (2 Corinthians 5:20) that **God is making his appeal** through Paul. This is the appeal: **Paul's readers should not receive God's grace (kindness) in vain**. 'In vain' means without a proper purpose, or without a worthwhile result.

We may ask how the grace of God could ever be in vain. The answer seems to be, **if it does not achieve its proper purpose in a person's life**. So, previously (1 Corinthians 15:10), Paul said that *God's grace towards him was not in vain*. He explained this by reference to his special work for God, and the way that God's grace worked through him.

On the other hand, Paul elsewhere describes a Christian who does not achieve God's purpose for his life (1 Corinthians 3:15). Although God will save that person, the person's work fails God's test (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). **That person will enter heaven without the reward** that God's grace would have achieved in his life. A possible reason appears in 1 Corinthians 13:2-3. A person may carry out all kinds of wonderful and great deeds, but act without love. Therefore, in God's opinion, that person has achieved nothing.

The Christians in Corinth were doing some very wonderful things by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians chapter 14). However, they had been acting without love (1 Corinthians 3:3 and 6:1-8). Paul had reminded them that he gave up his own rights to show God's love to other people (1 Corinthians chapter 9). He urged them to become mature Christians, who would gladly choose to act in a similar manner.

In his first letter, Paul had to warn Corinth's Christians often about their selfish and wrong behaviour. It was very difficult for them to obey his instructions. However, in the end, they did the right things (2 Corinthians 7:8-13). Now Paul wanted to encourage them and to give them confidence. He was sure that their love was genuine (2 Corinthians 8:7-8).

Now is God's time to save you

(2 Corinthians 6:2)

In every period of 50 years, there was one very special year in ancient Israel. It was called **the year of Jubilee**. In that year, there was a declaration of freedom for all the country's inhabitants. They would return to their family homes, and their family's land would belong to them again (Leviticus 25:8-13). That was a year of God's kindness, a special time when he showed his goodness.

God spoke about **another time when he would show special kindness to people** in Isaiah 49:8 and Isaiah 61:1-2. Then, too, there would be freedom for the people. God would deal with the things that were wrong in their lives. It is very interesting that Jesus used the second of these passages to describe his own work for God, in Luke 4:17-21.

Here, Paul refers to the other passage, Isaiah 49:8. There, God declares that, at that special time, God will answer the prayers of his servant; he will help his people. The 'servant' in Isaiah can mean either Christ, or Israel. The subject of Isaiah 49:8-26 is how God will bring back Israel's people to their own land. However, Paul uses Isaiah 49:8 to show how God is bringing people from every nation into a right relationship with him. God has chosen a particular, special time to do these things.

So, **God has chosen a special time to give freedom to the people**. Like a day, that time has a definite beginning and end. It can last for longer than people consider a day to be (2 Peter 3:8); but it cannot last always. **During this period of time only, God offers to save people**. That is, to rescue them from their real enemies: their sin (wrong and evil thoughts, words and deeds), the devil and hell.

As in Hebrews 4:7, Paul declares that **now is that special time**. Today is the day when God offers to rescue you. Today, God is willing to forgive your sins because of Christ's death. Today, God urges you to turn from your sins and to accept a right relationship with Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). Today, you should let God's grace (kindness) achieve its proper purpose in your life (2 Corinthians 6:1).

If you delay, you may be too late. That is why **you must let God work in your life now**.

The attitude of a true servant of God

(2 Corinthians 6:3-4)

Perhaps some people in Corinth were complaining that Paul recommended himself. In 2 Corinthians 3:1 and 5:12, he denied it. The men who really recommended themselves were teaching wrong things in the churches (2 Corinthians 10:12; 2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

However there was one way in which Paul did recommend himself. It was not by any proud words, like those false teachers. It was *by Paul's actions*, which were **the actions of a true servant of God**. Paul did not do these things to impress anyone, but simply to serve God.

Paul could have chosen to live a more comfortable life. However, **as God's servant, he recognised the importance of his ministry**, his work for God. He knew that God had given him an extremely important message to declare (2 Corinthians 5:18 to 6:1). Therefore, Paul accepted the most severe troubles as he carried out his work for God. Paul would not allow even the worst troubles to stop his work for God. Paul did not want any weakness of his own to be a reason why someone could not trust God.

Paul gives a list of some of those troubles in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33. Some troubles were the result of his enemies' actions; other troubles were the result of his circumstances. Some troubles caused physical pain; other troubles caused fear. Some troubles continued for a long time; other troubles were brief but severe.

During all these troubles, Paul depended completely on God's strength, help and comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3-6; 2 Corinthians 12: 7-10). So **God helped Paul to endure**, in other words, *to stand firm*, during his troubles. Paul knew that no troubles could ever separate God's people from God's love for them (Romans 8:35-39). God is doing such wonderful things for his people that their troubles in this world seem unimportant (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). So Paul trusted God in all his troubles; Paul's only ambition was to please God (2 Corinthians 5:9).

How Paul served God

(2 Corinthians 6:5-6)

Paul clearly began this list in verse 4 as a list of his troubles. However, he does not end the list there. Somewhere it becomes **a list of the ways by which he served God**. As Paul served God in his troubles, so Paul served God in many other ways too.

Perhaps we can see the beginning of this change in Paul's list when we read verse 5. Clearly, his time *in prison*, and the *cruel attacks* against him, are troubles.

However, then he speaks about *hard work*. Paul was pleased that, because of his hard work (2 Thessalonians 3:8), he could afford to declare God's message freely (1 Corinthians 9:14-18; 2 Corinthians 11:7).

Paul then says that he often had to *stay awake* by night. Sometimes that was because of his troubles - but he could still use the time to pray or to praise God (Acts 16:25).

Then Paul refers to the many times that he *did not eat*. Often he would have had little or no food because of his enemies' actions, or because of his circumstances (Philippians 4:12). However, often he would have chosen not to eat during his special times of prayer.

By the start of verse 6, Paul is clearly describing the **attitudes** with which he served God. He behaved in a *pure* (sincere) manner. He used his *wisdom and knowledge*. His enemies behaved with great cruelty towards him, but even in these troubles, Paul chose to be *patient*. Paul could have been angry against them, but instead he chose to show *kindness*. The *Holy Spirit* was active in Paul's life. (However, Paul may mean that *his own spirit was holy*. That is, Paul gave himself wholly to God). In all his troubles, God helped Paul to show *genuine love*, as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

Clearly, Paul had a very strong and firm character. However, he also considered it important for a Christian leader to be kind and gentle. So, Paul tried to help even the weakest people (1 Corinthians 9:22). He did not fight back when his enemies attacked him. He urged younger Christian leaders to learn from the patience and love that he showed (2 Timothy 3:10).

Paul did not depend on his own qualities or strength to deal with his troubles, or to serve God. Paul considered himself weak, but he knew the power of Christ (2 Corinthians 12:9). **Paul's good qualities and right attitudes came not from himself, but from the Holy Spirit** (Galatians 5:22-23).

The words and actions of a servant of God

(2 Corinthians 6:7)

Paul's list of how he served God moves, without a pause, from *attitudes* to **words and actions**. That seems right. Our actions are the result of our attitudes. Our words are the product of what is already in our heart (Luke 6:45). Unless our attitudes are right, our words and actions cannot be right.

So, Paul served God *in love, in truth, and in power*. The **love** (verse 6) was the sincere love that God had given to him (1 Corinthians chapter 13). Paul showed real love for each person to whom God had sent him (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). The expressions of his love, which we read so often in Paul's letters, were genuine (for example, 2 Corinthians 12:15).

The **truth** is the truth of God's message about Christ, often called the gospel. Christ is the true and living way to God (John 14:6). Paul recognised that he must always speak about Christ in a plain and truthful manner (2 Corinthians 4:2). We must be honest about the gospel; we must not try to convince people with a false message (2 Corinthians 11:4).

Paul did not depend on his own strength to do God's work, but on the **power of Christ** (2 Corinthians 12:9). The gospel is the power by which God saves people (Romans 1:16). Paul wanted people to know God's power as he declared God's message to them (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). It pleased him to see how powerfully God was working in the lives of the Christians in Corinth (2 Corinthians 13:3-4).

Only the most skilful soldiers could fight with **weapons in both hands** (1 Chronicles 12:2). However, soldiers often fought with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other hand, as in Ephesians 6:13-17. Paul saw his work for God as a war in the spirit world (Ephesians 6:10-12). That was why evil people opposed him so fiercely (compare John 8:44). Paul's reaction to their evil behaviour was **to do only what is right**. He could only know success in these troubles because of his right relationship with God.

Evidence that Paul was genuinely serving God

(2 Corinthians 6:8)

We have called this list: 'a list of how Paul served God'. Actually, it is something more than that. In verse 4, Paul wanted to show **how his behaviour during his troubles recommended him**. He wanted his list to show to Corinth's Christians that he was genuinely serving God.

Let us see, then, how the contents of the list recommend Paul and his work for God.

Paul began in verses 4 and 5 with a **list of great troubles**. The fact that Paul stood firm for God during such serious troubles showed him to be a genuine servant of God. In fact, even the troubles themselves provided evidence of that fact (1 Corinthians 4:9-13). However, the strongest evidence was that *Paul behaved like a servant of God during his troubles*.

Therefore, his **right attitudes** in verse 6 recommend him. Of course, many people behave well when they feel no pressure. However, *troubles test a person's true character* (1 Peter 1:6-7). It is hard to show kindness when you are under great strain. It is hard to show love to an enemy (Luke 6:27). Paul had constantly done these things, even in the greatest danger.

In all these things, **Paul depended not on himself, but on God** (verse 7). That is the only proper way for a servant of God to behave. He spoke God's truth; he depended on God's power. He did what is right; and God gave him the strength to overcome in every situation.

Paul had known honour and shame, kindness and cruelty. People had believed him, and they had refused to believe him. If Paul had cared about his own honour, his own importance or even his life, he could not have continued. Therefore, it was clear that **Paul was not working for himself, but for God**.

People's reports about Paul were the opposite of the reality

(2 Corinthians 6:9)

As Paul continues his list, his words become more and more powerful. **The ideas that people had about him were very different from the reality**.

Paul had given up everything so that he could declare the truth about God. Everywhere, he behaved in a **completely sincere and honest manner**. Paul loved the truth, but in every place, people considered his words to be lies. *They declared him a wicked man whom nobody should trust*.

Somehow, those strange contrasts seemed to affect everything that Paul did. **Everywhere, people spoke of Paul** as an *unknown and unimportant* fool. In that manner, reports about Paul spread across the region, even into countries where Paul had never been.

It became worse. Wherever Paul went, people were trying to kill him. In some places, vast crowds gathered to oppose him. **People were constantly demanding Paul's death.** In time, even Paul thought that he must die soon (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). It astonished him that he was still alive. *'Look!'*, he said to Corinth's Christians in 2 Corinthians 6:9. *'We live!'*

Paul was a good man. **People punished him** as if he were evil. They hurt him badly on several occasions. They wanted to show him that he had no place in this world (compare Hebrews 11:38 and Acts 22:22). In the incidents in 2 Corinthians 11:24-25, it surprises us that *they had not yet killed him*. However, it was God - and not men - who had control over Paul's life.

Paul knew that his proper place was not really in this world (2 Corinthians 5:1). He belonged in heaven with Christ, which is a much better place to be (Philippians 1:23). However, in the meantime, God had given Paul work to do. So Paul made it his ambition in every circumstance to please God (2 Corinthians 5:9).

Rewards in this life for God's loyal servants

(2 Corinthians 6:10)

Paul had suffered many of the most terrible experiences that are possible for a person to suffer. However, he did not consider these to be terrible experiences. Paul suffered great pain, but his attention was not upon his pain. **Paul did not need anyone's sympathy; rather, he considered that God had given him a wonderful life.**

If Paul felt *sad*, it was not for himself. Paul felt sad because people opposed God. He felt sad because they did not know the greatness of God's love for them. However, Paul himself knew **the greatest joy** (Philippians 4:4). He was so grateful that God had shown such kindness to him (1 Timothy 1:12-17).

Paul's happiness was not for himself alone. As Paul travelled to different places, he was often very *poor* (Philippians 4:11-12). However, Christ promised a wonderful reward to those who gave up their property or family for him (Mark 10:29-30). That was Paul's experience. To him, who had no family (1 Corinthians 7:8), God gave vast numbers of 'children'. Those 'children' meant the people in every town who became Christians because of Paul's work (1 Corinthians 4:14-15). Paul saw them as **rich** because they have true wealth in heaven (Matthew 6:20).

Paul had *nothing*, but as one of God's humble people, God had promised the world to him (Matthew 5:5). God has a wonderful plan for his people (1 Corinthians 2:9). **All things are theirs** (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

If a person could work for God for his whole life without any reward, that would still be worthwhile. Even if that person had to suffer much, they would not suffer in vain. However, God does reward his loyal servants. Like Paul, they can know great rewards even in this life. However, their reward in heaven will be much, much greater (2 Corinthians 4:17).

We should obey with willing hearts

(2 Corinthians 6:11-13)

We think that some of the Christians in Corinth were complaining about Paul. They thought that he was trying to control them. In fact, Paul was only giving them the advice that they needed to develop as Christians. However, it seemed to them that Paul was making new rules for them to follow. They had obeyed, but still they were unhappy.

Paul's reply was that he had always spoken to them in a plain and sincere manner (2 Corinthians 4:2). He had not tried to hide anything from them. They knew that his love for them was genuine.

Paul was not trying to control them, but to help them. He had to advise them as he did because of his love for them.

Paul was showing love towards his friends in Corinth; he was not controlling them. However, he complained that **they were controlling themselves**. He had shown love for them, but **they were not showing love to him**. They should recognise Paul's love for them and they should receive his advice gladly.

Paul compared the situation to a father's advice to his children (1 Corinthians 4:14-15). Sometimes a father must give advice that his children do not like. Sometimes he tells them to do something that seems uncomfortable or unpleasant. However, if he is a good father, he gives that advice because of his love for his children. Sometimes the children will obey, but they will feel unhappy. It would be much better **if they obeyed with willing hearts**. Then they would show love for their father, even as he has shown love to them.

God's people are different from other people

(2 Corinthians 6:14)

The ox is a strong farm animal, like a small cow, which farmers used to pull the plough. Usually, two of these animals would work together; a wooden bar called **the yoke** would join them together.

It would be very difficult to plough if a farmer joined **an ox to an animal of a different kind** (for example a donkey). The farmer would have not obeyed God's law in Deuteronomy 22:10. His animals would work at a different speed and they would behave in a different manner.

That law is one of a series of laws in Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:9-11. Those laws are **against the mixture of different kinds of things**. Their purpose is to remind God's people that they are different from other people.

Light is the opposite of darkness, even as right behaviour is the opposite of evil behaviour. In the Bible, light is a frequent word-picture for a right relationship with God (see John 1:4 and 1 Thessalonians 5:5). There is a good reason why God separates light from darkness, or right behaviour from evil behaviour: **These things are so different that they cannot even exist together**.

God's people live with other people in this world, and there has to be contact between them. However, **God's people must always remember that God has made them different from other people** (2 Corinthians 5:17). Often, their attitudes, behaviour, desires, words and even thoughts have to be completely different. It is not wise to establish a marriage, a friendship or a business relationship that may constantly tempt you to behave wrongly.

Sometimes a person becomes a Christian and such a relationship already exists in his life. Paul taught that, if possible, a husband and wife should not separate for this reason. The situation is not ideal; but God can still work even in such a situation (1 Corinthians 7:12-14).

How God's people are different

(2 Corinthians 6:15)

Paul is explaining how completely different God's people are from other people. The difference, of course, is not in their bodies, but **in their spirits**. God is actually living in the spirits of his people (1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Colossians 1:27). Therefore, **they must not do anything that makes their relationship with God weaker**.

To prove that, Paul asks a series of 5 questions in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16. All the questions show the same thing. Of course we cannot carry out *right* and *wrong* behaviour together. Anything wrong spoils what is right (compare James 2:10-11). Light is a word-picture for the knowledge of God. Of course *light* and *darkness* cannot exist together. Light overcomes the darkness (John 1:5).

Beliar probably means 'the one who has no worth'. It seems to be a title for the devil. Of course *Christ* can never make an agreement with *the devil* (see Matthew 4:8-10). They are enemies. The devil is constantly trying to spoil Christ's work; but Christ will completely overcome the devil (Genesis 3:15; Revelation 20:1-3 and 20:10).

The first Christians often called themselves simply '*believers*'. They believed God, and God had saved them (John 3:16-18). People who *refused to believe* God could not share their reward, their future, or God's wonderful promises to them.

Paul's final question is perhaps the most powerful. God's house, called *the temple*, is the place that he has made holy (1 Kings 9:3). In other words, it belongs to him completely; he lives there. Only the most evil person would put *the image of a false god* in such a holy place (2 Kings 21:1-12).

God lives in the spirits of his people. Therefore **they themselves are temples of the living God**. So, clearly they must not allow anything that is not good or true into their spirits. Their relationship with God matters more to them than any relationship in this world.

God lives in his people

(2 Corinthians 6:16)

God is present in the lives of his people. That is not just an idea, but an absolute reality. He has made their spirits his home; **he lives in them**.

That is an astonishing statement. This is the same God who created heaven and earth by the power of his word. **His home is higher than the heavens; but also with his humble people** (Isaiah 57:15). They are the people who truly respect God; with willing hearts, they obey him.

If that were merely Paul's idea, we could not believe it. So, Paul reminds us of **God's promises** about this matter (2 Corinthians 6:16-18). We know that we can trust all of God's promises completely (2 Corinthians 1:20).

In these verses, Paul does not simply repeat God's words from elsewhere in the Bible. Rather, **these words match what God has said in the rest of the Bible**. Some of these words clearly come from particular Bible passages. It may be that God gave some of the words to Paul in a prophecy (a message from God). Paul understood the importance of prophecies (see 1 Corinthians 14:1-25). There were occasions in Paul's life when God spoke directly to him (for example, Acts 9:5-6; Galatians 1:11-12).

2 Corinthians 6:16 is similar to *Leviticus 26:11-12*. That passage gives promises to God's people, Israel, if they obey God. **God will place his home among them and he will walk among them. He will be their God, and they will truly be his people.** Most of Corinth's Christians were not from Israel; but God had joined them with his loyal people from Israel (Ephesians 2:11-22). Therefore, the promise was for them, too. Because of Christ's death, they now had the reality of this promise in their lives (Colossians 1:27).

God's house is holy. Therefore **God's people, in whom he lives, are holy** (1 Peter 2:9-10). So, they should always live in a manner that pleases God (1 Peter 2:11-12; 2 Corinthians 5:9).

How God's people should separate themselves

(2 Corinthians 6:17)

Isaiah 52:7-10 declares that God will comfort his people from Israel. He will rescue them from the nations that have dealt so cruelly with them.

Paul's words are similar to the next passage, *Isaiah 52:11-12*. **God urges his people to separate themselves from the nations that are his enemies.** They are God's holy people; in other words, they belong to him. He has separated them for himself; therefore, he himself will bring them back to his holy city, Jerusalem.

People who carry out a holy task must behave in a holy manner. They cannot simply behave in the same way as other people do (1 Samuel 21:5). Under the rules of the Old Testament (the first part of the Bible), *they could not even touch something that the rules considered unclean* (Haggai 2:10-14). If they did, the rules would consider them unclean for a certain time. It was not normally wrong to be unclean; sometimes it was necessary. However, an unclean person could not join in the holy acts of public religion.

Although Christians do not follow these rules, the rules have an important meaning for them. They are **God's holy people** (1 Peter 2:9) and God is living in them (2 Corinthians 6:16). Therefore, their spirits and their bodies are holy (1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 7:1).

So, it is wrong for Christians to carry out any evil act (1 John 3:3-10). In fact, it is wrong for them *even to speak or to think* like someone who does not trust God (Matthew 5:21-28; Philippians 4:8). Of course we all do wrong things, but God wants to forgive us and to change us (1 John 1:8-9).

We must consider what it means for God's people to 'separate' themselves. God's judgement is against all that is evil in this world (Genesis 19:12-15; Jeremiah 50:8; Revelation 18:4). At the present time, God's people still live with evil people in this world, but that will not always be so (Matthew 13:36-43). God does not normally want his people to leave those other people now (Matthew 5:14-16). Instead, God wants his people to separate themselves **by the right attitudes that they have in their hearts, minds and spirits.**

Why God's people must be different

(2 Corinthians 6:18)

God gives the reason why his people must be different from other people. It is because **God has chosen them to become members of his family** (John 1:12-13). He has promised to be their Father. He will declare them to be his children - **his own sons and daughters** (Romans 8:14-19).

That gives them a **very special and wonderful relationship with God** (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). It is wrong to think that God saves Christians merely in order to forgive them. That is, of course, essential - but it is only *the beginning of his work* in their lives. He changes them completely (2 Corinthians 5:17); he even puts his Holy Spirit inside them (2 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Corinthians 6:19). God's wonderful plan is to make them like Christ (1 John 3:1-2). In other words, **they will have the perfect relationship with God that belongs to his sons and daughters** (Revelation 21:7).

Paul declares that *the Lord Almighty* says these things. That is a special name for God; 'Almighty' means that he has all strength. In the New Testament (the later part of the Bible), that word appears only here and in the Book of Revelation.

The fact that the Lord Almighty declares these things *gives confidence* to his people. He has the power to carry out his promises. **He is able to complete the work that he has begun in their lives** (Philippians 1:6).

That fact also *shows the importance* of this matter. God's people have no right to argue against his plans for them (Isaiah 45:9-10). They must live as he directs them to live. They must behave in a manner that pleases him. **They must learn how to serve him better.**

Paul's exact words in 2 Corinthians 6:18 do not appear elsewhere in the Bible. However, frequently in the Bible, God calls himself the '*Father*' of his people. Also, he frequently describes his people as his '*children*'. The first Christians believed that Paul's letters have the same authority as the rest of the Bible (2 Peter 3:15-16). Therefore, God spoke to his people by means of Paul.

2 Corinthians chapter 7

We must avoid anything that could spoil our relationship with God

(2 Corinthians 7:1)

God has made the most wonderful promises to his people. He has even promised to be their Father, and to make them his sons and daughters (2 Corinthians 6:18). It astonishes us to know that we can have such a close and loving relationship with God.

Nobody can earn that relationship. It is God's free gift because of Christ's death. When a person turns from sin (wrong and evil deeds) to invite Christ into their life, then their new life with God begins (John 1:12; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Paul was writing to Christians who had already done that. He urged them to develop in their Christian lives. He told them to prepare for the great work that God was carrying out in their lives.

They needed to live as God's **holy** people. To be holy means *to be separate for God*. Paul was not telling them to avoid other people or to live separately from other people. Rather, he was telling them *to fear (that is, to respect) God*. Wrong thoughts, attitudes, words and actions would spoil their relationship with God. Therefore, they must avoid these things. They should live in a manner that is right and true. They should desire only to do the things that please God (2 Corinthians 5:9).

Paul had warned the Christians in Corinth previously about wrong and selfish desires (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). We might think that these affect the **body** more than the spirit. Other wrong things might affect the human **spirit** rather than the body. **However, they all affect a Christian's relationship with God.**

All God's people must be holy. Paul did not just write this as a command for other people to follow. He knew that he, too, must allow God to work in his life. So, he included himself in this instruction; he uses the word 'we' in 2 Corinthians 7:1. He too must avoid anything that could spoil his relationship with God.

