

STUDIES IN II CORINTHIANS

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1. FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE Based on II Cor. 1:8-11

Paul Auranadt tells the story of one of the fastest rising young singers back in the early 50's. He was called the Romantic Voice Of America. Teenage girls would give anything to see him, but he never appeared anywhere. He was not even seen in photographs. He was strictly a radio voice. Soon KFRC in San Francisco was flooded with teenage fan mail begging for signed photos, but none were ever sent. The golden voice was heard, but the person behind it was never seen.

One day a young girl went into the studio looking for a glimpse of her idol. When she saw him she was overwhelmed, and not with awe, but with

laughter. The Romantic Voice of America was 5 ft. 10 and weighed 260 lbs. He was so embarrassed by her laughter that he went on a 4 month grueling diet. Because of that embarrassment he became fit enough to be seen in public, and he went on to become popular on television. By being crushed into despair he was able to rise to the heights of stardom. This young man is the now well-known Merv Griffin.

His experience reveals that there is often a link between the lows of life and the highs. The lows, or the failures, are often the motivating factors in our reaching for the heights and success. Had he never been crushed down by that negative experience he may never have been moved to change and climb to new heights. We see this process going on in the life of Paul as he records for all the world to see the depths of despair which forced him the heights of hope. Paul has been as low as a Christian can get, and he has been as high as a Christian can get. He knows the depth to which a Christian can sink in negative feelings, and he knows the heights in which they can soar in positive feelings.

Paul opens up and shares this intimate view of his own emotions, for he knows it will be a comfort to many, and God knew it would be a comfort to millions all through history. Christians need to know it is not a sign of lack of faith, or that God has abandoned you, because you feel sunk in a pit of despair. It has happened to the best of God's family, and is, therefore, an acceptable state of emotion even though it is not a state where you want to settle down and live. The proper response to this low state is to be motivated to climb to a higher level of faith and hope. We want to look at these two levels of life that Paul experienced so we can learn also to cope with the depths and climb to the heights. Let's look first at-

I. THE DEPTHS OF DESPAIR.

The Greek word Paul uses here to describe his low point means-to have no outlet whatever. Paul felt trapped with no way to escape. It was a hopeless situation, and there was nothing he could do. It looked like death was inevitable, and there was no other choice but to die. Paul was at a dead end. The enemy was bearing down on him and there was no exit. The pressure was great that it was beyond his ability to endure it. Paul was admitting that he had come to the end of his rope, and he could not longer hang on. This is a terrible place to be, but God had Paul share this so that Christians might not

be superficial in their judgments of Christians who reach this level of despair.

Many Christians who have lived sheltered lives, as many of us have, do not know the depths to which life can push the emotions. We have all felt depressed but despair goes deeper than depression. It is the feeling of utter hopelessness. It is a very dangerous state of mind, for this is what leads people to take their own life. It is the feeling that made Job wish he had never been born. It is the feeling that made Solomon feel that everything was vanity and totally meaningless. It is a theme very common in literature.

John Bunyan in Pilgrim's Progress has a scene where Great-Heart has a major battle with Giant Despair who had as many lives as a cat. In other words, despair is a hard foe to get rid of. John Milton in Paradise Lost has Satan cry out in despair, "Which way shall I fly-infinite wrath and infinite despair? Which way I fly is hell; myself is hell; and in the lowest deep a lower deep still threatening to devour me opens wide, to which the hell I suffer seems a heaven."

The lost world has picked up on the despair philosophy of Satan, and it has become, in the words of Francis Schaeffer, the culture of despair. He traces despair as one of the key ideas in art, poetry, and music in our culture. If you think a lot of modern art, literature and music is meaningless, then they have succeeded in communicating, for that is exactly what they are trying to convey-that life is meaningless and absurd. So when you look at a Picasso painting not knowing if you are looking at a male, female, or a chair, and you say this is absurd, you have gotten the point.

Despair leads to all kinds of absurdity. But despair does explain absurdity. The reality of despair helps us understand all of the mysteries of evil, and why people engage in atrocities so vicious and inhuman. Despair means there is no way out, and so what do you have to lose? Despair causes people to go and shoot fellow workers, or to kill strangers on the street. Despair causes teenagers by the thousands to take their own life every year. George Eliot said something long ago that fits our day as well: "There is no despair so absolute as that which comes with the first moment of our first great sorrow, when we have not yet known what it is to have suffered and be healed, to have despaired and have recovered hope."