How Paul behaved at Corinth

(2 Corinthians 7:2-3)

The Book of 1 Corinthians was Paul's letter **to deal with various problems in the church** at Corinth. The Christians in Corinth did not expect to receive a letter like that from Paul. They thought that their church was doing well. So they expected Paul to praise them - not to write to them in a strict manner.

The church members discussed why Paul had written such a letter. They had various explanations. One popular idea was that *Paul wanted to be in control* of their church. Another idea was that *Paul always wrote strong letters* like that (2 Corinthians 10:10). Probably, many Christians in Corinth were now worrying that Paul did not still love them (2 Corinthians 11:11)

Nobody in Corinth had been a Christian for more than a few years. They were mostly young people, without much experience. It was hard to be a Christian in such an evil city as ancient Corinth was. Those Christians very much needed mature and capable leaders like Paul to care for them and to pray for them.

Paul's reply was to remind them **how he had behaved at Corinth.** They knew his character; *for 18 months, he had lived among them* (Acts 18:11). During that time, he and his companions simply taught God's message to them. **He did not try to control anyone; he did not use anyone for his own advantage.** They all knew that; they had seen everything that he did. He lived with them; he was willing to risk his life or even to die with them.

When Paul reminded the Christians of these things, he was not trying to accuse them. He simply wanted them to remember **his love for them.** He had been absent from them for a few years, but that love had not changed. In fact, his love for them was the real reason why he wrote that letter. It was an act of love to deal with their problems. Paul wanted to teach them how they could serve God better.

How Corinth's Christians encouraged Paul

(2 Corinthians 7:4-5)

When Paul wrote the Book of 1 Corinthians, he had *to deal strictly* with some problems in the church at Corinth. The Christians there followed his advice, so now Paul wanted *to encourage* them. That was a much easier and more pleasant task for Paul. To do it, Paul only needed to tell them **how much their actions had encouraged him.**

This was a **very difficult time in Paul's life**. He had *suffered much* in the region then called Asia (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). He then went to Troas, where he hoped to meet Titus. Titus had been in Corinth; Paul wanted to hear what had happened in Corinth. However, Titus did not come to Troas, so Paul travelled to Macedonia (2 Corinthians 2:12-14).

In Macedonia, Paul found that the Christians were extremely poor. They had also suffered very much (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). Paul chose to work with them and, because of that, *he suffered with them*. The strain was constant; the enemies of the Christians there were fierce. They did not merely argue against Paul; they cruelly attacked him. *In addition to his physical pain, Paul also felt a sense of fear*. Paul does not say what he was afraid of. It seems that Paul was not afraid to suffer or even to die for Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23-27; Philippians 1:21). So perhaps Paul felt that fear because he was suffering such great strain (2 Corinthians 11:28).

Then, at last, Titus reached Paul with news from Corinth. **Corinth's Christians had decided to follow Paul's advice, and more importantly, to obey God. Paul's joy was without limit.** He felt so proud of them - like a father's pride when his children make a wise decision (compare 1 Corinthians 4:15). Clearly, Paul had not wasted his time in Corinth. In fact, God was now using Corinth's Christians to carry out his (God's) work. God even used them to comfort and to encourage Paul in that difficult situation (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

God acted to comfort Paul

(2 Corinthians 7:6-7)

In Macedonia, Paul was in great difficulties. His enemies were arguing against him and they were attacking him. They had managed to upset Paul so much that he felt afraid (verse 5). If God had not helped Paul at that time, Paul might have been in despair. Perhaps he might even have given up his great work to declare God's message.

However, in that desperate situation, God did not disappoint Paul. **When Paul most needed God's help, God acted to comfort him.**

What actually happened was this. Paul's friend **Titus** managed to find Paul in Macedonia. **Titus had just been to Corinth, and he brought good news about the Christians there.** They were serving God loyally, and they had followed the advice in Paul's letter to them. Titus told Paul that the Christians in Corinth still cared deeply about him. They were eager to see him.

That news encouraged Paul greatly. It gave him great comfort to know that his work in Corinth had not been in vain. He was so glad to know that the Christians there were now serving God properly. It gave him even greater joy to hear that they wanted to see him again. That was how God comforted Paul after all those troubles.

Paul is careful to say that **God comforted him**. He does not say merely that Titus, or the news from Corinth, comforted him. Rather, God used the arrival of Titus to comfort Paul. Also, God used the news from Corinth to comfort first Titus, and then Paul and his companions. Paul is careful **to give God all the honour** for what happened. Paul is so pleased about the things that both Titus and the Christians in Corinth did. However, Paul wants to praise God alone for his (God's) goodness to him.

The reaction of Corinth's church to the Book of 1 Corinthians

(2 Corinthians 7:8-9)

It was extremely difficult for Paul to write his first letter to Corinth, the Book of **1 Corinthians** (see 2 Corinthians 2:4). The church there was in serious difficulties, and **Paul had to be strict** with them.

When the letter arrived, one of the church leaders would have **read it aloud** at a meeting of all the members. Paul realised that his letter would give them a *shock*. They thought that their church was doing well; they only expected Paul to encourage them. They did not expect that he would write to them in such a serious manner.

Paul loved the Christians in Corinth very much. He compared his attitude towards them to a father's love for his children (1 Corinthians 4:15). For that reason, **he regretted that he had to send such a letter**. He really did not want to upset them. However, it was his duty always *to deal truthfully* with them (2 Corinthians 4:2). He had to tell them the message that God had given him for them.

So Paul sent that letter, and it did upset the Christians in Corinth. However, Paul did not in the end regret it, because he heard about the results of his letter. It was only *for a very short time* that the letter upset them. Even that was not without purpose, because **it caused them to turn back to God**. That result made Paul joyful. Of course he did not want to upset them - but he was very pleased that they had turned back to God.

So Paul's letter did not cause trouble for the church in Corinth - or rather, it only did that for a moment. The end result was that they gained from the letter. **God used that letter to deal with their troubles and to improve their relationship with him**.

The kind of sorrow that comes from God

(2 Corinthians 7:10)

Sorrow (sad feelings) is never pleasant. We would much prefer to bring our friends joy, rather than sorrow. However, sorrow is not itself something bad. It is possible to have **a right kind of sorrow**; even as it is possible to have **the wrong kind of joy**. Happiness about something evil is bad.

The worst kind of sorrow is *like an illness in the mind*. It can take away even a person's desire to live. We would not wish anyone to suffer like that. However, in this world, many people do suffer in that manner. As Christians, we can only pray for them and try to help them.

However, there is another kind of sorrow, and it comes from God. God allows that sorrow because it brings about something good in a person's life. For example a person may feel comfortable in life, although he is doing wrong or evil things. In that comfortable state, he may never realise that his actions offend God. So, God allows that person to suffer sorrow for a short time. Because of that sorrow, that person turns from his wrong deeds to serve God properly. So, **God has used that sorrow to rescue that person from his wrong or evil life**.

Paul refers to that as something which we cannot regret. Of course we regret the sorrow that someone has felt. Paul regretted his letter originally, because it upset the Christians in Corinth. We cannot, however, regret the fact that someone has turned to God. That is never a reason for sorrow; it is a reason for the greatest joy (Luke 15:7). **That person's sorrow lasted for a short time, but their joy will never end** (Revelation 21:1-4).

The church's decision to obey God

(2 Corinthians 7:11-12)

Probably, Paul's words show us how the church in Corinth dealt with the problem in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. It seems that Paul refers to the same matter in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. That was **one of the most serious problems that affected the church in Corinth**.

One of the church members was acting in a manner that was clearly against God's law. He had taken his father's wife, and he was having a sex relationship with her. The other church members had done nothing to deal with this man. Paul had to write to urge them to act in a strict manner at once.

Paul did not really want to upset the Christians in Corinth. However, he knew that his letter would have that effect. He hoped that they would turn back to God as a result. **It was very important that they did not allow the church member to act in such an evil manner.**

Now, Paul had heard the reports of what they had done. Paul's letter had certainly given them a shock. However, after that, they dealt with the matter in an extremely strong manner. They showed powerfully that they considered the man's behaviour to be totally wrong. They decided to act in a very firm manner. They made an order, probably that the man could not remain a member of the church. **They were eager to do what is right.**

In the end, that man turned back to God. However, Paul had not written merely for that man's benefit. Nor did he write because of the man's father, who had suffered so much in this matter. **Paul wrote in order to test the Christians in Corinth.** Before this, they had wrong ideas about personal freedom: they wanted the freedom to do whatever they chose. Paul wanted them to prove that, **in the end, they preferred to obey God.** That, of course, is what they did. They chose to obey God, and they did it eagerly.

Paul had urged Titus to go to Corinth

(2 Corinthians 7:13-14)

Paul's description of **Titus** (Titus 1:4) probably means that Titus became a Christian because of Paul's work. That would have happened during the journey that Paul took with Barnabas, in Acts chapters 13 and 14. Many people became Christians then, and they established new churches in many towns.

Titus, however, remained with Paul. Paul took him to Jerusalem, where there was a special meeting of the apostles (the first Christian leaders) - Galatians 2:1. At that meeting, the apostles wrote a letter to the Christians in the new churches (Acts 15:23-29). Perhaps Titus took back one copy of that letter to his own town, and later became a church leader there. There is no further reference to him for several years, until Paul went to Ephesus.

Ephesus could have been as near as 200 miles (320 kilometres) from Titus' own town. Perhaps Titus heard about the success of Paul's work there (Acts chapter 19; 1 Corinthians 16:8-9), and he wanted to help.

It was there, in Ephesus, that **Paul told Titus about the church in Corinth.** Paul considered it one of the best churches that he had established. God was working powerfully by his Holy Spirit in Corinth. Corinth's church had extremely serious problems, but Paul had complete confidence in the Christians there (2 Corinthians 7:16). He was sure that they would deal with all their problems properly.

Titus wanted to believe Paul's report. However, it seemed difficult to believe that such a successful church could have such serious problems. So Paul encouraged Titus to go to Corinth. Titus would be able to see the church for himself. More importantly, **Titus had the skills to help Corinth's Christians** to deal with their problems.

The work of Titus at Corinth

(2 Corinthians 7:15-16)

When Paul heard about the problems in Corinth, he first sent **Timothy** to them (1 Corinthians 4:17). Paul intended that Timothy's visit should be brief (1 Corinthians 16:10-11). Timothy taught them and he saw their initial reaction to Paul's letter; then he left. Timothy could only start to deal with their problems; he did not see the final result.

Next, Paul sent **Titus** to Corinth. It seems that Titus had not previously visited the church there. So Paul carefully explained to Titus about the church and his (Paul's) confidence that they would deal with their problems. It was a great responsibility for Titus to help them, especially as the church had very many members.

Perhaps Titus felt fear as he approached Corinth. He probably did not expect that **the church members' fear to meet him would be much greater**. Paul's letter and Timothy's visit had brought about a complete change in their attitudes. Before, they had proudly claimed the right to do whatever they wanted. Now, however, they saw that they must learn to obey God in a humble manner. They understood that Titus had not merely come on behalf of Paul. Rather, **God had sent Titus to Corinth**, to teach them how they could serve him (God) properly. So they respected Titus greatly.

Titus had the opportunity to spend a much longer time in Corinth than Timothy had done. In fact, Titus stayed there for much longer than even Paul expected. That was probably the reason why Paul did not find Titus in Troas (2 Corinthians 2:12-13). **Titus remained in Corinth until he had dealt with all the problems**. Then, at last, he returned to Paul with his report of everything that had happened in Corinth (2 Corinthians 7:6-11).

2 Corinthians chapter 8

Macedonia's poor Christians and their generous gift

(2 Corinthians 8:1-5)

The subject of chapters 8 and 9 is **a large gift to help the poor Christians in Judea**. The gift came from new Christians in several countries where Paul had recently established churches. It took more than a year to collect it, and a team of 8 men took it to Judea (Acts 20:4-6). Paul had previously written about the same gift in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.

That gift was an extraordinary act of love. By it, **Gentile Christians** (Christians who were not Jews) **gave to help Jewish Christians** (Christians who belong to Israel). Christians in the *new churches* gave to help Christians in the *oldest churches*. They gave generously to help people whom they would never meet.

Paul also intended that, by that gift, *rich Christians* would help poor Christians. There were many wealthy Christians in cities like Corinth and Ephesus. So of course Paul expected that they would want to help. However, something extraordinary happened when Paul went among **the very poor Christians in Macedonia**. These very poor people insisted that *they wanted to give, too*. When Paul permitted them to give, they gave with the greatest joy.

Paul saw this as **an expression of the grace (kindness) of God** in them. God's grace had worked so powerfully in their lives that they were now showing God's grace to other people too. It was not enough for them that they had benefited from God's grace; they wanted other people to benefit too.

Like the poor widow in Mark 12:41-44, they gave *more than they could afford*. Like her too, God considered their gifts to be *worth more* than even the richest person's gifts (2 Corinthians 8:2). They gave with right attitudes, willing hearts (minds), and a love that was generous.

Titus arranges the collection of the gift

(2 Corinthians 8:6)

Titus had only just come from Corinth to see Paul. Now Titus was going back to Corinth at once. The plan was that Titus would go there ahead of Paul, to prepare the church for Paul's arrival.

On his previous visit to Corinth, Titus had shown that he had the skills to make arrangements between people in churches. Several years later, Paul asked Titus to use the same skills to organise the churches on the island called Crete (see the Book of Titus). For now, however, **Titus' task was to arrange the collection of a large gift**.

The purpose of that gift was to help the poor Christians in Judea. More than a year earlier, Corinth's Christians had decided that they wanted to give (2 Corinthians 9:2). At that time, Paul was in Ephesus. He sent Corinth's Christians instructions about how they should collect the money (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). The intention was to bring together the gifts from the churches in Galatia and Macedonia, with the gift from Corinth. A large group of Christians would then travel together to take all the gifts to Judea (Acts chapters 20 and 21). Paul travelled with them.

Paul did not want to collect the people's gifts himself when he came to Corinth. He would only spend 3 months there, during the Winter (Acts 20:2-3; 1 Corinthians 16:6). He needed to use that time well, to declare God's message and to make Corinth's church stronger (2 Corinthians 13:10).

So, Paul needed to send someone else to collect the gift. Titus had begun to do that when he was previously in Corinth. Paul wanted Titus to complete that task, and Titus was eager to do it (2 Corinthians 8:17). So, Titus returned to Corinth.

Paul's opinion about the church at Corinth

(2 Corinthians 8:7)

Paul is trying to encourage Corinth's Christians to give generously, to help the poor Christians in Judea. So he reminds the Christians in Corinth how well they are doing in so many matters. Their trust in God (faith) is extremely strong. They understand so much about God, and they speak so well about him. They are so eager. **In all these matters, they are doing better than other churches.** So, they should try also to give even more generously than the other churches are giving.

In our studies of 1 and 2 Corinthians, **we have not always been aware that Paul had such an opinion about Corinth's church.** We have been much more aware of the *severe problems* in that church. It would be easy to consider it one of the *weaker churches* that Paul had established, not one of the best ones.

However, it has always been clear to us that **Paul loved that church and its members** (1 Corinthians 4:14). There is clear evidence of the strength of that church even in the problems that Paul had to deal with. Only *a church where God's Spirit is very active* would need the advice in 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 14. Only *a church whose members had learnt much* could form groups to argue with each other (1 Corinthians 1:11-12).

Corinth's church had such problems because **its members were not mature Christians** (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). There were no Christians in Corinth before Paul went there, perhaps less than 5 years previously. Before they became Christians, many of the members were living in a very evil manner (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Now they were eager to serve God. Acts 18:10 shows that *very many people* became Christians in Corinth. Even after Paul left Corinth, God's work there continued in a powerful manner (1 Corinthians 3:6-9).

The correct attitude for someone who gives

(2 Corinthians 8:8)

Paul had urged Corinth's Christians to give generously, to help the poor Christians in Judea. However, **Paul did not want anyone to think that he had ordered them to give** (2 Corinthians 9:7). He wanted their gifts to be a genuine expression of their love. That is, both their love for God, and their love towards the people who would benefit from their gifts.

Christians do have **a duty to give**, both to poor people (Deuteronomy 15:10-11; Matthew 6:2-4) and for God's work (1 Corinthians 9:7-12). They also have a duty to show love to everyone (Mark 12:31), but especially towards other Christians (John 13:34).

However, **the attitude, with which they do these things, matters very much.** So, even if someone gives the most generous gift *without love*, in God's opinion, that gift achieves nothing (1 Corinthians 13:3). If someone gives merely *to impress other people* or *to satisfy their conscience*, that is a wrong attitude (Luke 11:42).

Paul urged Corinth's Christians to copy the *correct attitudes* of the Christians in Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). **They gave eagerly, and they considered it an honour to give.** They made themselves aware of the greatness of God's grace (kindness) to them (2 Corinthians 8:9). That caused them to desire that they could show something of God's kindness to other people too. They saw no reason to be selfish when God had been so generous to them. Rather, **they chose to show love**, even towards the poor Christians in Judea whom they had never met. They knew that Judea's Christians could never reward or repay them for their gifts (compare Luke 14:12-14). They considered that they were really giving to God; their reward would be from him (Proverbs 19:17).

Jesus became poor so that his people would be rich

(2 Corinthians 8:9)

Jesus, who was rich, became poor. His wealth refers to **all the wealth of heaven**. Before his birth, he ruled heaven as God the Son (John 1:1-3), with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. There is one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He created everything, and all things exist for him.

It astonishes us that he left heaven to be born as a man. He chose not to be born in a king's palace, but into a poor family. Then, during his life on earth, he chose to behave in an **even more humble manner**. He served people, *like a servant* or even *a slave* (Mark 10:45; John 13:1-15). On the cross, he died *like a common criminal* (Philippians 2:5-8).

If these events astonish us, then the reason astonishes us even more. **He did these things, writes Paul, 'for your benefit'**. That is, for the people who turn from their evil deeds to receive him (Jesus) into their lives (John 1:12; Romans 5:8; Revelation 3:20).

The result is that **God's people will receive true wealth**. That does not refer to the kind of wealth that people try to get in this world (Matthew 6:19-20). This world's wealth does not impress God (Psalm 50:10). Nor is true wealth the things that this world's rulers consider great (1 Corinthians 2:8).

God has prepared for his people something that is much better than these things (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). They receive life that never ends (John 3:16). They receive joy that nobody can take from them (John 16:22). They will receive the full rights of the sons of God (Romans 8:18-19). Heaven and the New Jerusalem will be their home always, and there they will rule with Christ (Revelation 22:3-5).

They may be poor in this world (1 Corinthians 4:11) but in the next world, they will be truly rich.

The collection of gifts

(2 Corinthians 8:10-12)

More than a year previously, Corinth's Christians decided that they wanted to help the poor Christians in Judea. The Christians in Corinth believed that they could give **a large gift** for that purpose.

Paul had already explained to them that they would need to make **careful plans** for that gift. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, he urged them to collect money for that purpose each week. There were of course no modern banks that could transfer the money. Some Christians would have to travel to Judea to take the gift personally.

Now the time to take the gift was close. So **it was necessary to complete the collection of the money**. It was good that Corinth's Christians had been so eager to give. However, their good desires would achieve nothing unless they actually gave their gifts. Paul did not want to collect any money himself when he arrived in Corinth. He wanted them to make their gifts before he reached there.

Paul told them to give from **what they had**. It is right for a wealthy person to give much more than a poor person gives. The generous gift of a poor person may seem small, but God considers that gift to be very valuable (Mark 12:41-44).

Perhaps some of Corinth's Christians had hoped to give *more* than they presently had. Perhaps they expected to make money in business (compare James 4:13) and then they would be able to give more. **Paul urged them to give from what they already had**. They should not make promises to give what they could not afford. People are often eager to do all kinds of things that they cannot actually do. It is important **to complete**, and not just to begin, the things that we are eager to do. When proper actions are the result of right attitudes, that pleases God.

All Christians everywhere depend on each other

(2 Corinthians 8:13-15)

Paul was encouraging Christians to give money, in order to help the poor Christians in Judea. He permitted even poor Christians to give if they had the right attitudes (verses 4-5). However, Paul realised that there could be problems with such gifts. He did not want to take money from poor people simply so that other people could be more comfortable.

So, Paul's plan was not merely to collect money in order to support Judea's Christians. Rather, **Paul was arranging for the Christians in different nations to share with each other**. God had given good things to the Christians in each region. For example, many of Corinth's Christians had comfortable lives, and *more money* than they really needed. Judea's Christians were poor, but they had *a close relationship with God in prayer* (2 Corinthians 9:14). It was clear, therefore, that each group of Christians had something to give to the other group. **Paul expected Judea's Christians to pray for Corinth's Christians, and to accept that as a serious responsibility**.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Paul told Corinth's Christians that they all depended on each other. God had made a relationship between them, which was like the relationship between the parts of the human body. That was true for their church; but now Paul taught them that **all Christians everywhere depend on each other**, too.

Paul referred to Exodus 16:18. God provided a special food, called *manna*, for Israel's people in the desert. He did not want anyone to be greedy, or anyone to starve. So, **he provided the right amount for everyone**. That is how God wants Christians to deal with their money and possessions too. When they have plenty, they should consider it an opportunity to help other people.

Titus was eager to help Corinth's Christians

(2 Corinthians 8:16-17)

Probably **Titus** took this letter, which we call the Book of 2 Corinthians, to Corinth. Just a few weeks before, Titus had gone there for the first time. It seems that Paul sent him there to deal with the problems in the church. Titus dealt with those problems, and then he went to see Paul briefly.

Paul encouraged Titus to return to Corinth, in order to finish his (Titus's) work there (verse 6). He found that **Titus was already eager** to go back there. Perhaps Paul even had to delay Titus so that he (Paul) could write his letter.

Paul praised God for Titus's eager attitudes. Perhaps Titus's attitudes reminded Paul of **the very eager attitudes that the church in Corinth also showed** (verse 7). Paul could see that God had brought them together. Paul, and then Apollos, had been the first leaders of that church (1 Corinthians 3:6). Then, for a few years, the church seemed to be without any clear leader. Now God had sent to them Titus, who was well able to help them with their difficulties. They had accepted him and he was eager to work with them.

Only a few weeks after Paul sent this letter, he himself came to Corinth (2 Corinthians 13:1). He remained in that region for 3 months (Acts 20:2-3). We do not know what happened to Titus then. However, he was not among the men who left there with Paul to travel to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). So perhaps Paul left Titus in Corinth, to continue to lead the church there. That was what Paul later did in Crete (Titus 1:4-5). In Crete, as in Corinth, the church had many difficulties that Titus had to deal with, with God's help.

Paul recommends the first of two responsible men

(2 Corinthians 8:18-19)

With Titus, Paul sent **two other men** to Corinth. He does not give their names, probably to keep them safe. However, he does describe them, in verses 18-19 and verse 22. He wants the church in Corinth to know that **he recommends these men**. These are honourable men whom the churches can trust.

It would not be wise for everyone to know the names of these men. The churches across several countries were collecting a large gift to help the poor Christians in Judea. **It was the duty of these men to collect this gift and to look after it**. Then they would take it, probably in the form of gold coins, on the long journey by land and sea to Jerusalem.

Clearly, it was essential for the men who carried out this task to be **responsible men**. This first man, in verses 18-19, was *well-known in all the churches*. The Christians knew him and they respected him. Perhaps he was an important church leader. Or, perhaps he was a successful businessman whose frequent journeys took him to many different places.

Everywhere, the Christians knew him and they respected him as a loyal Christian. That was why *they chose him* to carry out this task. They understood that, in this task, he would be carrying out the work of God.

Paul explains in verses 20-21 that he had to deal with this matter very carefully. So, he decided not to name these men in this public letter. It would be safer for Titus to introduce the men privately to the local church leaders in Corinth. Then, Corinth's Christians would know to whom they should hand over their gift. It is likely, however, that the names of these two men appear in the list in Acts 20:4. That is a list of the men who, with Paul and Luke, later took the gift to Jerusalem.

The responsibilities of someone who arranges the collection of a gift

(2 Corinthians 8:20-21)

Anyone who collects money for the work of God is accepting a very serious responsibility. That money belongs to God and not to people. **Therefore, the person who collects it has a duty to God to deal properly with it.**

Paul was arranging a large gift to help the poor Christians in Judea. Several years previously, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem had asked him to do that (Galatians 2:10). In the meantime, Paul had established many new churches, in several different countries (Acts chapters 15 to 19). It was the members of those new churches who were giving this gift.

Paul chose not to collect anyone's gift himself (1 Corinthians 16:2). Instead, two men would come with Titus to collect the gift from the church at Corinth. Paul does not give their names, but one of them was well-known in all the churches (2 Corinthians 8:18). Paul did not select that man to carry out this task; *the churches chose him*.

Therefore, it was clear that **Paul did not have control over the money**. Because two men were collecting the money together, they would check each other's work. Titus also would be with them, to introduce them to Corinth's Christians and to see that they acted properly.

Of course Paul did not have to prove to God that he was honest; God already knew that. These arrangements were necessary in order **to give confidence to the people who gave their money**. In order to give generously, the people needed to know that Paul and the other men would deal properly with their gifts. They needed to be sure that their gifts would reach and help the right people. It was essential that the money benefited Judea's poor Christians and nobody else. That was the purpose of the gift, so Paul had made careful arrangements to achieve that purpose.

Different meanings of 'eager'

(2 Corinthians 8:22)

In chapter 8, Paul frequently refers to people who are **eager**. In the Greek language, the word is *SPOUDAIOS*. We think that, each time, Paul uses that word with a slightly different meaning. However, Paul probably considered that, each time, **people were acting with the same kind of attitudes**. Christians were eager, and Paul wanted very much to encourage that.

So, in verse 7, **Corinth's Christians** were *eager*. They showed that attitude when they dealt with the problems in their church. Previously, it was a matter of shame for them; they had neglected to act against a church member who was carrying out wrong sex acts (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). However, when they acted, they acted firmly. They were **anxious**, that is, eager, to deal with the matter.

In verse 8, the reference is to **Macedonia's Christians**. They were *eager* to give. In other words, they had a **strong desire** to give (verses 1-5).

Then, in verses 16-17, **Titus** was *eager*. In verse 17, Paul uses the word simply to mean that he **wanted to go quickly** to Corinth. That is perhaps the simplest meaning of the word 'eager'. In verse 16, the word is about his attitude towards Corinth's Christians. Titus had an *eager* desire to help them, in other words, he **cared very much** about them.

Finally, in verse 22, Paul describes **a man** who would collect Corinth's gifts for Judea's poor Christians. Paul considered the man very suitable for that task. He was suitable because he was so *eager*. That is, he was eager to do what is right. In other words, he was **careful**.

In all these situations, Paul approved of Christians who were eager to serve God. They all acted because of their strong desire to serve God. The result was that they were careful, or generous, or firm in their actions. In each situation, they gladly did what God wanted.

Men whose lives bring honour to Christ

(2 Corinthians 8:23)

Titus was coming to Corinth, with two other men, to collect the church's gift for Judea's poor Christians. Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to have complete confidence in those men. He wanted Corinth's Christians to know that **he himself trusted those men**.

So Paul explained that Titus was not merely coming on behalf of Paul, as Paul's agent or assistant. Rather, **Titus was Paul's partner** in the great work that God had sent them to do at Corinth. Paul was recognising that God had given Titus authority over Corinth's church, and responsibility for that church. So, Corinth's Christians should respect Titus as Paul himself respected him.

It seems likely that Paul wanted Corinth's Christians to accept Titus as the leader of their church. Certainly Titus's responsibility was *leadership*. However, the other two men were not going to Corinth to lead the church. Their task was *to collect and to look after the money* that the church members were giving. Therefore, Paul describes them differently.

Those two men were **'brothers'**, that is, *Christian men*. Paul then describes them, in the original language (Greek), as **'apostles of churches'**. We usually use the word 'apostles' to mean the first and most important Christian leaders. However, the original meaning of the word 'apostle' is someone whom a master sends to carry out a special task. That is the meaning here. The churches had given these two men the special responsibility and duty to collect these gifts.

Paul then adds a final, extraordinary description of these men. They are **'the glory (honour and greatness) of Christ'**. In other words, they are men whose lives bring honour to Christ. Or, the greatness of Christ shows clearly from their lives (compare 2 Corinthians 3:12-18 and 2 Corinthians 4:6).

'The proof of your love'

(2 Corinthians 8:24)

The church in Corinth was collecting **a special gift** to help the poor Christians in Judea. Paul describes that gift in an extraordinary manner. He calls it: **'the proof of your love'**.

Corinth's church had many problems in the recent past. Its members had even formed themselves into opposing groups (1 Corinthians 1:10-12). **It seemed to be a church without love** - but such a thing is not possible (John 13:34-35; 1 John 4:7-8). So, Paul urged them to *show their love* (1 Corinthians chapter 13).

Paul was sure that God was working powerfully in the lives of Corinth's Christians. He even spoke boldly about them to the Christians in other churches (2 Corinthians 9:2). Their desire to give was evidence that God's love was working in and through their lives. **It was a completely unselfish act.** However, it was important that they now completed their gift (2 Corinthians 8:10-11). They should hand it over to the men whom the churches had appointed for this purpose (2 Corinthians 8:18-22). Those men would then arrange to take the gift to Judea.

That gift showed love in many different ways. Of course, it showed love to the poor Christians who would benefit from it. It expressed the love between Christians, even Christians in different countries who will never meet. It expressed love towards the Jews (people from the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) from Christians who were not Jews. (Judea's Christians were Jewish Christians; most of Corinth's Christians were not Jews.)

The gift also showed love to God, from Corinth's Christians. For them, as for Macedonia's Christians in 2 Corinthians 8:5, **it showed how deeply they loved God.** Christians show love because God first loved them (1 John 4:19-21). Their love is the result of his love to them (1 John 4:9-11).

2 Corinthians chapter 9

God's holy people

(2 Corinthians 9:1)

Paul is writing about a large gift from the church at Corinth to help the poor Christians in Judea. However, Paul does not describe the gift like that. Instead, he describes it as **an act to 'serve the saints'**. By saints, he means God's holy people. The word for '*saints*' in the original Greek language is simply the normal word that means '*holy*'. The first Christians often used that word to describe any other Christians. **They were all God's holy people** (1 Peter 2:9).

To be holy, means to belong to God, or **to be separate for God.** That describes many of Judea's Christians well. They were the first people in the world to become Christians; and they suffered much for their belief in Christ. That was why they were so poor. Many of them had lost their homes and jobs because of their belief in Christ. Their friends, relatives and family had separated from them. Now many of them were old, and they had nobody to support them. In their troubles, they did not turn away from God. Instead, **they depended wholly on him.** They gave their lives even more to carry out good works and for prayer (2 Corinthians 9:14).

In the Bible, a gift of the first part of the harvest was especially holy (Leviticus 23:9-14; 2 Kings 4:42-44). It may be that Paul considered the gift from Corinth's church to be this kind of gift. It was **the first special gift** that this important new church was giving. Paul had refused to accept this first gift for himself, even when he needed it (2 Corinthians 11:7-9). The result was that this very holy gift would go for a very holy purpose.

Why Macedonia's Christians wanted to give

(2 Corinthians 9:2)

The generous acts of one group of people encourage other people to give. Paul had seen that as he spoke in various churches across Macedonia. The Christians of Corinth, in Achaia, were preparing to send a generous gift to help Judea's poor Christians. Paul told Macedonia's Christians about those preparations. The result was that Macedonia's Christians wanted to give, too (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

In fact, they offered not just their gifts, but themselves for this task too. Luke, Sopater, Aristarchus and Secundus, who were all from Macedonia, took the gift, with some other men, to Judea (Acts 20:4). That was a long and dangerous journey.

Paul did not expect that reaction from Macedonia's Christians (2 Corinthians 8:5). He was aware that they were very poor people (2 Corinthians 8:2). In addition, they had already given generously for Paul's own work (2 Corinthians 11:9). Paul mentions these gifts again in his letter to Philippi, which was in Macedonia (Philippians 4:15-16).

Probably, Paul was not even asking Macedonia's Christians to give for Judea's Christians. **It was they, the Christians in Macedonia, who urged Paul to allow them to give.** They did not want to lose the opportunity. Achaia was not far from Macedonia. Therefore, if Achaia's Christians had the opportunity to send a gift to Judea, so did Macedonia's Christians. Judea's Christians were the first Christians, and from there God's message had gone out across the world. It seems unlikely that Macedonia's Christians had ever been able to send a gift to Judea previously. Therefore, this gift was a wonderful opportunity for them to give to God and to help Judea's very special Christians.

We should give gladly, and not from a sense of shame

(2 Corinthians 9:3-4)

We think that Paul was *very polite* with the Christians in Corinth. He did not want to upset their feelings. More than a year earlier, they had decided to give a large gift to help the poor Christians in Judea. Paul gave them instructions about how they should collect that gift (1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

We do not know whether they followed those instructions immediately. However, more recently, Titus had begun to collect that gift (2 Corinthians 8:6). Now Paul was sending Titus back to Corinth, with two other men, to collect the rest of the gift.

Paul did not intend by this arrangement to put any pressure on Corinth's Christians. In fact, he intended the opposite. They had promised to give, and Paul had told Macedonia's Christians about their promise. Corinth's Christians would feel very ashamed if, on Paul's arrival, their gift was still not ready.

Paul cared about that. He wanted Corinth's Christians to give with glad hearts, and not from any sense of shame (2 Corinthians 9:7). **It is a great honour when we are able to give for the work of God.** We should give as an expression of thanks for the good things that God has done for us. Jesus taught that it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Therefore, **we should always give with joy.** Our gifts express our love (1 Corinthians chapter 13).

So, Titus and the other men would go to Corinth ahead of Paul. They were not going there to demand gifts from anyone. Rather, they would simply collect the money that Corinth's Christians had freely chosen to give. Then, they would keep everyone's gift safe until the arrangements were complete to take it to Judea.

Christian gifts are a blessing

(2 Corinthians 9:5)

In 2 Corinthians 9:5-6, Paul uses the same word of the Greek language four times. That word is *EULOGIA*, which usually means **a blessing**. A blessing means a declaration of God's goodness.

The first use of the word in verse 5, means simply *a gift*. That is, Paul says that Corinth's Christians had promised their 'blessing'. This gift will declare the goodness of God to the poor people who receive it. They will be very thankful to God because of it (verses 11 to 12).

In the second use, Paul explains that he does not want anyone to give merely as a duty, or from shame. Rather, he wants them freely and gladly to choose to give, *with willing hearts*. To express this idea, Paul contrasts a blessing with greedy attitudes. If a greedy person ever gives anything, he gives unwillingly. That is, he does not want to give. Perhaps he only gives because someone else with greedy attitudes has forced him to hand over his money. That is not how Christian gifts should be. They should be **an act of love and blessing, a declaration of God's goodness**. A Christian gives because of his strong desire to show God's goodness.

In verse 6, Paul uses the word 'blessing' twice in *a word-picture about the harvest*. A farmer, when he sows seeds, sows plentifully. We could say that he hands over his precious seeds *generously*. He is like someone who gives a generous gift gladly. Paul says that the farmer sows for 'blessings'. He sows plentifully because he believes in the goodness of God.

The result is that the harvest is also plentiful. It is a great blessing; it shows the goodness of God. The sower and the people who gather the harvest then share together in their great joy (John 4:36). They are very thankful to God for his great goodness. That is how Christian gifts should be.

Sow your seed plentifully for a good harvest

(2 Corinthians 9:6)

A farmer who does not sow enough grain should not expect a good harvest. For a harvest that is plentiful, the farmer must first sow plenty of grain.

Paul uses that word-picture to teach Christians about their gifts. **It is right to be generous; it is wrong to be greedy.** God rewards the generous giver (Proverbs 22:9; Luke 6:38).

We should think about the nature of that reward, and our attitudes towards it. God rewards his people even in this life - but the reward that he promises for the next life is much better (Mark 10:29-30).

A farmer sows seed because he wants the harvest, and for no other reason. Christians should give as an act of love and to obey God - not for any personal reward. Jesus even taught people to be generous to those who could not repay them (Luke 14:12-14). Then **they would know that their reward is from God**, and not from other people.

A rich farmer can afford to sow more grain so that he can get a bigger harvest. For Christians who give, however, **their attitude matters more than the amount**. Paul taught that a rich person should give more (1 Corinthians 16:2). A poor person may give much less - but God does not consider the poor person's gift to be less valuable (Mark 12:41-44).

In 2 Corinthians 9:10, Paul continued his word-picture about the harvest. He prayed there for those who would give. He prayed for God to increase their wealth, so that they could give generously. God could do that, even as he provides seed for the farmer to sow. Then, Paul asked God to increase the results of their generous act. That is like the harvest. The reward would be great - and not just for the givers. God would use their gifts to provide for poor people. So in the end God would receive the reward, as people gave thanks to him (2 Corinthians 9:11-12).

Give gladly

(2 Corinthians 9:7)

In the Bible, people gave various gifts to God, for various purposes. People had **a duty to give**, both for the work of God and to help poor people. In particular, God's people gave a tithe, which was a tenth part of their income (Leviticus 27:30-33). Not to give the tithe, was to rob God (Malachi 3:8-10).

Although it was a duty to make these gifts, **God wanted his people to give with glad and grateful hearts** (Deuteronomy 26:1-15). So he made **wonderful promises** to his people if they obeyed him (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). He would show his kindness to them; they would see that their wealth came from him.

It would have been easy for Paul to control the church at Corinth by means of a series of strict rules. However, Paul chose not to do that (for example, 2 Corinthians 8:8). **Paul was not teaching people to obey rules, but to serve God gladly**. He wanted Corinth's Christians to give as **an act of love**, and not because of shame, fear or a sense of duty. He cared much more about their relationship with God, than about the amount of money that he collected.

So, as Jesus had done in Matthew 6:3-4, Paul told Corinth's Christians to **decide about their gifts secretly**. What they gave was a matter between them and God. Nobody should force anyone else to give more than that person had chosen. Then, their attitude in front of God would be right. They would give with a joyful and willing attitude; and God loves that. God would be pleased to see that they gave gladly.

God provides enough so that his people can do his work

(2 Corinthians 9:8)

Corinth's Christians had made a bold decision. They had chosen, by their gifts, to help the poor Christians in **a distant country**, Judea.

That was clearly a good and generous act. However, perhaps some of Corinth's Christians worried about it. If they gave generously for Judea, they might not be able to afford to give other gifts. In particular, God might guide them to help people in their own region, but they might be unable to give.

So Paul reminded Corinth's Christians that **their gifts did not depend on their own resources**. Rather, they depended on the grace (kindness) of God, and that grace (kindness) has **no limit**. It was only because of the kindness of God that they were able to give on this occasion. Whenever God guided them to give, he would give them more of his grace (kindness). So, he would supply what he wanted them to give. By the grace (kindness) of God, they would be able to carry out every good work that he directed them to do.

Paul tells Corinth's Christians: *'In everything, you will always have enough'*. Paul's word for *'enough'* is the same as he uses in Philippians 4:11 and 1 Timothy 6:6. In Philippians 4:11-13, Paul describes his own experience. Sometimes Paul was very poor, sometimes he had plenty. However, in every circumstance, Paul was **content**. In 1 Timothy 6:6-10, Paul urges Christians to respect God and to be content, even if they can only afford the basic things in life. Paul's word for *'content'* is the same as his word for *'enough'* in 2 Corinthians 9:8. The meaning in all these verses is that **God satisfies his people; he provides enough so that they can be content**. That is his promise to rich and poor people alike. He does not only provide what they need; he also provides enough so that they can do his work.

Are my gifts a waste of money?

(2 Corinthians 9:9)

When people give generously, they often worry about it. God's people should not worry about the loss of money, because God promises to provide for them (Matthew 6:25-34). However, perhaps they do not worry about its loss; but they worry that they are wasting the money. In other words, **they are anxious for their gift to achieve its proper purpose**. They want their gift to achieve a real result, a result that lasts.

As Corinth's Christians prepared their own gifts, Paul reminded them about Psalm 112. His words in 2 Corinthians 9:9 come from Psalm 112:9. That Psalm describes **the character of a good man**. He does not keep his money for himself, like a greedy person who desires wealth. Instead, he gives generously. He gives to many poor people. So he does not hold onto his money; *he scatters it*. Many people, both near and far away, have every reason to be grateful for his gifts.

That good man has not wasted his money. His gifts achieve wonderful things in the lives of many people. His righteous (good) acts achieve results that never end. **That is because this man does God's work; and the results of God's work last always**.

The Psalm ends with the contrast of *a wicked man*. That man too, desired to achieve great things in his life. Perhaps many people even thought that he was truly great. However, *nothing in his life can last*. He must die, and God's judgement will be against him. So, that wicked man is the kind of person who truly *wastes his money*, his life, and everything else, too (Psalm 112:10).

God, the great provider

(2 Corinthians 9:10)

Perhaps you consider seed to be *a product of the natural world*. Perhaps you consider bread to be *a product of human effort*. However, Christians should not think in that manner. Instead, they should recognise **God as the great provider**, both for them and for the whole world. It is *God* who provides seed for the farmer to sow. It is *God* who provides bread and other foods for us to eat. **Everyone in this world depends wholly upon the goodness of God**, whether they believe in him or not.

Paul's subject in 2 Corinthians 9:10, however, is not food or agriculture, but **gifts**. When a Christian gives, he does not depend on his own resources, but on God's goodness. **God, the great provider, is using that Christian to show his (God's) goodness in the world**. So, God himself provides what that Christian gives. That is like the farmer's supply of seed. Although it may seem small, God uses it to provide for people in a wonderful way. The seed may be small but the harvest is plentiful. So **a gift that seems small can, by the power of God, achieve great results**.

Paul compares those results to the fruits of the harvest. The natural harvest astonishes us because it is so plentiful. In the same manner, the results of a person's good and generous acts can astonish us. A farmer works hard for his harvest, but that harvest depends completely on the goodness of God. So, a person may work hard for the money to give - but the results of that gift are the work of God.

So, the promise that Paul makes in 2 Corinthians 9:10 encourages us. **God, the great provider, does not just provide seed and food. He also provides for us, so that we can give for his work**. In addition, he uses those gifts to bring about results that last (verse 9).

Does God make his people rich?

(2 Corinthians 9:11)

Corinth's Christians believed that God wanted to make them rich. So, they had tried to behave like rich people. It seems that some of them were speaking proudly about their wealth (1 Corinthians 4:8). They even liked to eat plenty of meat and to drink plenty of wine. Paul did not approve (1 Corinthians 11:20-22).

Many other Christians would consider their attitudes to be completely wrong: selfish and greedy. However, **Paul could see that Corinth's Christians were generous people**, and not in fact selfish or greedy (2 Corinthians 9:1-2). They had *misunderstood* something about the Christian message, but they were not completely wrong. **Christ really did die so that they could become rich** (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Their mistake was to expect the kind of wealth that would impress other people in this world. They wanted money and possessions; but many of the best Christians do not have any of that kind of wealth (1 Corinthians 4:11). Instead Christians have a much better kind of wealth. **Christ himself is in their lives** (2 Corinthians 4:6-7; Colossians 1:27). That is true wealth and true greatness; that relationship with Christ will never end (Revelation 22:3-5).

We will only see that fully in the future age, after Christ's return (1 Corinthians 2:9-10; Romans 8:18-19). However, we can see that it has begun now, by the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:22). So, Paul says that Corinth's Christians were *rich in their speech and their knowledge* (1 Corinthians 1:5). Even Macedonia's poor Christians were *rich in their generous acts* (2 Corinthians 8:2). These Christians spoke, and knew, and gave, in the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, they did not depend on their own resources, but on God. **As God's resources have no limit, that is true wealth.**

God brings together Christians from every nation

(2 Corinthians 9:12-13)

The first Christians were all *Jews* (from the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and their churches were **in Judea**. God gave Paul the special work to establish churches among the *Gentiles* (people who are not Jews).

Many of Judea's Christians had doubted that Gentiles could be Christians. It was not easy for them to accept Paul's work. However, at a special meeting in Jerusalem, the leaders approved of Paul's work among the Gentiles (Acts 15:1-29). At the same time, **they asked Paul to collect money from the Gentile Christians to help Judea's poor Christians** (Galatians 2:10).

Several years passed before Paul was able to bring that gift. However, he never forgot about it. As he established churches across the countries now called Greece and Turkey, that gift became an important part of his plan.

All Christians everywhere need to recognise that they all belong to the family of God. People may separate Jews and Gentiles, but God brings them together (Ephesians 2:11-15).

Paul saw that **the effect of that gift would be to unite Christians from different nations**. By it, the Gentile Christians were showing a real act of *love* towards the Jewish Christians. That *love* showed that those Gentiles really had become Christians (John 13:34-35). It was clear evidence that they really had accepted the gospel, the message of Christ. Their decision to serve God, and to give this gift, gave great honour to God.

So Judea's Christians would have **many reasons to thank God**. They would thank him that those Gentiles really had become Christians. They would thank him for the power of the gospel in the lives of so many people. They would thank him for the love and generous gifts of the Gentile Christians. They would thank him that he had provided for them in such a wonderful way.

Prayers for the people who gave

(2 Corinthians 9:14)

At the start of the first church, the Christians **shared their possessions** (Acts 2:44-45). Nobody organised that; it was a simple act of love. However, it soon became necessary to make proper arrangements for those gifts (Acts 6:1-6).

We can see a later set of arrangements for the widows in the church in 1 Timothy 5:3-16. Paul did not want anyone who refused to work to receive anything from the church (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13). Of course, an older widow may be too weak to earn enough money for herself. Then, **she should carry out acts of kindness and she should pray** (compare Titus 2:2-5). She should give herself completely to God (1 Timothy 5:5); then it is right for the church to provide for her.

Corinth's Christians were sending a large gift for Judea's poor Christians. However, Paul insisted that he was not simply taking money from Corinth's Christians to give it somewhere else (2 Corinthians 8:13-15). In fact, each group of Christians was sharing what it had with other Christians. Corinth's Christians had money to give; but **Judea's Christians were holy people, with an especially close relationship with God in prayer.**

Paul expected Judea's Christians to accept, as a serious responsibility, that they must pray for Corinth's Christians. Corinth's Christians had only recently become Christians. Since then, there had been serious problems in their church. However, they had shown by this gift that God was working powerfully in their lives. Now, they needed prayer, so that they could develop and become strong in their relationship with Christ. Paul could see that the mature Christians in Judea were the right people to pray for them.