Studies show that despairing teens take their own lives because they think

the feelings they have at the moment are permanent. The broken heart the feel when their boy or girl friend dumps them is what they think they have to live with the rest of their lives, and so they cut their life short to end the pain. They do not have the ability to see beyond despair to a whole new life of joy. Do not take despair lightly. It is a very dangerous emotion, and it is what makes this a dangerous world in which to live. But the point of all this is that Christians can experience it. It is so negative, and the cause of such depths of evil in the world that many Christians refuse to believe that it is possible to be a Christian in such a state of despair.

Jeremy Taylor wrote, "It is impossible for that man to despair who remembers that his Helper is omnipotent." The problem with making such a radical statement is that it ignores the Word of God, which is our final authority. If a Christian can or cannot feel despair, it is not going to be settled by a survey, a vote, or by scholars doing research. It is settled by the revelation God has given us, and Paul states it clearly that he and young Timothy despaired even of life. They felt utterly hopeless with no way of escape.

Why is it important to accept the fact that a Christian can reach the depths of despair? Because it is in assuming they can't that has led many Christians to neglect the ministry of comfort, and let Christians descend into a pit so deep they cannot get out. Never assume that a Christian cannot descend to the pit of despair. The Word of God and the record of history makes it clear that they can. I have dozens of books by Charles Spurgeon. He was the greatest preacher England ever produced, and many consider him the greatest preacher in history. But he often had a battle with depression. He once said, "I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to."

I have many of the books of Dr. John Henry Jowett, another man who has been called the greatest preacher in the English speaking world. Listen to his testimony: "You seem to imagine I have no ups and downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and equanimity. By no means! I am often perfectly wretched and everything appears most murky." There are hundreds, if not thousands, of such testimonies from Christian leaders through history. Some feel these records should be hidden and not exposed to the public. But this is folly, for Paul opens up his own life for us to see the depths to which even an Apostle can go. And he does it to

give comfort.

Christians who do not know that Christians can go so low feel rejected by God and man. Those who hide these records from them for fear of hurting their faith rob them of the comfort they need to cling to their faith. It is important for us to see Paul is in deep distress and despair. He is overwhelmed by the troubles of life. It is important for us to see that Paul prayed for the removal of his thorn in the flesh, and he did not get the healing. It is important for us to see all of the negative experiences and emotions of Paul, for they are a source of great comfort for us when we suffer the same emotions. Hide the negatives from people, and they feel alone as if they are the only Christian whoever felt like they feel. This is to be a miserable comforter, and like Job's friends add weights to the crushing load that is already pushing down the suffering saint.

What does Paul do with his despair? He shares it with the church. He says in verse 8, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered." And then he goes on to inform them of the awful pressures they feel that are beyond their ability to endure. You would think Paul would keep quite about such a depth of despair. After all, he is an Apostle and an example to all believers. Should he be exposing his inner soul like this and telling Christians how deep a pit he is in? Yes he should, for it is the source of great comfort to millions that he was in that state. But the comfort does not end with the feeling we are not alone, but in the highest of company if we are in the pit of despair. There is better news yet, and Paul goes on to deal with-

II. THE HEIGHTS OF HOPE.

St. Philip of Neri cried out in the streets of Rome, "I am in despair, I am in despair." A friend asked how he could say such a thing and he responded, "I despair of myself, but I trust in God." This is what Paul is saying here. He despaired of ever being able to save himself, but he did not despair of God's ability to save him. He says in verse 9, "This happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead." The value of despair is that it forces you to give up your pride and self-sufficiency, and realize that without God you are sunk. The value of being so low is that there is nowhere else to look but up to God, who alone can give you hope.