A gift beyond explanation

(2 Corinthians 9:15)

God is doing such wonderful things in the lives of his people that we cannot even begin to express them (1 Corinthians 2:9). That is, we cannot describe them *in human language*. Probably, *heaven's languages* (1 Corinthians 13:1) can express these things, in the words that come from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:13).

This great work of God is not unknown to God's people. God has given them the Holy Spirit, to show them what he has prepared for them (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). The Holy Spirit shows them this great gift, but we cannot. It is **a gift beyond explanation**, too wonderful to express in words. We can only use our words to thank God for his astonishing kindness, and to pray for it in our lives (2 Corinthians 9:14).

We ask what Paul means by this great gift. Of course, we cannot describe properly something that is impossible to describe. However, we can see the kind of subjects that Paul was thinking about. We know the kind of things that he considered very wonderful.

We can see, for example, that Paul considered **God's grace (kindness)** to be very wonderful (1 Timothy 1:12-15). However, Paul is writing in 2 Corinthians 9:15 about God's great 'gift'. The gift is not the *kindness*; a gift is *the result* of kindness.

So we think that Paul is referring to **God's greatest gift to the world; that is, Christ** (John 3:16). Of course, we can describe what Christ did in this world. However, it seems much more difficult to describe what he is doing now in the lives of his people (2 Corinthians 4:7; Colossians 1:27). He lives and works in them, to change them completely (2 Corinthians 5:17) and to bring them into a perfect relationship with God (Romans 8:18-27; 1 John 3:2).

2 Corinthians chapter 10

People who opposed Paul's authority

(2 Corinthians 10:1-2)

At the time when Paul wrote the Book of 1 Corinthians, there were serious problems in the church at Corinth. In this second letter to the church, Paul says that most of the church members there followed his advice (2 Corinthians 2:6). Clearly, however, some did not.

The people who opposed Paul were not the ordinary church members. The ordinary church members cared very much about Paul (2 Corinthians 7:7); but these people considered themselves superior to him (2 Corinthians 11:5). **They were impressive people, who wanted to establish their own authority over the church.** So they opposed the authority that God had given to Paul (2 Corinthians 10:8).

These people were telling Corinth's Christians not to give attention to Paul's letters. *Paul wrote bold and strong letters, they said; but really, his character was weak. Paul would not dare to be strict with anyone if he came back there.* That was what they said.

Paul reminded Corinth's Christians about the character of Christ. **Christ was gentle and humble** (Matthew 11:29); so that is how Christians should behave. Paul was not ashamed if people considered him weak (1 Corinthians 9:22). However, Christ is not weak, but powerful (2 Corinthians 12:9; 2 Corinthians 13:3).

God had given authority to Paul (2 Corinthians 10:8). As God's servant, Paul had a duty to use that authority. **So of course Paul would deal strongly with any remaining problems when he came to Corinth** (2 Corinthians 13:1-10).

The people who opposed Paul had a wrong opinion about him. They thought that, like them, he wanted *to impress people*. However, Paul did not think like them. He only wanted **to please God** (2 Corinthians 5:9).

Christians must oppose their own wrong thoughts

(2 Corinthians 10:3)

The people who opposed Paul in Corinth had a wrong idea about the Christian life. That idea caused them to have a completely wrong opinion about Paul's attitudes, too.

They thought that **matters of the 'flesh'** guided Paul's life. The flesh means the human body. So, these people were saying that *natural feelings and desires caused Paul to act as he did*.

So, a person naturally desires *his own comfort*. He wants *to feel important* so he tries to impress other people. He wants *to make friends* so he is afraid to upset people. His *feelings and emotions* - for example, fear, happiness, joy and pain - guide his decisions.

Of course while Christians live in this world, they have the same feelings as everyone else. However, they desire strongly not to behave in the selfish way that their feelings might cause them to behave. They do not live for their own comfort, happiness and profit - but to serve God. **Their ambition is to please God, and not to please themselves.**

Paul compared the Christian life to a war. It is necessary for Christians to oppose some things in this life. Sometimes they must even oppose the thoughts that come into their own minds. What God wants, must always have the first place in their lives. **No feeling of their body, no thought of their mind, can ever be more important than God.** Christians must not try to please themselves or anyone else. Their task is always to please God.

The weapons that God's people use

(2 Corinthians 10:4)

Paul has told us that the experience of Christians in this life is **like a war**. Now he tells us how we must fight that war. God has provided us with powerful weapons, our tools for war.

The weapons that soldiers used to fight depended wholly upon the **flesh**, the human body. The purpose of a sword is to cut into an enemy's flesh; a soldier depends on the strength of his own flesh to use it.

A sword might kill an enemy, but it cannot destroy the enemy's castle. That, of course, needed much more powerful weapons.

Elsewhere, Paul writes about a battle against evil spirits (Ephesians 6:10-18). Here, however, his subject is **a war about the thoughts that fill a person's mind** (2 Corinthians 10:5). Thoughts and ideas are powerful, because they can control a person's whole life. One wrong idea can make a person completely unable to trust God. One evil thought can ruin a person's relationship with God. That wrong thought may only be a product of the person's imagination. However, without God's help, that person may be completely unable to change their mind.

People try to deal with such problems by many different methods. Perhaps they try to convince themselves, or other people, of the truth. Perhaps they make rules for themselves or other people to follow. **However, these methods are too weak to achieve success, because they are of human origin.** Paul would say that *these methods depend on the flesh*. That is, the person is depending upon himself, and not on Christ in him (see 2 Corinthians 4:7-11). **Instead, the person should give himself to Christ.** Christ changes people completely (2 Corinthians 5:17). He becomes both their master and their teacher: he teaches them how to obey him.

Why even our thoughts can offend God

(2 Corinthians 10:5)

Perhaps we have wondered why *proud attitudes* offend God so much (Proverbs 16:5). *Our attitudes are just thoughts*, we say. God is great and powerful; nothing that we think can upset his rule (compare Job 35:6-7).

Here Paul provides an explanation. Of course the proud thoughts of people cannot upset God's rule in heaven. Of course people's evil thoughts and wicked plans will not be able to prevent his rule over the earth (Psalm 2). **However, the wrong thoughts of people can and do prevent God's rule over their lives.** In other words, they refuse to obey God. Their own weak thoughts matter more to them than the words of God, who is their maker. That is a very proud way to behave: to care about your own thoughts more than God's opinion. It is astonishing that anyone ever behaves in such a manner (Isaiah 29:16). However, we know that we are all sometimes guilty of this wrong behaviour.

Now, perhaps, we see that **many of our other thoughts offend God, too**. Even *fear, doubt* or *the desire for happiness* can rob God of his proper place in our lives. Even *the love of money* or *a desire to impress people* can prevent God's rule over our lives. For these and many other reasons, people refuse to obey God - and that is always a very wrong thing to do.

The only answer is that we must accept Christ into his proper place, as a ruler of our lives. We must replace our proud attitudes with humble attitudes. A humble attitude means **the attitude of someone who has chosen to obey God with a willing heart** (Psalm 40:6-8).

Christians must learn to obey Christ

(2 Corinthians 10:6)

At the time of the Book of 1 Corinthians, the church at Corinth had many different problems. Paul patiently gave his advice in detail about each problem in turn. However, it seems to us that the church's problems had one simple solution: **its members needed to learn to obey Christ**. In his letter, Paul was constantly urging them to do that. It would have dealt with so many of their troubles. As Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 2:9, that was the reason for his letter. They had to learn to obey Christ.

That was a hard lesson for the church at Corinth. They loved the *freedom* that God had given to them. However, **they had not really understood that freedom** (1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23). They had heard about the *wonderful things* that God had prepared for them (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). However, **they did not want to wait for these things**. Some of them did not even think that there is any life after death (1 Corinthians 15:12). They believed that they could have these wonderful things now (1 Corinthians 4:8).

It seemed strange to them that Paul, as a free man and a Christian, would give up his rights to serve other people (1 Corinthians 9:15-19). However, Paul was urging them, too, not to think about their own interests, but about Christ (2 Corinthians 4:1-11). **By his death, Christ had bought them, so that they were free to serve God properly** (1 Corinthians 6:20). That kind of freedom might not impress other people, but it is *real*.

God really is working in the lives of Christians; Christ really is living in them (Colossians 1:27). God *really* will bring about what he has promised to them (Philippians 1:6). Most of the church members at Corinth genuinely wanted to serve God properly. They had already changed their attitudes and they began to obey Christ. However, some of them were refusing to obey Christ. Paul hoped that they would change their attitudes before his arrival at Corinth. If not, Paul was ready to deal strictly with them.

The appearance of things may give a false impression

(2 Corinthians 10:7)

Paul complains that **Corinth's Christians were looking only at the appearance of things**. In other words, they accepted as *reality* whatever something *seemed* to be. They were not checking whether the appearance of something gave a *false impression*. They made immediate decisions when they should have studied hard to know the reality.

In particular, they accepted any teacher who impressed them, to teach in their church (2 Corinthians 11:4). Also, they allowed any leader who seemed strong and bold to lead their church (2 Corinthians 11:20). **They did not check whether the teacher genuinely taught God's message. They did not check whether the leader's authority really was from God.**

The result was that the church in Corinth had made several wrong decisions. They had allowed several people to have important positions in their church, simply because those people seemed impressive. Now those people were using their positions in the church to speak against Paul.

Paul did not care about his own importance, or whether he impressed anyone. However, he cared very much about God's message, and about God's work in Corinth. He had brought *the genuine message of God* to Corinth; he saw that he must defend it. God had given him *authority over the church at Corinth*; he saw that he must use it.

The church members at Corinth all claimed to belong to Christ as true Christians. Therefore, they should accept Paul, who originally brought the true Christian message to Corinth. They should recognise that he, too, belonged to Christ. So, they should realise that Christ had sent Paul there to declare his message. If Paul was the servant of Christ, then Paul had authority from Christ. Paul did not ask them to respect Paul himself. **He urged them to respect Christ, and Christ's message.**

How church leaders should use their authority

(2 Corinthians 10:8-9)

It is important for us to know **the nature and source of a church leader's authority** (compare Luke 20:1-8). Clearly today most church leaders receive much of their authority from *other people*. However if **God** has given authority to someone, it is our duty to respect that authority.

Clearly, no person gave Paul authority over the church at Corinth. When Paul arrived there originally, Corinth had no church (Acts 18:1-4). Nobody - except God - appointed Paul to establish and to lead that church.

Now people were saying that *Paul's authority came not from God, but from Paul himself*. They were saying that *Paul was trying to frighten them by his letters. Paul was writing bold and powerful letters in order to control the church*. That was what they said.

Those people did not expect Paul to be bold or powerful when he arrived back in Corinth. **They insisted that Paul's authority was not real.**

Paul did not really want to behave in a bold or powerful manner towards Corinth's Christians, whom he loved (2 Corinthians 10:1). He admired the humble and gentle way that Christ leads his people (Matthew 11:28-30). For that reason, Paul did not usually say much about his authority.

However, Paul's authority as a church leader was real, and it came from God. Paul used that authority not to defeat people, but to defeat wrong ideas and thoughts (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Sometimes he had to use his authority to deal with certain people (2 Corinthians 13:1-3). However, Paul was not trying to control people, but to help them. Paul did not want to make other people weaker so that he would be stronger. That was not the purpose of Paul's authority as a church leader. Rather, the purpose of that authority was **to make God's people stronger in their relationship with God**. That is how church leaders should always use their authority.

A physical description of Paul

(2 Corinthians 10:10)

In the books that the first Christians wrote, there are very few *physical descriptions* of anyone. This is one of those rare descriptions. Paul repeats it from the words of *someone at Corinth who clearly disliked him*. This person was opposing Paul in order to gain authority in the church for himself (2 Corinthians 11:4-22). *'Paul was weak and he did not speak well'*: that was what this person insisted.

The description itself astonishes us. It is not how we would expect anyone to describe a man like *Paul*. We would describe Paul as *a man with great energy, whose words achieved great results in God's work*. **However, we have not met Paul, and this person clearly had heard him.** Even if this person's words are not entirely true, they were accurate enough for people to believe him.

Paul was not a physically *weak* person. He was strong enough to carry on his job, which was to make tents (Acts 18:3). So, the description seems to refer to *the impression* that he gave. **Paul appeared weak.** He did not seem like someone who was strong enough to lead people. He was not impressive.

The description of the words that Paul spoke is similar. **Paul did not speak in an impressive manner.** Instead, he chose words that were simple and plain in their meaning. He did not give clever speeches like people expected an important leader to do (2 Corinthians 4:2).

In other words, **Paul did not look or speak like a leader.** He did not behave in the proud and impressive way that many leaders behave (see Mark 10:42-44). Other people, now in the church at Corinth, considered that they had the right qualities to be its leader (2 Corinthians 10:12; 2 Corinthians 11:4-22). They laughed at Paul's words in the Books of 1 and 2 Corinthians. *Paul was only trying to frighten them by his letters*, they said (2 Corinthians 10:9). That was not **Peter's opinion** about Paul's letters. Peter considered that Paul's letters have the same authority as the rest of the Bible (2 Peter 3:15-17).

Paul meant what he said

(2 Corinthians 10:11)

Much of Chapter 10 is about **how people often try to create a false impression of themselves**. They want other people to respect them, so they hide their inner weaknesses. They use words, and sometimes actions, that do not show their true character. By that means, people try to gain various advantages for themselves.

Several of the teachers who had recently joined the church at Corinth were behaving like that. They were trying to impress people, because they wanted to become important in the church. So, they spoke boldly about themselves, and about the things that they had done (see 2 Corinthians 11:18-23). However, **they tried to hide the fact that their true intentions were evil** (2 Corinthians 11:4; 2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

Those teachers even dared to say that Paul was giving a false impression (2 Corinthians 10:9-10). Paul was trying to frighten people by his bold letters, they said. In his letters, Paul had promised to deal firmly with the people who were doing evil things. However, these teachers argued that Paul's character was too weak to act in such a manner. They urged people, therefore, not to respect Paul's authority.

However, Paul did not even consider it right to give a false impression (2 Corinthians 12:6). **Paul meant what he said** (2 Corinthians 1:17-18). He spoke clear words that did not hide his true meaning (2 Corinthians 4:2). He dealt with people in a sincere and honest manner (2 Corinthians 7:2).

Paul was not perfect. He confessed his own weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). However, Paul did not depend on himself to deal with these matters. **Christ was living in him** (2 Corinthians 4:7; Colossians 1:27). Paul himself may be weak, but Christ is powerful (2 Corinthians 13:3-4). In the strength that comes from Christ, Paul would deal with the problems in Corinth's church.

When church leaders compare themselves

(2 Corinthians 10:12)

Church leaders often compare themselves to each other; and that can become a serious problem. They might compare their importance, the size of their churches, or what results they are achieving. If they are doing well, that can be the cause of proud attitudes. If not, it upsets them. Sometimes that can produce a strange effect. A church leader might even feel a sense of despair because *God is using someone else in a powerful manner*. The right reaction would be *to praise God* for what that other person was achieving.

Even sincere church leaders may sometimes compare themselves in that way. **However, when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians 10:12, he was not dealing with sincere people.** He was speaking about people who did not declare the true message from God. They were proud people, who had replaced God's message with their own ideas (2 Corinthians 11:4; 2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

These people compared themselves, not to test the quality of their own work, but to show themselves greater than other people. They wanted to gain power and authority over everyone else in the church. So, they tried to prove that they were more important than anyone else.

Paul did not consider it wise for church leaders to compare themselves with each other. We can see his attitude from how he described his own work in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10. Paul considered himself *the least* of the apostles (the first Christian leaders). In fact, he did not think that he even deserved to be called an apostle. Paul had worked hard - but really, it was God's grace (kindness) that had worked through Paul. What Paul had achieved was really the work of God. **Unless God, in his kindness, had done these wonderful things, Paul would have achieved nothing whatever.**

A church leader's authority has limits

(2 Corinthians 10:13-14)

Some people had come to teach in the church at Corinth. These teachers wanted to impress the people there and so to gain authority over the church. So, they (the teachers) constantly compared themselves with each other. They spoke proudly about **how far they had travelled** to teach at the churches.

Paul had travelled further than them, but he did not want to speak like that. Rather, he considered it **his duty to keep *inside* the limits that God had given to him**. He did not want to go beyond the regions where God was sending him to work. To travel further would not be a great thing, as those teachers thought. Rather, the person who did that would not be obeying God.

However, Paul was glad to record how far God had sent him. **Paul was one of the first Christians to reach Corinth**, which was a great city. It was at the limit of how far the gospel (God's message about Christ) had reached. Perhaps only the church at Rome was further away from the first Christian churches in Judea. Paul did not then know that very many people would become Christians in Corinth. He did not know about the wonderful things that God would do there. **He simply went to obey God**; and then God approved of Paul's work in the most wonderful way (2 Corinthians 3:1-5).

Paul considered himself a servant of God (1 Corinthians 3:5-8). **God gives to each of his servants their proper tasks to carry out in his work** (Matthew 24:45-46). A servant who carries out someone else's tasks is not obeying his master. However, Paul had not gone further than God had sent him. God had given Paul authority even in Corinth (2 Corinthians 10:8). So Paul was not speaking too proudly when he used that authority. He was simply obeying God in the work that God had given to him.

The desire to do God's work in another place

(2 Corinthians 10:15-16)

God's message, the gospel, is *a message for the whole world* (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8). However, God does not expect all his people to try to take his message across the entire world. He arranges his work, like a great man who orders his servants to plant a garden or to build a house (1 Corinthians 3:5-10). That man gives to each servant the work that he (the servant) is most able to do. Also, he tells the servant where he (the servant) must work.

So God has many different kinds of work for his people to do (1 Corinthians 12:28-31). Also, **he directs them where they should work for him**. Sometimes, as in Acts 16:6-10, he sends them somewhere that they did not expect.

God had given Paul a strong desire **to declare the gospel in those places where people had not yet heard it**. So Paul was eager for God to send him to those places. Paul knew how much people needed the gospel in the regions beyond Corinth. He urged Corinth's Christians to pray with faith (trust in God) for those regions.

Some teachers, whom God had not sent, had come to the church at Corinth. They desired to take advantage of what God had done by means of Paul there (2 Corinthians 11:12-13). Paul regretted what they were doing. However, sometimes God did send people to work in places where Paul, or another Christian leader, was already working. For example, Paul had established the church in Corinth (in Achaia) but, in Acts 18:24-28, God sent Apollos there. Although Paul had not yet met Apollos, Paul still approved of his work at Corinth. In fact, when Paul did meet Apollos, Paul even urged him to return to Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:12). Paul could see that both he and Apollos were doing God's work at Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord

(2 Corinthians 10:17)

'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

In English, to boast means **to speak bold or even proud words**. A person who boasts, therefore, is usually praising himself. *He is declaring proudly how great he is.*

That was what some of the teachers were doing in the church at Corinth. They were trying to impress the members so that they could gain authority in the church. Paul did not approve. **These teachers claimed to be servants of Christ, but they did not have Christ's attitudes** (compare 2 Corinthians 10:1 with 11:20).

Paul's words come from Jeremiah 9:23-24. At the time of Jeremiah, too, **people were trying to show their greatness**. There were many different reasons why they considered themselves great. Intelligent people spoke about the greatness of their wisdom. Strong people spoke about the greatness of their strength. Rich people spoke about the greatness of their wealth. The Lord (God) insisted that none of these were truly great. Rather, **true greatness is to know God**. If people knew God, they would obey him. Then there would be kindness, right judgements, and good behaviour in the world. These are the things that God approves of.

Paul emphasises his words slightly differently. **True greatness is in God alone**. Therefore, someone who desires to speak about true greatness must speak about the Lord. Someone who wants to praise true greatness must praise the Lord. It is foolish when a person boasts (or speaks proudly) about himself. It is foolish to praise yourself. **When you desire to give someone honour, you should give that honour to God**. In the end, he alone deserves that honour.

How to know whether your life pleases God

(2 Corinthians 10:18)

People often imagine themselves to be better people than they really are. That is why people boast (speak proud words). They consider themselves good, or great, and they want everyone else to think that about them, too.

In reality, that is a *very foolish* way to think about your life. God made you, and you are responsible to him. He is the judge of everything that you do. **God alone has the right to decide whether your life pleases him or not**.

In the Bible, God has clearly declared what his standards are (Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 15). However, although his standards are perfect (Psalm 12:6), people are not perfect (Psalm 14:2-3). Everyone fails his test (Romans 3:23). Therefore **we cannot have a relationship with God because of our own goodness, but only because of God's goodness** (Romans chapter 4). That is why Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-7). We must confess our evil deeds to God, and we must invite Christ into our lives (Acts 3:19).

For that reason, **we must be humble and not proud in front of God**. Paul understood very well that he did not deserve to be a church leader (1 Corinthians 15:9) or even a Christian (1 Timothy 1:15-16). **Every good thing that he had achieved was because of the work of God in his life**. Christ was living in him (Colossians 1:27) – therefore Paul could serve God in the manner that pleased God (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

That was very different from the attitude of the teachers who were trying to gain authority in the church at Corinth. They were constantly looking for opportunities to tell people how great and important they were. These wrong ideas affected their beliefs, too. They did not agree with Paul about the importance of Jesus and his death (2 Corinthians 11:4-5).

2 Corinthians chapter 11

Was Paul foolish?

(2 Corinthians 11:1)

Some people in the church at Corinth considered Paul *foolish*. That was clearly the opinion of the teachers who were trying to gain authority there. If they did not actually say it, they certainly believed it. They would never act as Paul did.

In their opinion, a church leader should be an *impressive* and an *important* man. He should use his authority to gain control over the church members. He should use skill and intelligence in order to become the leader of a large church that will pay him well. He should not waste his time with poor and weak people; his friends should be rich and important.

Paul seemed to behave in the opposite manner. He did not hesitate to help poor, weak and even evil people (1 Corinthians 9:22; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). He would not accept his wages (2 Corinthians 11:7-9). He preferred to encourage the church members gently and not to control them by rules (2 Corinthians 13:10). Even when he established a good church, he did not remain in that town for a long time. He was constantly in great danger (2 Corinthians 11:23-27).

Nobody was saying that Paul lacked intelligence. However, it did seem as if he did not use his intelligence well. He seemed to have allowed himself to become too eager (compare Acts 26:24-25). He cared too much about God and his (God's) message, and not enough about himself.

Paul had no real answer; if a *fool* behaves like that, then Paul had been a fool (2 Corinthians 12:11). **However, if that is the behaviour of a genuine servant of God, then Paul truly was serving God.** People considered Christ a fool, too (Mark 3:21) – and they also said much worse things about him. Paul had suffered much because of his relationship with Christ. It mattered little to Paul if people called him a fool (2 Corinthians 6:8-10).

Why Paul was so eager

(2 Corinthians 11:2)

Paul was *so eager* to serve God that he had lived in quite an extraordinary manner. Some people considered him a fool; Paul showed no desire to argue about that. Instead, he chose to explain why his attitudes were so eager.

In Ephesians 5:25-32, Paul describes Christians as **the bride of Christ**. That is not just a word-picture. Christians are beginning now a love relationship with Christ that will last always. Revelation 19:7-9 seems to describe their marriage, in heaven, as an actual future event.