Paul comes to the end of his rope, but he does not come to the end of his hope. He had no resource in himself, and all he could do was to surrender his life and future to the providence of God. This is that place in life where we see unique answers to prayer. If there is no way out for man, and God is the only one who can deliver them, then there will be a marvelous demonstration of God's providence. For example, a chaplain in the South Pacific tells of being with American troops trying to hold a beach. It was a long battle, and their water supply ran out. They were desperate and they prayed for some relief. They were helpless to meet their own need. Suddenly, one of the shells the American battleship was laying down fell short and buried itself in the sand near them. It exploded and left a deep crater. It began to fill with fresh water from springs below. Their despair turned to thanksgiving, for what was hopeless for them was clearly possible for God.

Paul was likewise delivered from his hopeless situation, and this filled his despairing heart with the highest of hopes, for he learned you can give up on yourself and your own ability to escape, but you ought never to give up on God, for He can deliver you from any pit no matter how deep and seemingly hopeless it is. We see an example of this in Psa. 107 where God's people were in a storm tossed ship. It looked hopeless for them to survive. Starting at verse 26 we read, "In their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men. They were at their wits end. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and He guided them to their desired haven."

They were helpless in a hopeless situation. They were in the depths of despair, and yet they were also hopeful, for they cried out to God and He rescued them. The believer has to live sometimes in the paradoxical world of despair and hope at the same time. Politics makes strange bedfellows we say, but so does faith. Despair and hope are opposites, but they are often partners. The one aids us to let go of self, and the other aids us to take hold on God. Numerous were the passages where the feelings of despair and hope are linked together. They teach the same double lesson that Paul is teaching to the Corinthians, and that is that they are to be comforted in their despair, for it happens to the best. Be comforted because it forces you to look to God and be lifted to the heights of hope.

Edmund Burk said, "Never despair, but if you do work on in despair."

Paul would say amen, for if you work on by looking up you can reach the heights from that pit. This is the good news for both the world and the church. It is the greatest message of comfort in the world, for even the worst sinner in the pit of despair can look up, and buy the love of Christ be taken out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. That is what salvation is. It is being taken out of the pit of self-sufficiency and being set on the Rock of Christ's sufficiency.

Francis Scott Key who wrote the Star Spangled Banner also wrote this letter to a cousin: "Nothing but Christianity will give you the victory. Until a man believes in his heart that Jesus Christ is his Lord and Master...his course through life will be neither safe nor pleasant. My only regret is that I was so long blinded by my pleasures, my vices and pursuits, and the examples of others that I was kept seeing, admiring, and adoring the marvelous light of the Gospel.

There was no one who can be so blind, or so depressed, or in such a deep pit of despair that the Christian does not have good news for them. To be at the end of your rope is the best place to be if you are going to let go of self-salvation, and look to God for your deliverance in Christ. People in despair are good prospects for the kingdom of God.

Chuck Colson in his book Kingdoms In Conflict writes that Winston Churchill died with these words on his lips, "There is no hope, there is no hope." He looked at a world of sinful men trying to gain power and control of other people, and he was in despair. Colson takes a survey of the world and says there is good reason for despair, for people all over the world are killing each other. He writes that man has the technology for the greatest era for peace and prosperity, but man uses his power for evil and destruction. He also despairs about mans ever being able to produce a world of peace, but he ends his book with hope, not in man, but in the God of all comfort who has given us a lasting hope.

He ends his book with these words: "Like any author, I would like to end this book on a triumphant note, announcing that ultimate peace and harmony can be achieved through human efforts. But that utopian illusion is shattered by the splinted history of the human race. Governments rise; even the most powerful fall. The battle for people's hearts and minds will continue. Where then is hope? It is in the fact that the kingdom of God has come to earth-the

kingdom announced by Jesus Christ in that obscure Nazareth synagogue 2000 years ago. It is a kingdom that comes not in a temporary take over of political structures, but in the lasting takeover of the human heart by the rule of a holy God."

Our hope is not in self, not in the government, not in the U.N., not in technology, and not in all the idols of history, but our hope is in God. Anything that can get us to focus on this narrow way is a blessing, even if it means the pit of despair that robs us of all the other hopes. The world is indeed a hopeless case, but that is why God needed to provide us with a Savior. The world cannot save itself, nor can any person in the world. Our hope is in God alone, for He specializes in hopeless cases.