In the Bible, a woman who marries for the first time should be a virgin (Deuteronomy 22:13-29). A virgin is a woman who has never had sex. That is God's ideal arrangement because then **the woman can be completely loyal to her husband** both before and during their marriage.

God considers it very wrong when husbands and wives are not loyal to each other in this matter (Exodus 20:14). The Bible often uses that as a word-picture for when people are not loyal to God (see for example Hosea chapters 1-3).

Paul had established the church in Corinth and God had given him responsibility for it (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). Many of its members became Christians because of Paul's work there.

People were now complaining that Paul's attitudes were wrong: he was too eager. Paul, however, could see *nothing wrong* in his attitudes. **A man who arranges a marriage for his friend is very eager.** He wants to make the best possible arrangements. If he does not do it because of duty, he does it because of honour, or because of love for his friend. Paul saw his work like that, and his greatest desire was to please Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9). So of course he was very eager. He wanted the Christians, as the bride of Christ, to be perfect for him.

The danger that a wrong idea may lead us away from Christ

(2 Corinthians 11:3)

Eve, the first woman, remained loyal to her husband but **she did not remain loyal to God**. She accepted the lies of *the devil*, who appeared to her as a *snake* (Genesis 3:1-13). That was how *sin* (evil deeds) entered the world. The effect of sin was to separate people from God (Isaiah 59:2) and to bring death into the world (Genesis 3:19).

It would be terrible for Christians to behave in the same way that Eve did. Christ died to free them from the power of sin and the devil. **It would be very wrong if they chose on purpose to use that freedom to serve the devil.**

However, when we do wrong things, we often do not act on purpose. Instead, like Eve, we start to believe something that is not true. We accept the *clever lies* of the devil, and so we do not trust God's word. Those lies have the power to cause the most severe trouble to our relationship with Christ.

We can see from the Book of 1 Corinthians how often **wrong and evil ideas** had already entered the church at Corinth. The source of these wrong beliefs was the devil, but often people brought these ideas to Corinth. The devil was using those people to do his work (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

That was especially true now, because **certain teachers, with wrong beliefs, had entered Corinth's church** (2 Corinthians 11:4-6). They were impressive men, who acted boldly (2 Corinthians 11:20). They tried to gain authority over people, and many Christians accepted them.

Paul saw that he must stand against those men. He had to try to protect weaker Christians from their wrong message. God had given Paul responsibility for those Christians, and Paul was eager to serve Christ well.

Another Jesus, a different gospel?

(2 Corinthians 11:4)

Soon after Paul established a new church in any town, other men followed him there. These men wanted to become the leaders of the new churches, and they seemed very impressive. They also seemed to have great knowledge, but in fact they were **very dangerous**. What they taught was seriously wrong. Also, they wanted to lead the churches for the wrong reasons: they wanted to become powerful, rich and important.

It was not easy for the new Christians to recognise that these men were dangerous. They spoke about the *same subjects* that Paul and the other genuine Christian leaders spoke about. These men who wanted to lead the churches often mentioned *Jesus*, and the *Holy Spirit*, and the *gospel* (God's message). In fact, they seemed to have knowledge about these subjects that Paul did not have. They considered Paul's messages too simple; they considered themselves to be much better teachers of God's word, the Bible.

So, many Christians accepted these men and believed their messages. These men even taught publicly in the church at Corinth. However, what they were teaching was *a lie* from the devil (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

These men said that they were teaching the gospel. However, **their gospel was so different from the true gospel that Paul could not even recognise it**. It was clearly not a message from God (see Galatians 1:6-9).

Similarly, Paul could not recognise what they were saying about Jesus and the Holy Spirit. **It was as if they had received another Jesus and another Spirit**.

These men were popular because their message was attractive. It seemed easier to follow them than to follow Christ. The people thought that they had found *a better way* to live as Christians – but they had actually chosen *the wrong way*.

The people that Paul called 'the superior apostles'

(2 Corinthians 11:5)

Paul refers to some men whom he calls 'superior apostles'. However, he explains that he did not really consider them superior. They were not teaching God's message better than he was teaching it. God was not working through them more powerfully than he worked through Paul.

An apostle means *a person that God has sent to carry out a special task for him*. We usually use that word as a title for *the first Christian leaders*. In verse 13, however, Paul uses the word to make a title for people who only pretended to be apostles. They were *false apostles*. God had not sent them with his message, and they were not even serving Christ.

In the opinion of many writers, by the 'superior apostles' Paul means the leaders of the apostles, such as Peter and John. They deserved honour. Paul himself wrote that he did not deserve to be called an apostle. However, God in his kindness had worked even more powerfully through Paul than through them (1 Corinthians 15:9-10). Paul's message was the same as theirs. If Paul was less important than them, he still declared God's message accurately. So in that way, they were not superior to Paul.

However, **it seems more likely to us that by the ‘superior apostles’, Paul actually means the false apostles.** They had come to Corinth and they were causing trouble there. They considered themselves superior because they were such *impressive* people. They spoke well and many people respected them greatly. They wanted to control the church and its members.

Paul warned the church strongly against those false apostles (2 Corinthians 11:12-15). They were not speaking the true message from God, the gospel. They were trying to *change* what the Christians believed (2 Corinthians 11:4). They were not superior to Paul in any real way; in fact, their message was dangerous.

Paul was an unskilled public speaker

(2 Corinthians 11:6)

Paul confesses here that, perhaps, he is **an unskilled public speaker**. That surprises us. However, it matches the description of him in 2 Corinthians 10:10.

We do not expect that description because Paul achieved so much in his work as a public speaker. By means of him, vast numbers of people heard God’s message, the gospel, for the first time. Many of them accepted it and they became Christians. Everywhere, people were talking about him (2 Corinthians 6:8-9). Even Paul’s enemies recognised the importance of his activities.

Paul cannot be referring to the effect of his speeches, so clearly he refers to **the style** of those speeches. **Paul did not speak like a professional speaker**. Instead, he tried to explain everything as *simply and clearly* as possible (2 Corinthians 4:2). His constant subjects were Christ and his death (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). He confesses that he spoke in *weakness and fear*. He tried on purpose **not to impress people** with his words. He acted in this manner because he wanted people to see only the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:3-5).

That contrasts strongly with the attitude of the teachers who wanted to control the church at Corinth. They wanted very much to impress people with their own (the teachers’) greatness. They laughed at Paul’s speeches because **they considered their own speeches so much more impressive**.

However, unlike them, **Paul knew what he was speaking about**. Paul had studied the Bible very carefully and he knew the power of God. He was not speaking clever words from his own mind, but wisdom that came from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:7-16). **By his words, which the teachers considered foolish, God was saving people** (1 Corinthians 1:18-27).

Paul refused any payment from Corinth’s Christians

(2 Corinthians 11:7-8)

Paul was warning Corinth’s Christians about some of the teachers who taught in their church. In many ways, it was difficult to identify those wrong teachers. They pretended to be servants of God (2 Corinthians 11:12-15). They used the same words as Paul used, but with different meanings (2 Corinthians 11:4)

However, there was one matter where it was easy to see the difference between them and Paul. **They had a completely different attitude about money**. Those teachers loved money. They were hoping to earn a lot of money from Corinth’s Christians. Probably, Corinth’s Christians had already given generously to them.

Paul, on the other hand, trusted God to provide his money (compare Philippians 4:19). Often, he carried out physical work to earn money: he made tents (Acts 18:3). Paul would not accept gifts or payments from the new Christians while he worked to establish Corinth's church. However, sometimes Christians from other churches travelled to bring a gift for Paul. Paul believed that God had sent those Christians to provide for him. So, Paul accepted those gifts. However, those gifts did not match Paul's principle in 2 Corinthians 8:13-14. He was taking money from other churches when Corinth's church could offer nothing in return. Therefore, Paul says that he was '*robbing*' those other churches. Paul does not mean that he was doing anything wrong. Those churches gave gladly because of their love for Paul and their desire to support God's work.

Of course **Paul was not wrong to refuse gifts and payments** from Corinth's Christians. He had a right to receive wages from them, but he also had the right to refuse (1 Corinthians 9:6-18). Paul did not want to charge anyone when he declared God's message, the gospel. He was glad that he had been able to do that.

How God provided for Paul

(2 Corinthians 11:9)

Jesus said that **God will provide for his people** (Matthew 6:24-33). Paul also believed that (Philippians 4:19); he trusted God to provide what he needed. Here, he gives an actual example of how that happened in his own experience.

Paul worked in Corinth for a period of 18 months (Acts 18:11). During that time, he made tents to earn his money (Acts 18:3). However, the work was clearly not constant. On this particular occasion, **Paul did not have enough money to buy what he needed.**

We do not know how desperate Paul's situation was. Paul knew what it means to be poor (Philippians 4:12). It seems that sometimes he could not even afford to buy food (2 Corinthians 6:5).

There were new Christians in Corinth who could have helped Paul. Paul was careful not to tell them about his situation. He was trusting God to help him.

Then **a group of Christians arrived in Corinth with a gift for Paul.** They had come from *Philippi in Macedonia*, as Philippians 4:15 shows. They could not have known how much Paul needed their help at that time. Philippi was about 300 miles (500 kilometres) from Corinth, and there was no easy way to send a message. Probably, Paul did not even expect them to come.

So, by means of those Christians and their kind gift, God provided for Paul. **Paul did not need to demand money from anyone.** In fact, he did not even need to accept gifts from Corinth's Christians. It is not wrong for a church leader to accept gifts or wages from the people that he teaches (1 Corinthians 9:9-11). However, God had not guided Paul to do that (2 Corinthians 12:14). So instead, God provided for Paul in other ways.

Paul boasts about how God provided for him

(2 Corinthians 11:10)

In 2 Corinthians 10:17, Paul wrote that a person should only **boast** (express pride) in the Lord (God). Now, however, Paul seems to boast in something that he himself has done. *He is proud of how he behaved towards the Christians in Corinth and its surrounding region, Achaia.* He refused to accept any money from them during the 18 months that he worked there. He was very pleased that he had acted in that manner (1 Corinthians 9:15-18). However, it was Paul who told us to boast only in the Lord. We would not expect Paul to boast about himself so soon afterwards.

The explanation is that Paul is not actually boasting about himself in 2 Corinthians 11:10. **He is boasting about the goodness of God.** God did not merely send Paul out to declare his message, the gospel. God also provided for Paul as Paul declared that message. Nobody in Corinth or in Achaia had to pay in order to hear that message. So by both his words and his actions, Paul showed them that the gospel is free. Christ's death for us is an act of God's grace (kindness), for which we cannot pay (Romans 4:1-5).

Of course Paul believed that Corinth's Christians should give for the work of God. Chapters 8 and 9 are his instructions about a gift that they intended to give. Paul had also taught them to pay properly those people who worked for God among them (1 Corinthians 9:9-11). However, Paul insisted that he himself would not accept such a payment from Corinth's Christians. Paul was not a rich man (Philippians 4:12), but he was trusting God to provide for him (compare Philippians 4:19). **He was sure that God would provide – he even boasted about it.**

Paul's love for the church at Corinth

(2 Corinthians 11:11)

Paul dealt with Corinth's Christians differently from how he dealt with the other churches. He would not accept any gift or payment from Corinth's Christians while he worked there. Perhaps for Paul that was not unusual. However, Paul said that *he would not in the future* accept any money from Corinth's Christians (2 Corinthians 11:9; 2 Corinthians 12:14). That was unusual. Even when Paul was in Corinth, he accepted personal gifts from the Christians in other churches (2 Corinthians 11:8-9).

That difference seemed difficult to explain. Corinth's Christians considered it an important matter, and they tried to understand it. They wanted to serve God well, and **they were eager to give for God's work** (2 Corinthians 9:1-2). In fact, if possible, they wanted to serve God even better than the other churches did (2 Corinthians 8:7). In their opinion, it seemed wrong that Paul did not allow them the opportunity to give to him (2 Corinthians 12:13). So, they began to think that Paul loved the other churches more than them.

In fact, Paul's real reason was the opposite, as God knew. **Paul loved the church in Corinth even more than he loved the other churches** (2 Corinthians 12:14-15). That is, God had caused him to care about the Christians there in a special way.

Perhaps we can see the reason for this special love from the history of Paul's life. In every place, Paul began his work among the Jews (people from Israel). After that, he would declare God's message to the Gentiles (people who were not Jews) who already respected God (Acts 17:4; Acts 17:17). **However, most of the Gentiles belonged to false religions and many of them lived in a very evil manner.** Paul cared very much about them (Galatians 2:7-8); but his work had little effect among them until he came to *Corinth*. There God saved many of them (Acts 18:10; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11), and he gave them new lives (2 Corinthians 5:17). So of course Paul cared especially for them. He even compared himself to a father who looks after his babies (1 Corinthians 3:1-2 and 4:15). Even now, a few years later, his responsibility for them had not ended (2 Corinthians 12:14-15).

The true character of some teachers who wanted power over the church

(2 Corinthians 11:12-13)

In 2 Corinthians, Paul refers often to **the teachers who were trying to gain authority over Corinth's church.** We know that they were impressive men, and skilled public speakers. However, Paul has told us that they were dangerous. They taught a false message about Jesus (2 Corinthians 11:4). Now, Paul will explain the true character of these men.

The original meaning of an 'apostle' was a servant whom a master sent to carry out an important task. These teachers called themselves '*apostles of Christ*'. Therefore, they were saying that Christ had sent them. It was not true; they were not genuinely serving Christ. **In fact, by their wrong lessons and their proud behaviour, they were serving the devil** (2 Corinthians 11:14-15).

We must not think that Paul was warning against all the teachers in Corinth's church. That was a very large church, with many members (Acts 18:10) and several teachers. God had genuinely appointed some people to be teachers there (1 Corinthians 12:28). Probably, some of those people served God well, and others made many mistakes. It is interesting to compare Paul's description of the false apostles here with 1 Corinthians 3:10-16. There, Paul spoke about *weak church leaders who would enter heaven without any reward*. God would save them, but they would receive no reward for their work.

Paul could not even promise that to these false apostles. It seems that they did not have a real relationship with God. They did not know Jesus; the Holy Spirit was not working in their lives; they had not believed God's message, the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:4). They worked in the churches, but they were not serving God.

It was not easy to identify these men, because they imitated the genuine apostles. However, it was essential for every Christian to recognise their evil work. That was because **these false apostles were leading people to hell, and not to heaven** (2 Corinthians 11:15).

The devil appears as an angel of light

(2 Corinthians 11:14)

Paul's statement that **Satan (the devil) may appear as an angel of light** is a shock to us. Perhaps we understand from such passages as Ezekiel 28:14-17 that Satan was once a leader of the angels (God's special servants in heaven). However, that was long ago. He opposed God and he lost his place in heaven. Now he behaves *like a fierce and terrible animal* as he fights against God and his (God's) people (1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 12:9).

An '**angel of light**' means a **splendid and wonderful angel; a holy servant of Christ** from whom, alone, true light comes (John 1:9). We would expect that we could trust such an angel completely – but we would be wrong (Galatians 1:8). We can place our trust in God alone; only he can save us (Psalm 62:1-8).

However, perhaps Paul's statement is not such a shock for us. **We all know the devil's character.** We know that he lies constantly (John 8:44). He causes the whole world to believe what is false (Revelation 12:9).

We know him well, because once we all served him. He never did what was right for any of us. He never encouraged any of his people to trust God or to believe his word. Instead, he constantly tempted us to do those things that lead people away from God. He even lied to us that those things were better for us. He told us that those things were good, or right, or sensible, or more pleasant (Proverbs 14:12). **It was all a lie.**

Now that we know God, we hate the devil and all his evil ways. Yet still the devil tempts us, and he still uses the same lies. **We must be firm and we must stand for God.** We must know God's word and we must ask him for his help (Matthew 6:13). We can only remain strong in our relationship with God by God's power (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

Church leaders who serve the devil

(2 Corinthians 11:15)

We cannot trust every person who declares himself to be a Christian leader or teacher. Sometimes the devil's servants do that, too. As God has appointed people to work in the churches (1 Corinthians 12:28), so the devil has appointed people. They carry out the devil's work on earth, and even in the churches.

You might think that it would be easy to recognise such people. However, it is not. The problem is in the impression that they give (Matthew 7:15). Even the devil can make himself seem splendid and wonderful (2 Corinthians 11:14). In the same manner, **people who serve the devil can seem to be good people.** They can seem honest, and sincere, and even holy. In fact, *they may genuinely be sincere*: such a person may even convince himself that he is a true Christian. A person may do wonderful things in Christ's name, but never know him (Matthew 7:21-23).

The teachers in Corinth, whom Paul warned about, had tried hard to impress people. They brought letters that recommended them. They spoke about the great things that they had achieved. They were skilled public speakers and powerful leaders. However, it should have been possible for the Christians to recognise them. **Every Christian should know the gospel, the message of how God saves people by the death of Christ.** These teachers declared a *false gospel* (2 Corinthians 11:4). So it was clear that the results of their work could only be bad (Matthew 7:16-20).

Paul added that these wrong and evil teachers were themselves in great danger. God knew the truth about these evil men, and his judgement would be against them because of their evil works. The devil's servants may find work in a church on earth, but **there is no place for them in heaven.**

Paul's answer to the proud words of powerful men

(2 Corinthians 11:16-18)

2 Corinthians 11:16 to 12:10 is one of the most extraordinary passages in Paul's letters. His purpose is to show that **a church leader should never be proud.** The passage forms a complete answer to the proud words of these people who were trying to gain authority over Corinth's church.

Those men were not depending on God, but upon themselves. They considered themselves truly great, and they wanted everyone else to think that about them, too. Actually, it was true that they were powerful, clever and impressive. However, they were leading people away from God (2 Corinthians 11:13) and so they caused great trouble in the churches (Acts 20:29-30).

Paul had to show that their proud words were foolish. To do that, Paul saw that, in this passage, he must speak like them. They spoke so proudly about the things that they had achieved; so Paul would do the same. **Usually, Paul would never speak about himself like that.** However, in this situation, it was necessary. Paul could only show by that means that *Christians must depend not on their own strength, but on God's strength.*

Church leaders do not need to be impressive and powerful people for God to work through them. In fact, the opposite is often true. God works through weak and unimportant people, and then God receives all the honour. It is often very difficult for strong, capable and important people to allow God to work in their lives. God will not work in the lives of proud people, or people who trust in their own greatness.

Humble people are people who consider God, and not themselves, to be truly great. Many people consider that to be **weakness** and, in this passage, Paul accepts that as a description of himself. However, really it is only humble people who can know true strength. That is because only a humble person can depend on the strength of God.

The powerful and cruel behaviour of some church leaders

(2 Corinthians 11:19-20)

The people who wanted to lead Corinth's church acted in a very powerful manner. They made rules in order to control the members; they took advantage of people. Sometimes they even used physical cruelty.

It astonished Paul that a church leader would ever behave like that. He considered it his duty to take care of people - and especially, weak people (2 Corinthians 11:29). He thought that a church leader should act with patience, kindness and love (2 Corinthians 6:6). When strict discipline was absolutely necessary against a church member, Paul dealt with the situation by prayer (1 Corinthians 5:3-5).

It astonished Paul even more to hear that the church members at Corinth accepted that wrong kind of authority. The people at that church cared very much about the freedom that God had given to them. They wanted to be free to do whatever the Holy Spirit directed them. **However, now it was other people, and not the Holy Spirit, who were taking control of their lives.**

Probably, those powerful people had lied that the Holy Spirit was guiding them to lead Corinth's church. Also, they lied that they had received a new gospel, a new message from God (2 Corinthians 11:4). They wanted to replace what Paul had taught with their own ideas.

It was not wise to allow people like that to have authority in Corinth's church. Those powerful people were foolish because they were not serving God. They even considered Paul weak because he did not behave like them.

By the standards of the powerful rulers in this world, Paul's behaviour was weakness. However, Christ has different standards for how leaders should behave (Mark 10:42-44).

Paul too will speak proudly – but only about his weakness

(2 Corinthians 11:21)

The people who wanted to lead Corinth's church dared **to speak boldly** about themselves. So, Paul dares to do that, too. He considers it foolish to speak like that. However, he does it in order to show how foolish it is.

Those people spoke like that in order to show their greatness. Paul does it to show his weakness. That makes his list of the things that he achieved very strange. He leaves out anything that might cause people to give honour to him. He wants his readers to see how great God is. God is so great that he works through a man like Paul. Therefore, all honour should go to God for Paul's work.

So, Paul begins with his family history (2 Corinthians 11:22). He **does not mention** the fact that he had the *honour* to be born as a citizen of Rome (Acts 22:27-28). Nor does he refer to his *education* (Acts 22:3; Acts 26:24) or his *importance* before he became a Christian (Acts 22:4-5).

Next, Paul writes about his work to serve Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). Perhaps Paul could tell us *how many people's lives God changed* because of his (Paul's) work (for example Acts 18:7-11). He could describe *how powerfully* God acted on his behalf (for example Acts 16:23-28). Instead, Paul only records his **troubles**. He does not even mention the *many churches* that he established. He only mentions the **strain** that they caused him (2 Corinthians 11:28-29).

Paul's final subject is the wonderful things that God shows to his people (2 Corinthians 12:1-9). He does not record how Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 22:6-11). Nor does he record how Christ - and not any man - taught the gospel (God's good news) to him (Galatians 1:11-12; compare 1 Corinthians 11:23). Instead, Paul expresses pride in *what God showed to another man*, but not to Paul himself. Then Paul tells of how God promised him strength for his **weakness**.

So, in the end, Paul expresses pride in his weakness. That is because, **in Paul's weak state, Christ's power could work through him** (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Paul is a Jew

(2 Corinthians 11:22)

All the first Christians were Jews. Therefore, of course, **all the original leaders and teachers in the churches were Jews**. The Jews are the people from Abraham's family who belong to the nation called Israel. Paul was a Jew; so were Jesus and all the apostles (first Christian leaders).

The teachers who wanted to control the church at Corinth were also Jews. Those teachers considered that fact important. They were explaining why they should have authority over the ordinary church members. **Most of the church members at Corinth were not Jews**. They respected greatly those Christians who were also Jews.

Paul was warning Corinth's Christians about those teachers and their wrong use of authority. The Christians respected those teachers because they were Jews; therefore, they should respect Paul's advice, too. Paul reminds them that he too is a Jew. He explains it in *three different ways*, perhaps to emphasise his meaning. A '**Hebrew**' means a Jew; but especially one that uses the *language and culture* of Israel (Philippians 3:5). Many Jews at that time preferred the language and culture of Greece (Acts 6:1).

Israel was the name that God gave to Jacob (Genesis 32:28). It became the name of the Jews *as a nation*. For Paul, that title may express their rights to a place in the country that God has promised them (Romans 11:26).

Paul's last title for the Jews shows their **relationship with Abraham**. They have *the benefit of God's promises* to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). God wants to use them to show his kindness to people from every nation.

However, none of these things gave those wrong teachers the right to lead Corinth's church. The man whom God really had sent to Corinth's church at that time was Titus (2 Corinthians 8:16-17). Titus was not a Jew (Galatians 2:3).

Paul, the servant of Christ

(2 Corinthians 11:23)

Paul is comparing himself with the men who wanted to control the church at Corinth. He next asks whether they are **servants of Christ**. If not, then they are not genuine Christians and they should not lead any church.