Tony was a good example. He was a 5 year old who was raised in the streets of Tijuana surrounded by crime, narcotics, and prostitution. His chances for a good life were extremely low. Then one day he heard his baby brother screaming, and when he ran into the house he saw his parents bending over his brother's body with a bloody club nearby. He turned and ran. His parents reported him to the police and told them that Tony had murdered his brother, and that is why he ran away. So 5 year old Tony was thrown in prison for murder. There he stayed until Carolyn Koons visited the prison. Carolyn was herself a product of great family abuse. But she found Christ and founded Mexicali Outreach, which brought hundreds of college students into Northern Mexico for short term missionary work.

That is how she discovered Tony in prison. There had never been any investigation of the charges against him. He was just presumed guilty and left to spend his life in prison. She fought a long and expensive battle against bureaucratic red tape, but she finally won his freedom and brought him to the United States. She raised him as a single parent and sent him to a Christian college. A kid who had no chance in a hopeless situation was, by the providence of God, given love and life and eternal hope. He was taken from the depths of despair to the heights of hope.

The lesson Paul wants all Christians to learn is not that there are not hopeless situations. He knows there are for he had been in such situations. But the point is, it was not hopeless for God. We have a right to feel hopeless and helpless when all our powers are fruitless. But we also have a responsibility to then look to God for whom there are no hopeless situations.

The Comforter helps the hopeless look beyond their despair.

A 26-year-old baseball player was cut from the Yankees and sent back to the farm club. He decided to quit baseball and get a job. He and his wife were driving back to their hometown in Louisiana when he stopped for gas. His wife said, "Honey, it is always going to bother me to think that you ran away and will never know whether you could have made it in the big leagues or not." Right there he made a decision to head back North. He went to the farm club and worked hard. Three years later he was declared the pitcher of the year. He won the Cy Young Hall of Fame Award, and led the Yankees to two world championships. Ron Guidry was his name. He was in a pit of despair about his future, but his wife's encouragement gave him the hope he needed to try again.

Paul's point is, don't give up in despair, for failure is a part of life. Just give up trusting in your own power to solve the problem. Let go of the self-sufficiency and put your hope in God. Is it 100% guaranteed God will lift you out of the pit? No! Paul was rescued often, but he was finally killed by Nero. The point is that Paul could have died much earlier, but God gave him assurance that he would be spared until his work was done. That is all the hope anyone needs. Like Paul, we should all be looking to God no matter what our circumstances, and be ever moving out of despair into hope.

2. PAUL'S SELF-DEFENSE Based on II Cor. 1:12-17

Jonathan Edwards was born in 1703, and he became one of the greatest preachers in history. He lived in a day when pastors went to a church out of seminary and stayed there for the rest of their lives. His father was the pastor of The Congregational Church in the little village of East Windsor, Conn. for 64 years. Jonathan entered Yale at age 13 and graduated at age 17. He studied theology for 2 years and then became a tutor at Yale. At age 24 he was invited to be the junior pastor at Northampton, Mass. where his grandfather was the senior pastor. Two years later his grandfather died and he was the sole pastor of the church.

Edwards developed a theology that said God can do whatever He wants

with people. They are His creatures and He can do with them as He pleases. He can take them to heaven or cast them into hell. He has the right and the power to do anything He wills. He started to preach a series on this theme, and one became very famous, and it was called Sinners In The Hands Of An angry God. His fearful messages started a revival that spread until he became one of the most famous and influential pastors in the nation, and he was still only in his 30's.

When the winds of change died down, and the emotions of revival cooled, and apathy set in there was a period from 1744 to 1748 where not a single new person joined the church. This was a long dry spell, and critics of Edwards stirred up agitation. After much personal bitterness the church voted in 1750 to dismiss their pastor. He appealed to the Ecclesiastical Council to review the church's action, but five of the nine ministers voted to sustain his dismissal. So Edwards found himself out of a job at 47 years of age with a wife and 10 children to support. Their financial situation was pathetic.

After a few months the church found that nobody wanted to come to be their pastor, and so they did an unbelievable thing: They asked Edwards to help them out. Most pastors would have refused with indignation, but Edwards agreed to do it. He started preaching again in the pulpit from which he had been cast out. He was ministering the Word of God to a people who had rejected him. He did this for a year before he got a call to another church. He went on to write 4 theological works that gave him the reputation of being the most original religious thinker in American history. In 1758 he was asked to become the President of Princeton. I share this history of one of the great preachers of our land because it is such a parallel to what we see in the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian Church.

Paul spent a year and a half getting this church established. It was hard work, for they were a very godless people, and Paul needed special encouragement from God to hang in there and not give up. So Paul plugged away at it and got Silas and Timothy to come and take over his labor of making tents so he could devote himself full time to preaching and teaching. You would think that this would be a dream church. The world's greatest Apostle, who was the most brilliant and devoted man on the earth was their pastor, but the fact is, it was a nightmare. Paul had more problems with this church than with all the rest of them put together. These Christians refused

to grow up. They stayed as babes, and the result was they were not really any different than the pagans around them. Paul, however, never gave up on this bunch of carnal Christians. He wrote 4 letters to them. We have 2 of them, but he refers in them to 2 others he wrote. So we have the paradox that the church, which had the most problems, and which gave Paul the most grief, have the most written to them of all the churches. They were the worst and they received the best.

They found every petty fault they could find in Paul to criticize. They chewed him up and spit him out, and yet Paul keeps coming back for more. Many who study the issue in depth wonder why Paul did not just write them off as a hopeless cause. As Paul travels the world he is ever thinking of this church and how he can help them shape up and stop being so critical. He wants them to grow up for the glory of God. Most would walk away from a church that treated them like this, but Paul looks at all their fault finding and decided he will defend himself against these critics.

This letter is loaded with Paul's self-defense. Some Christians feel it is not wise to engage in self-defense, for it can sound very egotistical. This is true, and at times Paul sounds anything but humble in this letter, but we need to keep in mind that he is not doing this for his sake, or for his reputation. The truth of God's Word will suffer and all the church will be hurt if he lets his critics undermine his authority and his teaching. He is defending himself for the sake of the church. Self-defense is legitimate when it benefits others.

Believe it or not, one of the main criticisms of Paul was that you cannot trust the man to keep his promises. Paul told the Corinthians that he planned to come and see them and spend a winter with them after he went through Macedonia. But that plan did not work out, and Paul did not make it to Corinth. The best laid plans of mice and men, and even Apostles, do not always work out, and this one of Paul's fell through. This is just the sort of thing critics latch onto. They were saying that Paul's word was not worth the paper it was written on. He says one thing and then does another. He says yes, but he means no.

It made no difference to the critics that Paul ended his promise to come to them with these words in I Cor. 16:7, "...if the Lord permits." Paul knew that life did not always go according to his plan, and so he conditioned his promise. But this did not stop the faultfinders. Have you ever promised

somebody something and then discovered that life took a turn that you were not expecting, and you could not keep that promise? Parents have this quite often with children. You don't have to do this very often before you hear the words, "You never do what you say you will." This is what the childish critics are saying to Paul. He is like a mother who placates her crying kids by promising them the moon, but when it comes to carrying out the promise she is too tired, or has other plans.

Parents often do make promises too easily, and they do fail to be consistent with keeping their word. But this is not the case with Paul. He has valid reasons for his behavior, and much of this letter is his self-defense. It is hard to deal with Paul's defense in any other way but by a methodical verse by verse examination of his arguments and statements, and so that is what we will do beginning with verse 12. Paul begins with, "Now this is our boast." The Greek word Paul uses for boast is a very common word in the Greek world. The only problem is that it is almost always a bad word used to describe a person who trumpets his own renown, and is, therefore, not liked.

We feel the same about a boaster today, and so it does not sound like a good choice of words for a man trying to defend himself against critics. This is especially so since James 4:16, using this same word, says, "As it is you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil." So now he has James against him too, and he is calling him evil for his boasting. Paul's first words of defense do not seem appropriate unless he is trying to hang himself, or unless he is a master of paradox. That, of course, is what Paul was, and by so being he teaches us over and over again that the same thing can be both evil and good. Boasting is primarily evil, for it is a sign of pride. But we all know there is also a positive pride, which is the foundation for our self-esteem, and without it we would not be healthy individuals.