Of course they *claimed* to be servants of Christ. Paul has already shown that he does not believe it (verses 13-15). Therefore, Paul cannot reply, as in verse 22, that he is the *same* as them. So instead he replies that he is *more* of a servant of Christ than them.

Paul clearly does not like this kind of language. Either a person serves God or he serves the devil (Matthew 6:24). **No servant of Christ has the right to consider himself greater than any other servant of Christ**. Only God can make such judgements.

However, **Paul knew that he had worked harder for Christ than anyone else** (1 Corinthians 15:10). Certainly, he served Christ better than the men who wanted to lead Corinth's church. Paul worked constantly. He did not just speak with people about Christ; he also carried out hard physical work (2 Thessalonians 3:7-8).

Paul also suffered much more than other people did. It would be interesting to know the opinions of the men who wanted to lead Corinth's church, about that. Perhaps they would have been proud to tell of such an adventure. Or perhaps they would have felt ashamed.

Paul suffered because **he was serving Christ loyally.** He did not even try to count how often he had been in prison. It is interesting to see that the Book of Acts records only one occasion until this time (Acts 16:22-24). Clearly, there were many more, which the Book of Acts does not record. Nor does it record all the occasions when people beat Paul. We will find out more about those experiences in verses 24 and 25.

The punishments that Paul suffered

(2 Corinthians 11:24)

This brief account of Paul's experiences helps us to see how complex and difficult Paul's life was. The Book of Acts, like any history, can only record some of the main events.

Jesus taught his disciples (students), **when people attacked them in one place, to escape to the next place** (Matthew 10:23). That really was how Paul, and many of the first Christians lived. They saw that there was no place for them in this world (Hebrews 11:38). They remembered that God has prepared a city, the New Jerusalem, for them (Hebrews 11:16). So when troubles came, they simply moved on. They did not complain or try to fight back (1 Corinthians 4:11-13). They knew that there was room for them in heaven (John 14:2).

Sometimes *a judge* ordered that Paul should suffer as a criminal. Sometimes *a crowd of people* attacked him wildly in their anger. Of course, Paul was not a criminal and he deserved no punishment. He suffered only because, as a Christian, he declared God's message.

The Jews (people from Paul's own nation, Israel) punished Paul on several occasions. However, because of God's law and their traditions, they usually punished him **less severely** than other people did. Deuteronomy 25:3 only permitted them to beat a man 40 times. It was the custom never to do that, but only to beat the criminal 39 times. Paul tells us that he suffered that particular punishment on 5 separate occasions.

After such troubles, Paul, and the other Christians, obeyed Jesus' instruction. **They went to the next town, and they declared God's message there.** That was how the message about Jesus spread so quickly at that time. In each place, people heard about Jesus, and some of them chose to invite him into their own lives.

Paul's troubles: cruelty from people, danger at sea

(2 Corinthians 11:25)

Paul continues to record how much he had suffered as a servant of Christ. It is a difficult and painful passage - even for us, as we merely read it. Paul was not popular, and very many people did not respect him. They hated him and his message. **They considered that he deserved nothing but cruelty.**

Paul's message was for people from every nation, and people from many different nations attacked him. He has mentioned his own people, the Jews, in verse 24; he will mention the Gentiles (people who are not Jews) in verse 26.

The Book of Acts mentions only a few of the experiences that Paul mentions here. However, we do have a record of the event when people *threw stones* at Paul. That happened in **Lystra** (Acts 14:19). There, both Jews and Gentiles were in the crowd that attacked Paul. They almost killed him; in fact, everyone thought that he had died. Afterwards, a group of Christians gathered round Paul's body, perhaps to pray, or perhaps to bury him. That was when God gave Paul the strength to get up again.

It was not just people who put Paul's life in danger. He suffered similarly from **storms at sea**. We could refer to Paul's frequent journeys here; to travel by sea was not safe or easy. However, people believed that storms at sea were often the work of evil spirits. Perhaps Paul was saying that *evil spirits*, as well as people, wanted to kill him.

On three occasions, storms had destroyed the boats in which Paul was travelling. Once, Paul floated on wood from a boat for a day and a night before he reached a safe place. All these events happened before the experience that Acts chapter 27 records.

The dangers of Paul's journeys

(2 Corinthians 11:26)

Paul continues to describe his experiences as he served Christ. Most of verse 26 is about his journeys and their dangers.

It is difficult for us today to understand how dangerous travel was in the ancient world. Although Paul could ride a horse (Acts 23:24), he probably usually *walked* between towns. It would often be necessary for him **to cross rivers and streams**. There were few bridges. People usually paid a local guide to show them *a shallow place* where they could get across the water. However, rivers become deeper after rain, and the safest places were not often easy to find.

Large groups of **robbers** often controlled the open areas between towns. They often attacked and killed people. Jesus' description of such an attack (Luke 10:30) would have been very familiar to everyone.

Paul was no safer *at home* than he was when *abroad*. Crowds of people would attack him in the *city*; robbers would attack him in the *open country*. There seemed no escape. Paul could only avoid such dangers *at sea*. However, as verse 25 says, Paul was in constant danger at sea, too.

Paul could not even trust those people who claimed to be Christians. Perhaps they too were robbers, who wanted to gain his confidence. Perhaps it was a plan to hand him over to his enemies. Sometimes people wanted *power in the spirit world* (Acts 19:13). Sometimes they wanted a more natural kind of power: *to gain control over the Christians*. The people who were doing that in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:12-15) probably wanted to gain importance, wealth and honour from the Christians. So those people lied about their own relationship with Christ (2 Corinthians 11:4).

Paul's weakness

(2 Corinthians 11:27)

As we read this list, **Paul wants us to see his weakness, not his strength.** He does not want to seem like some kind of hero. Although he was quite a strong man, his body was constantly too weak during his troubles. He was unable to deal with these troubles in his own strength. He had to depend entirely on the power of God.

Paul's subject in verse 27 is **how much his body suffered** from these daily troubles. He does not mention the *pain* that his enemies caused him - perhaps he has said enough about that in verses 23-25. Instead in verse 27 he writes about the *ordinary troubles* of a hard life. Paul had not escaped the troubles that other people suffer.

Paul did not want to take money from people while he was urging them to become Christians. He probably thought that would give them a wrong impression about God's message, the gospel. So, as he established new churches, **he worked** to earn his money; he made tents. Here, he explains that this work was *hard*. In fact, it was so hard that he often had **to stay awake** at night, to complete his work (1 Thessalonians 2:9).

Even that kind of hard work did not always provide enough for Paul. Sometimes he did not have enough food (Philippians 4:12). He knew **hunger** often.

Sometimes also Paul had been **desperate for water** to drink. He had lived in desert regions like Arabia (Galatians 1:17). Often on his journeys it would be difficult to find fresh, clean water.

Paul could not always find a suitable place to sleep. Often, he would have slept outside, even in Winter. His body felt the **cold**, and **he did not always have enough clothes** (compare 2 Timothy 4:13). When people attacked Paul, his clothes might tear badly. It was usual for robbers to steal even the clothes that a person was wearing (Luke 10:30).

The strain of a church leader

(2 Corinthians 11:28)

In most of the towns where Paul established churches, he remained only for a few days. He declared the gospel (God's message about Christ) in public, and some people accepted it. They joined together to form the new church. Paul advised them, then he left for the next town. He could only promise to return if God so directed him (for example Acts 18:21).

Sometimes Paul sent his companions to work in those churches, or sometimes other Christians went to help them. However, the Christians in those churches loved Paul, and they continued to respect him as their leader (Acts 20:17-37). Often, the churches would send people to visit Paul, and especially if they needed his advice.

Paul saw that God had given him responsibility for those churches. Paul considered their troubles to be his own troubles (2 Corinthians 2:4). He prayed much for them; he very much wanted to help them (2 Corinthians 12:15).

Many people would love to be important like that. However, people who love to be important care more about themselves, than about other people. Especially, they do not care about the poorest and weakest people.

Paul felt very great strain, because he really did care about all those people. For Paul, that pressure felt very much like the pain that his other troubles caused him (2 Corinthians 2:1-4).

Church leaders today often think more about the organisation of the churches than the people. Paul recognised that good organisation is important (see the Books of 1 Timothy and Titus). However, verse 29 shows that **he cared about each person**. He actually felt the weakness of a Christian who was weak. It upset Paul if something tempted a Christian to do wrong things.

The cause of a church leader's strain

(2 Corinthians 11:29)

It is not easy to lead a church well. There is a feeling of strain that affects the leader's emotions deeply. Paul was very aware of that strain and how it affected him.

The cause of that strain is **the responsibility that the leader has towards the people**. For example, it is *not difficult* for someone to speak about a matter of no importance in public. However, a church leader should be declaring **a message from God that can change people's lives**. That is an extremely serious responsibility.

When church leaders do not care about the people, they do not feel that strain. However, that is a wrong attitude for any church leader to have. Jesus told Peter that a church leader should be like a shepherd (a person who looks after sheep) - John 21:15-17. A church leader is responsible for *people*; he is not just responsible to run his organisation well. A shepherd must show special care to the weakest of his sheep. In the same manner, **the weakest Christians need more help from their church leader**.

Many church leaders increase the strain by their own *unwise choices and actions*. For example, they may be anxious to impress people. They may be too proud to ask for advice and help from leaders who have more experience. They may try to act without enough prayer. They may try to advise people when they do not have enough knowledge. They may want to do things that God has not guided them to do. Such behaviour causes great strain.

Paul knew the strain of those anxious thoughts; but, like Peter (1 Peter 5:7), Paul knew how God wanted him to deal with them. Paul's letters show that **he was constantly praying for the churches and their members**. Perhaps Paul's *anxious thoughts* show his weakness - but his *many prayers* show that God gave him the strength to deal with that weakness.

Paul's escape from Damascus

(2 Corinthians 11:30-33)

Paul insisted that **he must speak proudly only about his weakness**. That seems extraordinary. Other people speak proudly about *their own greatness or strength*. Therefore, Paul was doing *the opposite* of what people usually do. Perhaps Paul includes this last incident in chapter 11 to show what he means. Paul has not placed the incidents in this chapter in the order of their dates. Actually, Paul's escape from Damascus was **one of his earliest experiences as a Christian**. Acts 9:23-25 also describes this event.

Paul begins his description of this event with what seems like a reference to his own importance. **The ruler of one of the most important cities in the world had heard about Paul's activities**. Damascus, the capital city of Syria, has been an important city for several thousand years (Genesis 15:2). Paul was speaking about Jesus so powerfully there (Acts 9:22), that he (Paul) had upset people across the whole city.

Like most ancient cities, a wall surrounded Damascus. The ruler personally ordered guards to stand at each gate in order to arrest Paul. However, Paul's manner of escape was not a great thing. **Probably, Paul felt very ashamed to have to hide in a basket.** The other Christians lifted the basket through a window in the city wall. Then they lowered Paul, in the basket, to the ground.

So, early in Paul's Christian life, Paul had seen his own weakness. **He was as weak as anyone else was.** It would be foolish for him to imagine himself great: only God is truly great. If the ruler of Damascus had arrested Paul, perhaps Paul's life would have ended that day. It was only by God's strength that Paul was even alive. Therefore, it was Paul's duty to serve God in the strength that God gave to him.

2 Corinthians chapter 12

Proper attitudes if God shows us secret and special things

(2 Corinthians 12:1)

It astonished Paul to hear about the pride of some people who wanted to teach in Corinth's church. It was bad enough that they were proud of their own importance. They were so pleased to tell everyone about the things that they had achieved. They considered that those things made them much greater than everyone else.

However, that was not the end of their proud words. **Those same people also spoke very proudly about the things that God had shown them.** They said that God had shown them *secret*, or *special* things. Paul does not here discuss whether God really had shown them these things. Elsewhere, he warns that they were not truly serving God (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). He also says that they were teaching wrong things (2 Corinthians 11:4).

However, **if God really had shown them great things, they ought not to be proud about it.** It would be no reason for them to consider themselves better than the other Christians. Instead, what God had shown them should cause them to respect God more. Then they would want to serve weaker Christians, and not to control them. Paul tried hard to have pride only in what God has done (2 Corinthians 10:17). He knew that he must not be proud about himself. God had spoken to Paul on several occasions, and God often did astonishing things by means of Paul. **Paul gave the honour to God; he did not claim any honour for himself.** These things were much too sacred for Paul to speak proudly about.

However, other people spoke proudly about such things, so Paul must speak about them too. He did not want any honour for himself. **He wrote about these things to show that all the honour for them belongs to God alone.**

The man who visited the 'third heaven'

(2 Corinthians 12:2-4)

About 14 years before Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he had begun to teach in the church at Antioch (Acts 11:25-30). Several prophets came to Antioch at that time. A prophet is someone who receives messages from God. Clearly, a prophet should have an especially close relationship with God, and he should spend much time in prayer. Perhaps, therefore, the experience that Paul records here was the experience of one of those prophets.

Paul says that the man entered the 'third heaven'. The word for *heaven* can mean simply the sky, but Paul meant somewhere higher than that. It was above the 'heaven' (sky) where birds fly. It was even above the 'heaven' (sky) where the stars are.

The man entered heaven, but his body had not died. Paul was unsure whether the man's body entered heaven during this experience. Perhaps only the man's spirit went there. At death, the spirits of God's people enter heaven, but of course their bodies remain on the earth. Perhaps something similar happened to this man - but the man was not dead. **The man entered heaven, then he returned, and Paul knew him.** Clearly, Paul heard from the man about his experience. However, the man could not tell Paul everything. Some things were *too wonderful* to explain (compare Revelation 10:4).

Paul does not record anything more about this man's astonishing experience. Clearly, Paul considers it **one of the most wonderful experiences that he has ever heard about.** It probably encouraged Paul much to hear the man's report about heaven. Maybe it was important for Paul to hear that as Paul began his special work for God.

People often say that, really, this was one of Paul's own experiences. However, Paul never says that. In fact, he seems to say the opposite in verse 5.

Paul refuses to speak proudly about himself

(2 Corinthians 12:5)

Paul has just described one of the most wonderful experiences that a Christian could have (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). It was a very special and sacred experience in that man's relationship with God. That man actually saw and heard things that were happening inside heaven.

Paul insisted that it would be very wrong to speak proudly about such experiences. **He too had known some very wonderful experiences** during his Christian life (for example, Acts 9:1-7). Sometimes he even considered it right to tell people about those experiences (Acts 22:6-11; Acts 26:13-18). However, he would never speak about those experiences in a proud manner, in order to impress people.

Paul could tell people about another man's experience, because Paul gained no honour by it. There was no possible advantage for Paul when he spoke about someone else. However, it was dangerous for Paul when he spoke about *his own* experiences. He had to be careful not to take for himself the honour that belongs to God alone.

With great care, therefore, Paul might speak about his own experiences when God guided him to do that. God had shown Paul some wonderful things, but Paul must not become proud. Especially, Paul must not use those experiences to try to gain authority, honour, importance or other advantages from people.

However, Paul did not need to be so careful when he spoke about his weaknesses. Paul could not become proud of his weaknesses, and these things would impress nobody. People would see Paul as an ordinary man, whom God was using in an extraordinary way. Therefore, they would praise God - and not Paul - for the wonderful things that God was doing in Paul's life.

The right impression

(2 Corinthians 12:6)

We have said much about the **men who were wrongly trying to gain authority** over the church at Corinth. Those men wanted very much to create *a good impression* of themselves.

A good church leader also wants to create *a good impression*. Like Paul, he may not care what people think about him (2 Corinthians 13:7). However, a good church leader still wants people to trust his message. So it still matters whether people have a good, or a bad, impression.

The difference, therefore, is not the *desire* to create a good impression. **The difference is the methods that the leader uses to create that impression.** An evil person uses whatever methods achieve his purpose. He does not care whether he speaks lies or the truth. A good person uses only those methods that please God (2 Corinthians 5:9). Therefore, he can only speak the truth (2 Corinthians 4:2).

Paul saw that God wants his people to live by even better standards than that. **Sometimes it is not good enough only to speak the truth.**

For example, the men who wanted to control Corinth's church spoke proudly about their own experiences. They saw it as an easy way to impress people. Probably, not everything that they said was actually true.

Paul saw that he could *impress* people like that, too. If he did, **he would still be speaking the truth.** He really did have the most astonishing experiences as he served God. God really had shown him wonderful things. **However, Paul refused to speak proudly about himself.**

Paul wanted people to form **their own impression** of him and his message. He wanted them to examine his words and to find out whether they were true. He wanted them to examine his life, to see whether he truly was a servant of God. Paul did not want to control people by clever or powerful words (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). The people might see Paul's weakness, but they would also see the power of God.

Paul's thorn in the flesh

(2 Corinthians 12:7)

Christians often discuss what Paul meant by his '**thorn in the flesh**'.

Paul's word for a '*thorn*' actually means any kind of sharp point. However, it refers especially to those that grow on certain plants. The '*flesh*' means the soft parts of the human body. Paul uses that word frequently as a word-picture, to refer to human weakness (for example, Galatians 5:13-19).

Paul is using the phrase, '*thorn in the flesh*', as a word-picture. He explains what he actually means in the next phrase. He meant **one of Satan's (the devil's) special servants, the demons.** That demon could not possess Paul; it could not control him. However, **the demon constantly caused him trouble.** In other words, the devil was constantly attacking Paul by means of this evil spirit. It hurt Paul, probably in Paul's mind or body - and it would not go away. That was why Paul described it as a '*thorn in the flesh*'.

Because of the devil's attacks, Paul was constantly aware of how weak he (Paul) was. God was at the same time showing Paul such wonderful things. Paul very much wanted to be free from those troubles so that he could enjoy fully these experiences with God. Paul has already told us about a man who rose into heaven (verses 2-4). It would have satisfied Paul if he could just rise above (or, be free from) his troubles. However, it was as if the devil was constantly pulling him back down.

Paul did not like those troubles, and their source was evil: they came from the devil himself. However, those troubles helped Paul not to become proud. **Paul could not become proud when he was so aware of his weakness.** Instead, in his troubles, he became more and more aware that **he must depend completely on God.** Also, **Paul had to give God the honour** for the wonderful things that God was showing to him.

How Paul prayed about his troubles

(2 Corinthians 12:8)

Sometimes Christians refuse to pray that God will save (rescue) them from a particular trouble. They say that God has sent them that trouble for some reason, for example, to teach them patience. Often, they will refer to this passage to support their belief. Their trouble is like Paul's experience, they say.

However, it is clear from this passage that **Paul's opinions and actions differed very much from theirs.**

Firstly, **Paul never said that God caused him this trouble.** In fact, Paul said that its cause was one of the devil's special servants, *a demon* (verse 7). God permitted Satan to attack Paul, as he had permitted Satan to attack Job (Job chapters 1 and 2). Paul understood that this trouble was something evil, not something good. God never does any evil thing (James 1:17). Therefore, God was not responsible either for Paul's troubles or for Job's troubles.

Secondly, **Paul did pray for God's help.** In fact, he prayed much about this matter. He knew that he must pray against the devil's work. Paul continued to pray until God answered his prayer.

However, God did not answer the prayer in the manner that Paul had wanted. This trouble made Paul aware of his weakness, and Paul wanted to be free from that weakness. God would not allow that. Instead, **God showed Paul that Paul must depend on God's grace, his special kindness.** Paul would know the strength that he needed to deal with these troubles - but that strength would not come from Paul. Instead, Paul would know the strength of Christ, who would work in him and through him.

For as long as Paul lived on this earth, the devil would continue to attack him. So Paul would continue to know the *weakness in himself* that those attacks caused. However, at the same time Paul would know the **strength of Christ**, who was living in him (2 Corinthians 4:6-10).

God's grace is sufficient

(2 Corinthians 12:9)

God made a wonderful promise to Paul; and God makes the same promise to all of his (God's) people. **They do not have to depend on their own resources**, for example, their strength, skills, intelligence or money. **They only need to depend on God, and upon his kindness (grace)**. All that they need comes from him.

God's people need that promise, because their own resources may fail. Even the strongest person can quickly become weak. An intelligent person may not know what to do. A rich person may lose his money. A healthy person may become ill. However, **God's grace (kindness) never fails** (Lamentations 3:22-23). In every situation, his kindness satisfies us completely.

Let us remind ourselves about **how God showed his kindness** to us. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. When we were still God's enemies, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8). Christ suffered that punishment so that God could forgive our sins (wrong and evil deeds).

God's kindness to us did not end with Christ's death. Each of us had wandered far away from God; but **God worked in our lives to bring us back to him** (Luke 15:3-7; Psalm 119:176). God's grace (kindness) to Paul astonished him (1 Timothy 1:12-14); and his grace in our lives should astonish us, too (John 1:16).

When we have received a right relationship with God, **his grace (kindness) is constantly working in our lives** (1 Corinthians 15:10). His grace works both in us, and through us. It works *in us*, because **Christ lives in us** (Colossians 1:27). Therefore, his strength is in our lives, even when we ourselves are weak. Also, his grace works *through us*, to benefit other people. That happens when God uses us to bring other people into a right relationship with him.

When I am weak, then I am strong

(2 Corinthians 12:10)

Paul has shown the real difference between himself and the men who wanted to control Corinth's church.

Those men were **so proud of their own strength**. That included their strong character, their bold actions, their impressive speeches, and the powerful effect that they had on other people. They considered themselves *great men*, who deserved to be *important leaders*. **Paul, on the other hand, did not desire that kind of strength**. Paul was not trying to control people - in fact, he did not even want to control his own life. He simply wanted to serve Christ loyally (1 Corinthians 3:5-7).

The men who wanted to control Corinth's church would have considered Paul's attitudes *very weak*. Paul only wanted people to see the power of God; Paul really did not care whether people respected him or not.

So, Paul chose not to be the strong leader that people expected him to be. However, **God was still working very powerfully** through his life (verse 12). In fact, God worked so powerfully in Paul's life *because* Paul served God so humbly. In other words, Paul loyally obeyed God in every situation. **What other people considered Paul's weakness, was in fact strength**.

Paul was pleased to serve God when God worked powerfully through him. However, Paul was also pleased to serve God when Paul suffered because of his relationship with Christ. In such situations, Paul often felt the weakness of his own body. Therefore, Paul realised that **he could not depend on himself, but only on Christ**. Paul needed great strength to stand firm for Christ during those troubles - but that strength could only come from Christ.

Why Paul wrote about himself

(2 Corinthians 12:11)

Paul was not a proud man, and he really did not want to write so much about himself (2 Corinthians 11:21 to 12:10). He does not do that in his other letters. In the Book of 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul wrote only two verses about his current situation at Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:8-9).

However, **the attitude of Corinth's Christians had forced Paul to write about himself**. If the problem had only been a matter of Paul's *honour*, Paul would not have written like that. Paul did not need to defend himself. God knew the truth about him - and so did Corinth's Christians (2 Corinthians 3:1-3). Paul was not claiming *authority* over Corinth's church; he did not need to do that, because God had already given him authority (2 Corinthians 10:8).

The real reason why Paul wrote about himself was to protect Corinth's Christians. He cared very much about them, and God had given him responsibility for them (2 Corinthians 12:14-15). He had heard reports about the teachers who wanted to control their church. He knew that many of those teachers were not teaching the true message about Christ (2 Corinthians 11:4). He also knew that Corinth's Christians were eager to serve Christ well in every way (2 Corinthians 8:7). They were so *eager* that they had accepted those evil teachers as genuine servants of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:1-20).