Paul had a healthy sense of self-esteem, and he was able to be honest about how he felt about the gifts God had given him. His pride and boasting were not self-centered, but God-centered. You will notice that he stresses that his gifts are from God and according to God's grace. When your boasting exalts God as the source of what you are proud about it is a virtue. Just because most boasting is a vice of self-centered pride does not mean we should avoid all boasting. Paul took this bad word and used it often in a positive way. In so doing he taught Christians to look for the positive side of the sinful nature of man. What possible good lurks in the hearts of sinners who behave

so proud and boast of their achievements as if they were self-made and created all their gifts on their own? That very vice that keeps them self-centered can become a tool for God-centered service. This negative word became one of Paul's favorite words. He uses it about 25 times in his letters to the Corinthians, and it is used only a few times in all the rest of the New Testament. It is a bad thing that can be good if properly expressed.

Minnie Pearl was famous for saying, "I'm mighty proud to be here." It was an expression of joy and a compliment to the audience. No one would ever accuse her of sinful pride in her spirit. Paul says something very similar when he says, "I am mighty proud to be God's agent in this world. I am mighty proud to be a child of God and a useful tool for His kingdom." We sing something like it when we sing, "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God." Is that pride? Is that boasting? Yes it is, but it's the good kind that Paul loves to express often. It is that good pride like, "I am proud to be an American." Paul was proud to be a Christian, and he is going to boast about being a good Christian by the grace of God.

The first thing Paul boasts about is his clear conscience. His conscience testifies that he has been blameless in conduct in the world, and especially in his relationship to them. It is obvious to all commentators that Paul is being accused by some in the church of worldly behavior and worldly wisdom. They are questioning his integrity and sincerity. Almost every evangelist is suspect because there are so many who manipulate people for their own gain. Paul and all faithful evangelists have to endure this same criticism because it is so often true. Once you are accused of bad behavior it is very hard to get rid of the stain and restore your image. It is not enough to be innocent, for you have to prove it, and this will never convince all the critics.

Some years ago governor Gifford Pinchot of Pennsylvania sent his black retriever to the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia for the inmates to have a mascot. The prisoners loved the dog, and he became a great favorite. The story got out that he had condemned the dog to prison for killing a cat. He got letters from all over the world denouncing his inhuman cruelty. He could not stop the spread of the story, and so through his whole term of office he kept getting these nasty letters. It is hard to believe that people in total ignorance of the facts will go off half-cocked and in righteous indignation blast people as if they had direct access to the omniscient mind of God.

If you read of the hoaxes that have stirred up millions to write letters of protest over false reports you will discover that Christians are the worst offenders. They are often gullible and easily manipulated by false reports. It is nothing new, for Paul had to fight it in his day as all kinds of misinformation was being spread about him, and it was Christians who were doing it and believing it. That is why we see his self-defense in this letter, for if the falsehoods were allowed to stand his ministry would suffer.

His first argument is, "I do not feel guilty for my conduct, for my conscious is clear." His promise to visit them was made in all sincerity, and he does not feel any guilt that he could not keep his promise, for that was out of his hands. He does not control all of life, and so the best he can do is plan and make a sincere effort to carry out that plan. Some Christians go all to pieces when plans do not go as they wish. They feel guilt as if they failed. Paul will have none of this guilt, for he did his best. He moves on to plan B and does not fret and grieve and feel guilt. Some were trying to make Paul feel guilty by telling others that if he was really spiritual his plan would have worked out.

It is a case of Job's friends ride again. They were blaming Paul for the complexity of his life as if it was his sin that made his life so complex. If he was more spiritual and less worldly his plans would work out and he could keep his promises. Christians are notorious for calling other Christians less spiritual because they don't operate just the same way as they do. In his defense Paul writes that all he does is characterize by the holiness and sincerity that are from God. In other words, he operates with a singleness of heart, and he is not double minded as his critics are saying.

The word sincerity means, "Judged by the sun." When a person bought a vase they would hold it up to the sun, for if there was a crack in it the sun would reveal that flaw. Paul is saying, "I am not a fake putting on a show for my own benefit. I do not deceive you." Some vase makers would cover over their flaws with wax so you could not see the crack unless you held it up to the sun. On a cloudy day they could sell these defective vases, for they looked perfect. Paul is saying, "I am not trying to hide anything and put one over on you. I operate openly and above board, and gladly submit to a thorough examination to test my sincerity."