Paul would have much preferred to carry out his work for God quietly, so that only God would see it (see Matthew 6:1-18). However, **he had to show how his attitudes and his actions differed from those evil teachers**. All the apostles (first Christian leaders) and all Paul's companions behaved like him (2 Corinthians 6:3-10). Their attitudes were like his attitudes. That is the correct way for a servant of God to think and to act.

The wonderful things that God did at Corinth

(2 Corinthians 12:12)

The apostles were the men whom God sent to establish the first Christian churches. Paul did not claim to be a great apostle; he even described himself as *the least important* apostle (1 Corinthians 15:9). However, he did insist that God had sent him. Paul even described himself as *'nothing'* (2 Corinthians 12:11). **He meant that he had no desire to impress anyone**. He did not want Christians to be loyal to him, but to Christ (1 Corinthians 1:12-13). Paul considered himself to be a servant of Christ (Philippians 1:1). It was Paul's duty, therefore, always to obey Christ. God had given great responsibility to Paul in his work for Christ. However, Paul's work could only be successful when God worked through him.

So, when Paul declared God's message in Corinth, God worked powerfully there (Acts 18:1-18). It was important for Corinth's Christians to know that fact. They needed to be strong and to remain loyal to God when people declared different messages to them (2 Corinthians 11:4). **God had done some very wonderful things in Corinth, and these things had happened in public.** The Book of Acts does not record these incidents in Corinth, but all of Corinth's Christians would know about them. Probably, God had cured ill people. Blind people were able to see; deaf people were able to hear. God had freed people from the power of evil spirits. That was clear evidence that God was working (Hebrews 2:4). **What God was doing through the other apostles, he was doing through Paul.**

Paul only mentions this subject briefly. It is more important to know God and to serve him than to do these wonderful things (Acts 19:13-16; 1 Corinthians 13:2). However, when God does such a thing, we must be careful always to give him the honour for it.

Corinth's Christians lost nothing when Paul refused their gifts

(2 Corinthians 12:13)

Paul returns to the subject which he was discussing earlier in his letter (2 Corinthians 11:7-11). When he was in Corinth, **he refused to accept any personal gifts or payments** from the new Christians there. That worried Corinth's Christians. They could not understand why Paul would accept gifts from other Christians, but not from them.

Some people had the idea that Paul did not really care about their church. That was clearly wrong. Paul remained in Corinth for 18 months while he established that church (Acts 18:11). That was longer than any other place except Ephesus. The reality was that he loved Corinth's church even more than the other churches (2 Corinthians 11:11; 2 Corinthians 12:15).

Corinth's Christians thought that Paul was wrong to refuse those gifts. Paul clearly did not believe that; he insisted that he would continue to act in the same way (2 Corinthians 12:14-15). Paul asked them to 'forgive' him, but his word for 'forgive' really means to *show kindness*. He was asking them to *think kindly* about him, and not to accuse him about this matter. He gladly gave everything to serve them and to help them. **They should think with kindness about the actions of someone who loved them so much.**

Perhaps Corinth's Christians still thought that Paul had shown greater kindness to the other churches than to them. If so, they certainly could not say the same about God's actions. He had worked as powerfully among them as he had at any other church (2 Corinthians 12:12). **If Paul had disappointed them, God had not.** So if Paul's actions about the gifts were wrong, Corinth's Christians had lost nothing. They had still received the gospel, God's message; and God's Spirit was still working powerfully in their lives.

Paul's return to Corinth

(2 Corinthians 12:14)

Paul had tried so often to return to Corinth, but the time was not right. Now, at last, because of Titus' report (2 Corinthians 7:6-7), Paul believed that the right time had come. **He would arrive there soon after the church had received this letter** (the Book of 2 Corinthians).

Again, Paul told the Christians that **he would not accept any personal gifts or payments** from them. That was how Paul had behaved during his first visit to Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:7-11). Often Paul would earn his money by physical work while he established a church (2 Thessalonians 3:8). However, afterwards he would accept their gifts (Philippians 4:14-18). So, he was behaving differently at Corinth.

Paul was continuing to refuse gifts from this particular church because of his special responsibility for them. Paul had compared that responsibility to a father's love for his young children (1 Corinthians 4:14-15). In other words, **God wanted Paul to look after them**. They needed help to deal with the remaining problems in their church. Especially, they needed to understand the difference between Paul's attitudes, and the attitudes of some teachers in their church. Those teachers were trying to get wealth, power and importance from the church members.

Paul told Corinth's Christians plainly why he would not accept any personal gifts from them. **God, whom Paul served, demanded not just their gifts, but their lives**. As God's servant, Paul could accept nothing less (2 Corinthians 11:2). Of course it was right for them to give, both for poor people (2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9) and for God's work (1 Corinthians 9:8-12). However, they themselves must give their lives completely to God - that is most important.

How Christians show love

(2 Corinthians 12:15)

In 1 Corinthians chapter 13, Paul explained what he meant by 'love'. He described there the perfect love that Christians should always show. We want to know how that kind of love showed in Paul's own life. For example, **how did Paul show love to Corinth's Christians; and how did he expect them to show love to him?**

The first part of the question is perhaps easier to answer. **Paul showed his love for Corinth's Christians by the way that he looked after them**. When they first became Christians, most of them knew nothing about the right way to serve God (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). Paul prayed for them constantly; he taught them carefully; he advised them patiently. No task to help them was too hard, if God gave Paul strength. No person was too weak or unimportant to receive Paul's full attention (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). Paul did all this for no personal advantage. He did it because of the love that God had given him for them.

Then we ask **how Paul expected Corinth's Christians to show their love for him**. Love must not be a selfish attitude: Paul did not love them so that they would love him. However, it seems natural that they should love him too (2 Corinthians 6:11-13).

Clearly, Paul did not expect Corinth's Christians to show love by their gifts to him. He had just said that he would refuse such gifts (2 Corinthians 12:14). Rather, Paul wanted to have the right effect on their lives (2 Corinthians 12:19-21). He was so eager for them to have a sincere and right relationship with Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). When they were not serving God properly, that upset Paul very much (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). Paul did not want to receive honour, importance, money or anything else from them. **He simply wanted them to develop in their relationship with Christ and to serve Christ loyally**. If they did those things, then they would be showing love to Paul as their leader, teacher and helper.

Paul asks the Christians to say whether he dealt wrongly with them

(2 Corinthians 12:16-18)

Samuel led Israel for several years, not as a king, but as its judge. Then the people urged him to appoint a king, so that they could be like the other nations. After Samuel had appointed King Saul, Samuel spoke very seriously to the people. It was his last public speech.

What the people had done was wrong. Samuel had always told them that they should allow God to rule their nation. So now Samuel asked them to say whether Samuel's own actions had caused them to make this wrong decision. If Samuel had dealt wrongly with anyone, that person should now give evidence against him.

The people replied that *Samuel had not taken unfair advantage of any of them*. He had cheated nobody (1 Samuel 12:1-5). **Therefore, the people were guilty when they would not allow God to rule their nation.**

Paul could see that he was in a similar situation. God had given him authority over the church at Corinth (2 Corinthians 10:8). However, the church members were trying to appoint new leaders, who seemed more powerful and impressive (2 Corinthians 11:20). These leaders did not teach the truth about God (2 Corinthians 11:4); in reality, they were serving the devil (2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

So Paul urged Corinth's Christians to think about how he had behaved towards them. They all knew that Paul had not cheated them. Nobody whom he had sent to them had dealt wrongly with them.

Therefore, Corinth's Christians should know that they were responsible for their own actions in this matter. They must not appoint church leaders whom God had not chosen. They must not allow anyone who was not serving God properly to lead their church. Even if they did not want to follow Paul's instructions, they must still accept God's authority over their church.

Paul was not defending himself

(2 Corinthians 12:19)

Paul did **not** write the Book of 2 Corinthians in order **to prove that he had authority** over the church at Corinth. He did **not** write it **to defend himself** against the people there who were saying wrong things about him. Some of the church members believed that Paul was writing to them for those reasons. However, they were wrong.

In Paul's work as a church leader, Paul was responsible to God, and not to the people. It was God who had appointed Paul; it was God whom Paul served. Paul's aim was not to please people, but to please God (2 Corinthians 5:9).

So when Paul wrote his letters, he said nothing for his own benefit or to defend himself. He thought only about his responsibility to God; he wrote only what God wanted him to write.

God gave Paul his authority so that Paul would make the Christians stronger, and not weaker (2 Corinthians 10:8). In the same manner, **God guided Paul in his letters to write those things that make Christians stronger**. God's desire is for Christians to develop and to become strong in their relationship with him (Hebrews 5:11-14). They need to learn to trust God more; they need to learn how they can serve God better. They need to develop good qualities, for example love, patience and kindness. They need to learn how to stand firm for Christ when they suffer troubles. They need their love for other people to increase, and to show that love in all their actions.

Many people today still find Paul's letters difficult to understand, for the same reason. They imagine that Paul was writing for his own selfish purposes. **However, Paul did not believe that Christians should do anything just for their own benefit**. In everything, they should serve God and they should try to help other people. That was how Paul always tried to live as a Christian.

Prepare for God to work among you

(2 Corinthians 12:20)

Paul wanted his return to Corinth to be a very joyful occasion (2 Corinthians 2:1-3). He intended to remain there for 3 months (1 Corinthians 16:5-7; Acts 20:2-3). He wanted to teach and to encourage Corinth's Christians. Probably, he hoped that many more people would become Christians during his visit.

However, Paul was very aware of the serious problems that had existed recently in Corinth's church. Only a few months previously, he had written to warn them about the opposing groups in the church (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). There were extremely serious arguments among the Christians (1 Corinthians 6:1-8). Church members were behaving wrongly towards each other, even at the church meetings (1 Corinthians 11:17-22).

Since then, Corinth's church members had worked hard to deal with those problems (2 Corinthians 7:6-16). Titus had done much to help them, and he was returning to Corinth immediately, to help them more.

Because of Titus's encouraging report, Paul had decided that he too would go back to Corinth soon. However, **Paul still worried that Corinth's Christians may not have dealt with their former problems completely**. Even if they had stopped their public arguments, they might still feel jealous and angry towards each other. Perhaps they still were selfish and proud; perhaps they spoke against each other in private. Perhaps their wrong behaviour in the church meetings had not ended, but merely paused.

Paul urged Corinth's Christians to deal with any such matters before his return. Each of them should examine the attitudes of his own heart and mind in front of God (2 Corinthians 13:5). If anything was wrong, they must change their thoughts, attitudes and behaviour (2 Corinthians 13:11). Otherwise Paul would have to deal strictly with them on his return (2 Corinthians 13:10). Then that occasion, which Paul wanted to be joyful, would in fact be serious and severe.

Stop your wrong behaviour and turn back to God

(2 Corinthians 12:21)

As we have said before, Paul wanted his return to Corinth to be a joyful occasion. However, Paul could not be happy if many of the church members were not behaving in a proper manner.

Before they became Christians, several of the members were carrying out wrong sex acts (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). God changed their lives completely when they became Christians (2 Corinthians 5:17). However, it is clear from Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 that **this wrong behaviour still tempted them**. He mentions *one man* whose evil acts were especially severe (1 Corinthians 5:1). However, Paul now says that **many of them were doing these wrong things**. So, he urges them to stop all this wrong behaviour and to turn back to God.

God had given Paul the serious responsibility for the churches where he worked (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). Paul thought of Corinth's Christians as if they were his children (1 Corinthians 4:14-15). Of course a father cannot be happy when his children are doing wrong things. So of course Paul would only be joyful if Corinth's Christians were serving God properly. It was not enough that their church was large and successful. **Paul wanted them to be loyal to God in both their hearts (minds) and their actions.**

If they were not, then Paul's return to Corinth would be a serious and sad occasion. Paul would spend his time there in *serious prayer* about the Christians who were not serving God. He would have to *act strictly* against them (2 Corinthians 13:1-2), as he did in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. His hope then would be that those serious actions would cause those people to return to God.

2 Corinthians chapter 13

Paul offers to act as judge

(2 Corinthians 13:1)

Paul had wanted to return to Corinth earlier (2 Corinthians 1:16). He did not go then because of the troubles in the church (2 Corinthians 2:1-2). However, now he had made a definite plan. Very soon, he would go there, even if problems remained in the church. **He would go with the authority that God had given him to deal with those matters.**

Paul knew how much the church members had argued in the past (1 Corinthians 6:1-6). So Paul warned them that he would not listen to gossip, or to stories about other people. In any such matter, **Paul needed to hear witnesses who were able to give their evidence in front of God.** The truth would become clear when the evidence of two or three witnesses was in agreement.

Paul repeated the words in Deuteronomy 19:15. That was **God's law about the evidence that Israel's judges should accept**. They should not declare a person guilty if only one witness spoke against him. The evidence of two or three witnesses was necessary.

Paul had complained that nobody in the church was acting as the judge of such matters (1 Corinthians 6:1-4). If it was really necessary, he himself would do it. However, Paul still hoped that it would not be necessary. **He urged each person to examine his own attitudes and actions in front of God.** There was still time, before Paul's return, for members who had done wrong things to turn back to God. Paul knew that the Christians in Corinth were sincere and eager people (2 Corinthians 8:7). He urged them to be eager to deal with the problems that remained in their church (2 Corinthians 13:11).

Paul was ready to deal with the wrong behaviour of Christians

(2 Corinthians 13:2)

Paul repeats what he has said before. **On his return to Corinth he will deal firmly with those people who are causing trouble in the church.**

Many Bible translations say that Paul warned them about this during his *second visit*. However, that does not match the records that we have about Paul's visits to Corinth. The Bible only describes Paul's original visit there, in Acts 18:1-18. In 2 Corinthians 1:23, Paul seems to say that he has not yet returned to Corinth.

Perhaps, therefore, Paul's reference to the 'second time' (2 Corinthians 13:2) has a different meaning. Perhaps Paul warned them **as if he was present on a second occasion**. That is a possible translation of Paul's words, and it matches the facts.

We can see how and when Paul did that, in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. There, Paul told the church to deal with a member who was guilty of wrong sex acts. He urged the church to join with him in prayer against that man and his evil behaviour. Paul was absent from them at that time. However, *in spirit he was present* with them because he was agreeing with them in prayer. So, **Paul and the church had dealt with the matter together, as if he had been present with them.**

Paul wanted to deal with that man at once, because his wrong behaviour had been so severe. However, **many other church members** needed to change their attitudes and actions too (2 Corinthians 12:21). Paul wanted them to learn from what happened to that man. Paul hoped that they would turn back to God themselves; then Paul would not have to use his authority against them (2 Corinthians 13:10). However, if they did not do that, Paul was ready to act against them. He would deal with them *in prayer*, and perhaps he would have to *send them away* from the church. Paul hoped and prayed that these actions would cause these people to return to God in the end.

When leaders must be firm and powerful

(2 Corinthians 13:3)

Corinth's Christians very much wanted to see **the power of God**. For a time, they confused it with *the actions of powerful men* who wanted to control them (2 Corinthians 11:20). Probably, the Christians made that mistake because they had not really understood God's power in their own lives. They considered Paul weak; they even doubted that he really had brought Christ's message to them.

Their error was to concentrate too much on the things that they could see and feel. Their problem with Paul was simply that he did not impress them enough (2 Corinthians 10:10).

Paul, on the other hand, believed that **church leaders should normally be humble, gentle and patient** (2 Corinthians 10:1). He understood that God is working powerfully inside his people (2 Corinthians 4:6-7) - nobody can see that power, but it is real.

However, there is a situation where church leaders must be firm and powerful. **They must sometimes deal with strong people who have firmly chosen to do wrong things.** In such circumstances, even the most gentle church leader has a duty to be strong and bold. An extreme example is how Samuel carried out God's punishment against the wicked King Agag in 1 Samuel 15:33.

Paul knew that soon he might have to act firmly against some of the church members at Corinth. He would not deal with them by physical force, but by prayers and decisions. However, **in those actions, they would see the power of Christ.** It was not how Paul wanted them to know Christ's power - but perhaps at the present time, it was necessary. **If they returned to God, they would then know Christ's power in a different way.** Christ would be working in and through their lives, and so they would carry out his work powerfully in the world.

Human weakness and the power of God

(2 Corinthians 13:4)

It was only possible for Christ to die because he accepted a human nature. In other words, he became a man, like us. When he did that, he also received *the weaknesses of our human nature*. He knew what it means to be tired, or hungry, or to suffer pain (Isaiah 53:3).

Christ accepted that weakness so that he could bring people into a right relationship with God. **He died in weakness and shame so that God can forgive our evil deeds** (1 Peter 2:24). In his death, he suffered the punishment that we deserve. So, because of his death, we can have life that never ends.

Of course Christ could not remain dead (Acts 2:24). **After he became alive again, he received the place of greatest honour in heaven** (Hebrews 1:3). In that, we truly see the *power* of God.

Paul had spoken much about his own weakness (for example, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10). He described *the weakness of his own human nature* as he carried out his extraordinary work for God (2 Corinthians 11:23-30). Often, it seemed that he must die (2 Corinthians 1:8-10) - but God rescued him.

So Paul was very aware both of his own weakness, and of the *power* of God in his life. **He had discovered that Christ was living in him** (2 Corinthians 4:6-11; Colossians 1:27; John 14:19-23).

Other people were trying to control the Christians in Corinth by strong and impressive actions (2 Corinthians 11:20). Paul refused to use any such methods (2 Corinthians 4:2; 2 Corinthians 11:21). Instead, Paul would depend completely on the power of God to deal with their problems. So God, and not Paul himself, would deal with these matters. Paul would do simply what God guided him to do.

Examine yourself: is Christ living in you?

(2 Corinthians 13:5)

Paul urges each of his readers to examine whether their own relationship with God is real. It is not good enough if *other people* consider us to be genuine Christians. Even *our own heart* (mind) can convince us of something that is not true (Jeremiah 17:9). So we must be extremely careful in this matter.

A person's life should show evidence of whether that person truly has a relationship with God (Matthew 7:15-20). That evidence appears both in the person's attitudes and his actions (James 2:14-26). A true Christian should have faith (Hebrews 11:6) - that is, he should trust God. Also, he should show love, both for God and for other people (Mark 12:29-31). He should do what God wants him to do (Mark 3:35). He should listen to God's word, the Bible, and obey it. He should choose to do what is right, and not to do wrong and evil acts.

However, **a person may be a genuine Christian even when his relationship with God is weak.** Such a person may show very little evidence of his relationship with God. **That person should try hard to make that relationship stronger; then the evidence will be stronger, too.** He can pray; he can study the Bible; he can get help from other Christians. He must try to obey God in every circumstance; he should try to serve God whenever there is an opportunity.

If any person truly is a Christian, then Jesus Christ is living in that person. Paul did not consider that to be a theory or a word-picture, but an actual reality. God, whose home is higher than the heavens, has entered that person's life. There God remains; therefore, the person has become God's home also (John 14:23; 1 Corinthians 6:19).

That relationship is possible only because of Christ's death. He died so that God can forgive our evil deeds. That relationship begins when we turn from our evil deeds to invite Christ into our lives (John 1:12; Revelation 3:20).

That relationship begins in this life, and it will never end (Revelation 21:3-4).

Do other people's opinions matter?

(2 Corinthians 13:6-8)

It mattered very little to Paul what people thought about him. Elsewhere, he describes how everyone seemed to have their own opinion about him (2 Corinthians 6:8). Few people actually approved of him.

Paul loved the Christians in Corinth, even as a father loves his own children (1 Corinthians 4:14-15). However, **even they were discussing whether Paul's work for God was genuine or not.** They complained that Paul did not seem impressive enough (2 Corinthians 10:10). He refused their gifts (2 Corinthians 11:7); and he did not seem powerful, like some other church leaders (2 Corinthians 11:20-21).

Of course Paul wanted them to know the truth about him. However, in the end, it hardly seemed to matter. Paul had worked hard among them so that they could have a relationship with God. **So, if now they were truly serving God, their opinion about Paul was unimportant.** Paul had done his work; the work of God in their lives would continue without Paul.

Paul still prayed for them, and he would continue to pray for them. He was not praying that they would approve of him. **He was praying that they would do the right things.** He prayed that they would stop their wrong activities. Paul's greatest desire was that they would learn to serve God better.

Paul saw himself as a witness of the truth about God (compare 1 Corinthians 15:3-11). **As a witness, Paul cared only that people heard the truth.** When people accepted Christ into their lives, they had received the truth. It was not necessary for them also to accept Paul as the leader of their church. If Paul had argued otherwise, he would have been arguing against the truth. So Paul considered it his duty simply to declare the truth that God had shown to him (2 Corinthians 4:1-2).

Paul's prayer for Corinth's Christians

(2 Corinthians 13:9)

Many political leaders and business leaders are pleased when they become more powerful or more important. Church leaders should have a very different attitude (Mark 10:42-44). They can be glad even about the loss of their power, when other people serve God better as a result. That is because church leaders must not work for their own wealth, honour and importance. Instead, **church leaders work for God; and they work to help other people to know God better.**

So, Paul was not praying that Corinth's Christians would respect him. Instead, **he was praying that God would make them perfect.** We can see what he meant by 'perfect' from his previous use of a similar word in 1 Corinthians 1:10. There, Paul was writing about the opposing groups that had formed in their church. Those groups argued much with each other. Paul appealed that the church should be 'perfect' with the same opinion. In other words, **he wanted them to 'join' with the other Christians,** and not to be separate groups that constantly argued. We could say that **God needed to 'repair' their church;** it was as if it had broken apart. Paul was praying for God to do that.

Paul uses that word again in 2 Corinthians 13:11. There, we could translate it: **'repair yourselves'**. His advice in that verse is very similar to what he wrote previously. The Christians should try to avoid arguments; they should show love and they should respect each other. If they did that, their church would be strong again; and Paul would be pleased about them.

Deal with your wrong attitudes quickly

(2 Corinthians 13:10)

Corinth's Christians were especially eager (2 Corinthians 8:7). **It surprises us just how eager Paul expected them to be.** He had just told them that some *very severe problems* remained in their church (2 Corinthians 12:21; 2 Corinthians 13:1-2). They are the kind of problems that most churches would need several months, or even years, to deal with. However, Paul wanted the Christians there to deal with all these problems before he arrived. That would be very soon (2 Corinthians 12:14). Perhaps they only had *a few days* to prepare.

Probably that was possible because **Corinth's Christians had already stopped their wrong behaviour**. However, some of them had not **changed their attitudes** yet. In other words, they still *wanted* to do those wrong things. For example, some of them had carried out wrong sex acts previously. However, they had not yet repented; in other words, they had not completely turned back to God (2 Corinthians 12:21).

In the same way, it seems that the opposing groups in 1 Corinthians 1:11-12 had disappeared. That was good; but it seems that people still had *wrong attitudes* towards each other (2 Corinthians 12:20). They needed to forgive and to act with love towards the other members of their church (2 Corinthians 13:11-12).

There were some people who would probably not change their attitudes before Paul's arrival. They were the evil people who had tried to become the leaders of the church (2 Corinthians 11:12-15). It would be clear to them that their opportunity to take advantage of this church had ended. They would not want to meet Paul, who would deal strictly with them (2 Corinthians 13:1-2). Probably, they would leave quickly, to carry on their wrong activities elsewhere. They would not want to go to Macedonia, where the Christians were poor (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). However, Paul had recently established a large church, with some wealthy members, at Ephesus (Acts 19:1-20). A few months after Paul wrote this letter, he warned Ephesus's church leaders about those men in Acts 20:29.

Paul's advice to Corinth's Christians

(2 Corinthians 13:11)

The Book of 2 Corinthians ends very quickly. There are none of the long lists of greetings that we sometimes see at the end of Paul's letters. Instead, Paul just gives **some very brief advice**, and then he blesses the Christians.

Paul's word for '*goodbye*' also means '*rejoice*' (be glad). Perhaps Paul intended both meanings; he often told Christians to rejoice (Philippians 4:4). Christians can be glad because of the goodness of God.

Paul was praying that God would 'make right' the problems in Corinth's church (2 Corinthians 13:9). Now, with a similar word, Paul urges the Christians to *deal with those problems*. God wanted them to be a strong church, and not a group of people who constantly argued. Then they could achieve much better results in their work for God together; and they would be better Christians.

The rest of Paul's advice is for the same purpose. They should urge and encourage each other to serve God better. They should end their arguments and they should try to understand each other. Their many different opinions had caused them to separate from each other in the past. However, **God wanted them to join together so that they would all benefit from their many different skills and gifts** (1 Corinthians chapter 12). Then, instead of their constant arguments, their church would be calm and content.

That was what God wanted. **Love and peace (a calm and content attitude) are part of God's character.** They are also among the results of the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of Christians (Galatians 5:22-23). Christians should love each other with the love that comes from God. They should be calm and content because of the work that God is doing in their lives.

A way that Christians expressed love to each other

(2 Corinthians 13:12)

Paul mentions **the 'holy kiss'** in three other places also: Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; and 1 Thessalonians 5:26. It became a usual greeting in the first Christian churches. The custom continues in the churches in some countries near the Mediterranean sea today. The men kiss each of the other men in turn. The women kiss each of the other women. Men do not kiss women; and they do not kiss on the lips. Rather, they kiss by the side of the head.

This custom did not begin with the first Christians. **It was a usual custom in that region.** People would kiss their relatives and their close friends in that manner. It was polite behaviour to kiss a guest like that (Luke 7:45). With such a kiss, Judas handed Jesus over to his enemies (Mark 14:43-45).

The purpose of the kiss was **to express love.** Of course, no physical act can really prove that someone loves another person. Love is an attitude of our hearts. It shows itself in the desire to help and to show kindness to other people. Without that desire, any physical act to show love has no real meaning.

However, the fact that someone refuses to greet another person does have a real meaning. It means that they have a **bitter attitude** towards that other person; perhaps they *hate* that person.

Clearly Paul was urging the Christians to follow this custom for a definite reason. There had been some very serious arguments in this church in the recent past. However, Christians should love each other (John 13:34-35) and they must forgive each other (Luke 17:3-4). Of course such greetings do not really show love. However, **a friendly greeting can be a way to say 'I forgive you'**. That was something that Corinth's Christians very much needed to do.

The saints

(2 Corinthians 13:13)

'All the saints greet you.' In the original language, Greek, the word for 'saints' is *HAGIOI*. That word is simply the plural form of the word that means 'holy'. So, a correct translation would be: *'All the holy people greet you.'*

We may ask whom Paul means by the *'holy people'*. The word 'holy' describes someone, or something, that belongs to God. In 1 Peter 2:9-10, Peter calls Christians: **the 'people who belong to God'**. In 1 Peter 1:18-19, he explains the reason. **God has bought them for himself**, by means of the blood of Christ (see also 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). In other words, because of Christ's death, God has freed them from the power of the devil, sin (evil deeds) and death (Romans 6:17-18; Hebrews 2:14-15). So, Peter tells Christians to be holy in all that they do (1 Peter 1:15-16). In other words, they should live in the way that is right for God's holy people to live.

These passages do not just refer to a few special Christians. They refer to all Christians. **Every Christian is one of God's holy people; every Christian belongs to God.** The first Christians often referred to other Christians generally by the word that we translate 'saints'.

So, by the word 'saints' in 2 Corinthians 13:13, Paul means all the Christians who were with him at that time. That would include some of Paul's companions, like Timothy, Titus and Luke. However, it would also include some of the ordinary Christians in Macedonia, from where Paul wrote this letter. Paul did not have the space or time to record their names. However, they all wanted to send their greetings to the church at Corinth. They all wanted to express their love, as Christians, to the Christians in Corinth.

The blessing called 'the benediction', or 'the grace'

(2 Corinthians 13:14)

Paul finishes the Book of 2 Corinthians with words that are very familiar to many Christians today. They are not just a prayer but a **blessing**: *a declaration that God will show his kindness in a person's life*. This blessing is sometimes called 'the benediction', which means 'the blessing' - or sometimes simply 'the grace'. Many church meetings today end when the leader, or all the people, declare these words to everyone present.

This is one of just a few Bible verses that mention God as **Father, Son and Holy Spirit**, together. As in 2 Corinthians 8:9, it mentions the **grace** (kindness) of **Christ**. He showed that kindness when he died to save his people. He constantly shows that kindness by the way that he works in their lives.

Then, as in verse 11, Paul mentions **the love of God, the Father**. He showed that love when he sent Christ into the world (John 3:16). He constantly shows that love by the way that he cares for his people (Matthew 6:25-32).

Finally, Paul mentions **the fellowship, or friendship of the Holy Spirit**. He shows that friendship by the way that he constantly guides and helps his people (John 16:13; Galatians 5:16-25).

All of this is so different from how many people think about God. They consider Christ to be someone in history, whose death has no effect on their lives today. They think that God the Father wants to punish them, not to show them love. They imagine that the Holy Spirit is just a strange force or power, and certainly not a friend.

So we, who are Paul's readers today, really do need to know **the true character of the one real God**. We need to know his *kindness*, his *love*, and his *friendship* in our lives. We need to trust him constantly and to know that he is always with us. We need truly, therefore, to become his people.

2 Corinthians: a study guide

About the Book of 2 Corinthians - its author, date and purpose.

The author of 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 1:1 gives the name of **Paul** as the author. That does not surprise us. The book is very similar to Paul's other letters, but especially to the Book of 1 Corinthians. There are many references back to Paul's first letter in this second one to Corinth.

That verse also mentions **Timothy**. Paul had recently sent Timothy to Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:17), and then Timothy returned to Paul. So, the Christians in Corinth knew Timothy well. It is possible that Timothy wrote some of the letter. Paul often says “we” when he could have said “I” (for example 2 Corinthians 6:3-4); so perhaps they worked together on the letter. However, the most likely explanation is that Timothy wrote down Paul’s words. We know that Paul sometimes worked like that (Romans 16:22). The reference to Timothy is similar to the reference to Sosthenes in 1 Corinthians 1:1.

The date of 2 Corinthians

In our opinion, **Paul wrote 2 Corinthians less than a year after he wrote 1 Corinthians**. Paul was working in Corinth in the year 51 A.D.; he wrote these books a few years afterwards. Paul was still in Ephesus when he wrote the first of these letters (1 Corinthians 16:8). He then went to Troas (2 Corinthians 2:12), from where he travelled by sea to Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1). He wrote this second letter from Macedonia. It seems likely that Titus took the letter to Corinth (2 Corinthians 8:16-24).

The letter arrived just a few weeks before Paul himself returned to Corinth (2 Corinthians 9:3-4). Paul intended by his letter to prepare the church there for his arrival (2 Corinthians 13:1-5).

Paul remained in that region (Greece) for 3 months (Acts 20:2-3). He had said previously that he wanted to spend the Winter in Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:6). After that, Paul went to Jerusalem and then, as a prisoner, to Rome.

There is a theory that the Book of 2 Corinthians is a collection of two, or perhaps more, shorter letters. We do not like that theory, and we have seen no evidence to support it in our studies of the book. In our opinion, that idea would destroy the very clear structure that the book has.

The purpose of 2 Corinthians

As we have said above, Paul’s main purpose was **to prepare the church at Corinth for his return**.

Originally, Paul had worked for 18 months to establish the church at Corinth (Acts 18:1-18). For Paul, that was very unusual. Usually, he only remained in each place for a few days. He remained in Corinth because God was doing something very special in that city. Many people who had lived very evil lives were becoming Christians (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Nowhere else had Paul seen so many people who served false gods become Christians.

The church that Paul established there was an astonishing church. **There was great excitement in the meetings, and the Holy Spirit was very active there**. The church members were eager to serve God; and Paul considered it his favourite church (2 Corinthians 8:7).

However, the Christians there were slow to become mature in their relationship with God (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). They formed opposing groups and they argued fiercely. They spoke much about their own rights and they had not yet learned to love each other. Some of them were behaving in a wild manner during their meetings.

These problems became very clear a few years after Paul left Corinth. It seems that, at the time of Paul's first letter, Corinth's church leaders were urging him to return. However, Paul was not yet available to do that (1 Corinthians 16:7-9). Also, he did not consider it wise for him to return when their problems were so severe (2 Corinthians 2:1-4). So instead, he advised them in that letter, and he also sent Timothy to help them (1 Corinthians 4:17). Later, he sent Titus.

Titus's experience at Corinth (2 Corinthians 7:6-7) convinced Paul that the time was now right for Paul's own return. However, Paul still worried that the church members may not be completely ready (2 Corinthians 12:20-21). So, Paul sent Titus back, ahead of him, to prepare them (2 Corinthians 8:16-24). Paul also sent this letter to prepare them. Titus probably took the letter to Corinth a few weeks before Paul expected to arrive there.

The structure of 2 Corinthians

The structure of Paul's second letter to Corinth matches closely its purpose.

Paul begins with an account of his journeys since his last letter (chapters 1 to 7).

Firstly, Paul tells of his great dangers in the region then called Asia, now part of western Turkey (2 Corinthians 1:3-11). He expected to die there - but after that great strain, God comforted him. He thanks Corinth's church for their prayers. He does not however tell them how God comforted him until chapter 7. God did it by means of the wonderful news that Corinth's Christians had truly chosen to serve God properly (2 Corinthians 7:6-7).

In 2 Corinthians 1:12 to 2:4, Paul explains why he had not returned to Corinth yet. He was eager to see them. However, he did not want to return before they were ready for his visit. So, instead, he wrote to advise them how to deal with the problems in their church.

They dealt with their most severe problem well (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). In that matter, they showed that they truly wanted to serve God. However, Paul did not hear about their decision when he was still at Troas (2 Corinthians 2:12-13). From Troas, Paul could have sailed to Corinth; but instead he went to Macedonia.

Paul could have regretted his decision to go to Macedonia then - especially as he had many troubles there too (2 Corinthians 7:5). However, he trusted God to guide him (2 Corinthians 2:14-17).

Many people would consider Paul's life to be a continuous series of troubles and dangers. That was not Paul's opinion, however. Instead, he saw how God was working in his life, and in the lives of all God's people. What God is doing in their lives is truly wonderful (chapter 3).

Therefore, even in the greatest dangers, Paul could declare God's message boldly and plainly. Although Paul was weak, God was present in Paul's life. The troubles in Paul's life seemed to last only for a moment. The wonderful things that God is doing for him and for all God's people will last always (chapter 4).

So Paul did not fear death. In death, in life, and in every circumstance, his only ambition was to please God (2 Corinthians 5:1-10). Paul could see that God was changing people's lives completely by means of Paul's work. He could also see that his task was to appeal to people on Christ's behalf. God was urging people, through Paul, to receive a right relationship with God (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Paul's particular appeal to Corinth's Christians was that they should allow God's grace (kindness) to have its proper effect on their lives. Paul urged them to allow God to change both their behaviour and their attitudes. He wanted them to give themselves completely to God. He reminded them of the wonderful promises that God has made to them (2 Corinthians 6:1 to 7:1).

Paul then tells them how much their actions had comforted him. They had proved that they really did want to serve God well. They had also shown that they cared deeply about Paul himself (chapter 7).

Paul could now see that the time was right for him to return to Corinth. **So in the rest of the letter, he tells the church how to prepare for his arrival.**

In chapters 8 and 9, Paul deals with a practical matter. Corinth's Christians wanted to send a gift to Judea's poor Christians; Paul had offered to travel with that gift (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). However, Paul did not want the church to collect that gift when he was in Corinth; so, he arranged for them to make their gifts first. He taught them about the correct attitudes when Christians give.

Paul next needed to deal with the problem of some men who were trying to control Corinth's church. These men were impressive and powerful, but they were not teaching the truth about God. They were proud men, who considered Paul weak (2 Corinthians 10:1 to 11:21).

Paul confessed that in many ways he was weak. He told about how much he had suffered in his work for Christ. However, Paul did not depend on his own strength, but on the power of Christ in him (2 Corinthians 11:22 to 12:13).

Finally, Paul appeals to the church members themselves. Soon, he will be with them. Perhaps some of them have not yet truly turned from their evil deeds. Perhaps the arguments, gossip and other troubles that had spoilt their church had not yet ended completely. Paul explains that, on his arrival, he must deal strictly with such matters. So he urges each person to examine his own thoughts and attitudes first. They must each make their own relationship with God strong. Then Paul's visit will be a joyful and useful occasion, from which they all will receive the full benefit (2 Corinthians 12:14 to 13:14).

Why the Book of 2 Corinthians is important

Here are some of the reasons why the Book of 2 Corinthians is important for Christians to study:

(1) The Book of 2 Corinthians emphasises that **the work of God does not depend on our own strength or power**. Christians may be weak, but they should allow God to work in and through them (2 Corinthians 4:7; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

(2) 2 Corinthians shows that **God is working powerfully in people's lives**. When they become Christians, he changes their lives completely (2 Corinthians 5:17). Then, he continues to change them, so that they will become like him (2 Corinthians 3:18).

(3) 2 Corinthians urges **church leaders** always to deal with people in an honest and sincere manner (2 Corinthians 4:2; 2 Corinthians 7:2; 2 Corinthians 10:11). It warns against leaders who try to change God's message or to gain power over people (2 Corinthians 11:1-20). It urges church leaders to imitate Christ's gentle and patient attitudes (2 Corinthians 10:1).

(4) 2 Corinthians urges Christians to make it their **ambition to please God** in every circumstance (2 Corinthians 5:9). They should not be afraid of trouble, or even of death, because God is preparing the most wonderful things for them in heaven (2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10).

(5) 2 Corinthians contains **practical advice about the gifts** that Christians give. It discusses the correct attitudes both of the givers and of the people who collect their gifts (chapters 8 and 9).

(6) 2 Corinthians contains many **especially wonderful and astonishing verses** – for example, 2 Corinthians 1:20; 2:14-16; 3:18; 4:6-7; 4:16; 5:17; 5:20-21; 6:2; 8:9; 9:7-8; 10:4-5; 12:2-4; 12:7-10; 13:14. You might like to learn some of these verses so that you can say them from your memory.

2 Corinthians - a 13 week study guide (to print and use)

Please print this section if you would like to study the Book of 2 Corinthians with a group of people. You will find these questions on the Internet at www.usefulbible.com

Week 1 - chapter 1 - God's comfort, direction and promises

Read chapter 1, then discuss these questions:

- (1) In chapter 1, how often does Paul refer to the comfort that God gives? In what circumstances did God comfort Paul? In what circumstances have you become aware of God's comfort? Discuss your own experiences.
- (2) Read verse 20 again. Which of God's promises in particular encourage and help you? How can we be sure that God will carry out all of his promises?
- (3) Read verse 11. Why did Paul consider prayer to be so important? What does prayer achieve?

Week 2 - chapter 2 - Our test is whether we obey God

Read chapter 2, then discuss these questions:

- (1) Read verse 4 again. Why was it so difficult for Paul to write the Book of 1 Corinthians? How do Paul's words, which upset Corinth's Christians so much, show his love for them?
- (2) Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 about the man whom Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. What was the man formerly doing wrong, and what did Paul then advise the church to do? How had the man's behaviour changed, and what did Paul now advise? Compare your answer with the advice in James 5:19-20.
- (3) Read verses 14 to 16. To whom does the knowledge of Christ bring life; and to whom does it bring death? Discuss how the knowledge of Christ does this, and why. How did Paul's experiences bring this matter particularly to his attention? Compare your answer with 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.

Week 3 - chapter 3 - The splendid beauty of what God is doing in his people's lives

Read chapter 3, then discuss these questions:

(1) What evidence does a church leader usually produce before he begins work in a particular church? Why did Paul produce no such evidence before he began his work in Corinth, in Acts 18:1-4? What was the proof that Paul really was working for God there?

(2) Read the incident in Moses' life to which Paul refers: Exodus 34:28-35. Why does Paul say that God's Spirit is doing an even more splendid work in the lives of Christians? Why can we not now see that work?

(3) What advice does Paul give in verses 14-16 for people who find the Bible difficult to understand?

Week 4 - chapter 4 - God's people are constantly receiving from Christ the kind of life that never ends

Read chapter 4, then discuss these questions:

(1) Why did Paul consider it essential to explain clearly the message about Christ and his death? Why do some people seem unable to understand that simple message? Is there anything that we can do to help them?

(2) How in this chapter does Paul show that he depends on Christ's strength and not on his own weakness? Compare the message of this chapter with 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

(3) Discuss how Paul showed even matters of life and death to be less important than God's work in our lives. Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 and 2 Corinthians 11:23-27. How do you think that Paul's experiences helped him to learn this lesson?

(4) Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 and Colossians 1:27. What does it mean if Christ is living in you? How should this fact affect the lives of God's people?

Week 5 - chapter 5 - Christ has given new lives to his people, so their ambition should be to please him

Read chapter 5, then discuss these questions:

(1) Read verse 17 again, then read John 3:1-16. What does it mean to be born again? Read John 1:12-13. How can we become children of God?

(2) How do Paul's words in verses 1 to 9 explain his statements in 2 Corinthians 4:17 and Philippians 1:21? Why was Paul not afraid to die? What happens when a Christian dies?

(3) What has God done in order to bring people across the world into a right relationship with him? What was the special work that God had given Paul to do? What appeal did Paul bring on behalf of Christ? How can people receive a right relationship with God; and how should they behave after they have received it?

Week 6 - chapter 6 - Now is the time when God wants you to live in a right relationship with him

Read chapter 6, then discuss these questions:

(1) Compare verses 1 to 2 with Hebrews 3:7-15. Why does God urge people to trust him now? Why must people not delay? Why do we need God to save us?

(2) Examine Paul's list of the different ways that he served God (verses 4 to 10). How many of these have you known in your own experience? Which of these should be part of the experience of every Christian? Why do God's people suffer in this world?

(3) How can God's people separate themselves from evil things while they are still living in this world? What is God asking us to do in verses 14 to 18, and how can we do it? Why must God's people turn from evil deeds?

Week 7 - chapter 7 - Paul expresses his pride in Corinth's Christians, because they had chosen to obey God

Read chapter 7, then discuss these questions:

(1) What is your reaction to the promises that God has made? What effect do they have on your life and your attitudes? What effect did the same promises have on Paul?

(2) 'Christians do not need to suffer fear.' Discuss whether this statement is correct. What caused Paul's fear, and how did God help him in that situation?

(3) Discuss the reaction of Corinth's Christians when they received Paul's letter (in other words, the Book of 1 Corinthians). Why was it right for them to be sad? How did they deal with those sad feelings? What was the result?

(4) When is it right for a church leader to be proud about his church? When is it wrong?

Week 8 - chapter 8 - Arrangements for a gift

Read chapter 8, then discuss these questions:

(1) Compare verse 9 with Philippians 2:5-11. When was Christ rich, and how did he become poor? Then, contrast that verse with 1 Corinthians 4:8-13. How does Christ make God's people rich? Compare your answer with 1 Corinthians 2:9-10.

(2) Compare verse 8 with John 13:34-35, and 1 Corinthians 13:3. What lessons do these verses teach about the attitudes of Christians when they give?

(3) In what ways does this chapter show the principle that Jesus taught in Mark 12:41-44?

(4) The church at Corinth had made many mistakes, but its members were doing extremely well in many other matters. Discuss the ways in which they were serving God well.

(5) What arrangements had Paul made to make sure that the gift would reach Judea safely? What can church leaders today learn from these arrangements?

Week 9 - chapter 9 - Paul encourages the Christians to give gladly.

Read chapter 9, then discuss these questions:

(1) If our actions are right, do our attitudes really matter? Read Psalm 40:8; Mark 7:6; Mark 12:28-34 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Why does the Bible so often emphasise the attitude of our 'hearts' (minds)? With what attitudes should we give?

(2) What promises does this chapter make to Christians who give gladly? What reasons does the chapter give to encourage Christians not to worry about their gifts?

(3) Discuss the different ways in which we can give thanks to God. How does the chapter emphasise the importance of this?

Week 10 - chapter 10 - Paul's authority as a church leader, and the limits of that authority

Read chapter 10, then discuss these questions:

(1) Certain people were opposing Paul's authority over Corinth's church, in order to gain power for themselves. What were they saying about Paul, and about themselves? How true were they in their statements? How correct were their opinions?

(2) Who usually gives authority to a church leader? Who gave authority to Paul? For what purpose did he prefer to use that authority?

(3) In verses 3 to 6, Paul compares his work to a battle. What was he trying to defeat? What methods did he use to fight this battle? What was Paul's aim? Whom did Paul want Corinth's Christians to obey? Compare your answers with Paul's advice to them in 2 Corinthians 13:5-11.

Week 11 - chapter 11 - Paul contrasts his weakness with the powerful behaviour of some leaders who wanted to control Corinth's church

Read chapter 11, then discuss these questions:

(1) Describe the wrong behaviour of those leaders that Paul was warning against. What was attracting the church members to those leaders? Why did Paul believe that those leaders really were serving the devil? Why might an evil person want to lead a church?

(2) Read Mark 10:42-45 and John 13:12-17. How did Jesus teach that a church leader should behave? How did Paul try to live by these standards?

(3) Is it necessary for Christ's servants to suffer so many troubles as Paul suffered? If not, then why did Paul choose to accept such a hard life? Compare your answer with Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:13-23.

Week 12 - chapter 12 - Christ shows his power when we are weak

Read chapter 12, then discuss these questions:

(1) Why do we often prefer to depend on ourselves, and not to show faith (active belief and trust in God)? What happens when we depend on God's power? Discuss Mark 11:23-24 and Hebrews 11:6.

(2) What does Paul mean by God's grace (kindness)? How does God show his grace, both through Christ's death and in his daily care for his people?

(3) What lessons can we learn from the extraordinary incident in verses 2 to 4?

(4) How did Paul gain the courage to stand firm for God during all the troubles that he mentions in chapter 11? How can we gain the strength to serve God loyally during the strain and pressures of our daily lives?

Week 13 - chapter 13 - Paul urges Corinth's Christians to prepare themselves for his arrival.

Read chapter 13, then discuss these questions:

(1) What did Paul tell Corinth's Christians to do in order to prepare for his arrival? Why did they need to do these things? Why could they not simply wait until Paul had actually arrived there?

(2) Read Matthew 5:23-24 and 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. In what ways is the advice in these passages similar to the advice in this chapter? How can we prepare to meet with God at our church meetings?

(3) Read verse 14 and John 16:7-13. In what ways can we know the fellowship (friendship) of the Holy Spirit? Read 1 Corinthians 12:7-13. What is the result of the Holy Spirit's work in our churches?

(4) In what ways does 2 Corinthians chapter 13 encourage Christians not to be selfish? What evidence is there in this chapter that Paul was not selfish?

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