Because Paul is so honest with this self-exposure of his conduct,

character and motives, we have in this letter the most intimate look at Paul's inner being and emotions. Paul tells us his conscience is a witness for his defense, for it says to him that he has done the right thing. Paul is the New Testament authority when it comes to the conscience. John uses this word only once, and Peter 3 times, but Paul uses it 28 times of the 32 uses in the New Testament. For Paul conscience is the self-awareness that you are right or wrong in your attitudes and actions. If you are deceiving people and doing what you know is not the will of God, you will feel guilty. The ancient Greeks saw the conscience as an inner witness telling you that you are on the right path, or that you are going astray. It is a God-given inner voice. It can be a very effective guide even in the pagan world.

This whole business with the conscience is a major theological issue with Paul. He writes in Rom. 2:14-15, "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." Paul is saying that there are pagan people who are guided by their conscience, and if they listen to this inner voice and obey it, they are as righteous as those who obey God's written law in His Word. Where there is no Bible people will be judged according to their conscience.

In Paul's day the conscience was a major subject. The Pythagoreans stressed the importance of a good conscience, and self-examination each night. They wrote, "Thou shalt not take sleep to thy gentle eyes until thou has considered each of the days acts. Where did I fail? What was a right act? What was left undone? Begin with the first, go through them, and finally when thou has done wrong rebuke thyself and when thou has done good rejoice." Socrates left the judgment of his accusers, who gave false evidence, to their conscience. Seneca the Roman stoic, who was a contemporary of Paul, wrote, "Every night I examine my life. I open out my conscience to the gods. For conscience is to every man a sort of inward god. The famous Roman by the name of Cicero wrote, "There is a law within, diffused among all men, constant, eternal.... There is one common master and commander of all, even God who originated this law. If anyone obeys not this law he plays false to himself and does despite to the nature of man."

Philo was the Greek Jewish theologian who was also a contemporary of

Paul. He wrote of the conscience, "It is born with every soul and makes its abode with it, nor is it want to admit anything that offends. Its priority is ever to hate the evil and love the good." We could go on and on, but these are sufficient to make clear why Paul appeals to his conscience in self- defense. It was universally accepted by pagans, Jews and Christians that the conscience was a key witness to any persons motives. A clear conscience was one of the best testimonies that could be presented. Paul is saying, I am proud to declare that my conscience testifies I have been holy and sincere in all my dealings with the world and with the church.

Paul is saying that the charges of him being worldly wise are not true, and they are based on the critics misunderstanding. He makes it clear in verse 14 that he expects this letter to clear up this misunderstanding so that they can be proud of him. His self-defense is not just to make him look better, but to help the Corinthians so they can be proud of their founder and teacher, and, thereby feel more secure in their faith. Their self-image is going to be damaged if they think their founder is a con man. The goal is mutual boasting of each other, and a sense of positive pride about who they are in Christ.

The critics of Paul are saying that he is deceptive and that he uses words to cleverly say one thing, but he really means another. Paul says in verse 13 that what he writes to them is not mysterious and ambiguous, but it is easy to understand, for he is being as open and honest as he can be to convey transparent genuineness. His opponents are reading between the lines, and they are reading in things he is not saying. Critics who do not like a person are easily detected, as are Paul's critics. They find fault very easy because they read into his words and acts that which is not his intent to convey. Never take a critics interpretation of the meaning of another person's words, for there will be distortion. The only valid interpretation of a man's words are what he gives. If it sounds like a man is saying one thing and meaning another, don't ask his critics, ask him. He alone can give you an authentic interpretation of what he means. Paul's critics are saying, "We think he means something other than what he says." Paul responds, "You are wrong. When I say yes I mean yes, and when I say no I mean no. I say what I mean and I mean what I say."

Warren Wiersbe of Back To The Bible fame says he can sympathize with Paul, for he has made promises too and then had plans changed so that

he had to cancel meetings where he was scheduled to be. Christians can be very critical when you foul up their plans. Paul's critics are calling him wishy-washy. He does not care about us, but only wants to get our money. We will see a lot of criticism and a lot of self-defense as we study this letter. The major lesson of this letter is that Christians are too critical, and they hurt the cause of Christ by being that way.

I must confess that I find myself critical of other Christians. We went to a large Presbyterian Church, and found myself being critical. Their choir was not nearly as good as ours, and the pastor took 10 minutes giving announcements, and his message had no central theme. I came away feeling proud that even though we are smaller we have a better service. Being critical of others makes us feel superior, and that is why it is popular, and that is why Christians put others down. It is important for us to be aware that we have this critical spirit so that we can keep it under control. That is one of the major goals for studying this letter of Paul.

3. OUR JESUS IS YES Based on II Cor. 1:15-22

Yes is only a three letter word, but its utterance can change your life. It happened to the poet Robert Robinson one Sunday morning in London. People everywhere were hurrying to church, but he was not. He had left the church, and he had lost the once passionate faith that made him a zealous witness for Christ. He was now dark and cold inside, and he was a very lonely man as he walked the streets. He heard the clip clop, clip clop of a horse drawn cab behind him. He turned and lifted his hand to hail the driver. But then he saw that the cab was occupied by a young woman dressed for church. He waved the driver on, but the woman ordered the carriage to be stopped.

The woman in the carriage said to him, "Sir, I'd be happy to share this carriage with you. Are you going to church?" He was about to decline when suddenly he was overcome by an urge to say yes. He did it. He said yes, and he got into the carriage. As it rolled forward he told her his name, and she said, "What a coincidence. I was just reading a verse by a poet with that name of Robert Robinson. She reached into her purse and pulled out the

small book of inspirational verse. She handed it to him and he nodded and said, "Yes, I wrote these words years ago." She exclaimed, "Oh, how wonderful! Imagine! I'm sharing a carriage with the author of these very lines."

She was thrilled with God's providence in her life, but she had no idea of the profound work God was doing in his life. He opened his own book to his poem that became a famous hymn. He read these words:

Come thou fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace.
Streams of mercy never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.

His eyes filled with tears as he read the bottom of the page.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it-
Prone to leave the God I love,
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

He was convicted and then revived by his own poem, and restored to fellowship with God. It was all because he said yes to an invitation to do something he knew was the will of God, and that was to go to church. The more we say yes to those things God wants in our lives, the more we will receive the yes of God's promises. e. e. cummings wrote,

Yes is a world
And in this world of
Yes live (skillfully curled)
All worlds.

The world of salvation begins with our own yes to the Gospel. Yes we say to God, I will receive your gift of eternal life in Christ. From then on every stage of growth is a stage we advance to by saying yes to God. Yes I will pray and read your word for guidance and wisdom. Yes I will give of my time, talent, and treasure to bless the body of Christ, and yes I will give and I will go to fulfill the Great Commission. Yes I will witness to my world, and yes I will love my neighbor as myself. Yes I will love and praise and serve my

Savior, and I will follow the path He reveals for me to follow. The whole Christian life is a life of saying yes to God who has said yes to us in Jesus.

Paul in our text tells us that Jesus is never no, but always yes. He is God's yes, and all God's promises are yes in Christ. This is the greatest text in the Bible for the support of Christian optimism and biblical positive thinking.

1. Is there life after death? The answer of God in Christ is yes!

2. Is there hope for people who have messed their life up beyond human repair?

The answer of God in Christ is yes!

3. Is there a way out of the predicament men get into by their mere humanistic

schemes? The answer of God in Christ is yes!

4. Can sin be forgiven? The answer of God in Christ is yes!

5. Can the future still be a success? The answer of God in Christ is yes!

6. Can broken relationships be restored? The answer of God in Christ is yes!

7. Can impossible dreams still come true? The answer of God in Christ is yes!

8. Can I overcome the past? The answer of God in Christ is yes!

You can go on and on asking such hard questions, and the answer of God in Christ is always yes, yes, yes. God's answer in Christ is always yes, for Jesus is the yes of God. That is why the Christian can always celebrate even in fallen world filled with sin, sickness, and sorrow, for the final word will always be yes. James Angell could write,

**In the midst of flashing neon darkness,
We dare this day to celebrate the light.
In the midst of blaring, shouting silence,
We dare this day to celebrate the word.
In the midst of bloated, gorged starvation,
We dare this day to celebrate the bread.
In the midst of bottled, bubbling thirst,
We dare this day to celebrate the water.
In the midst of smothered, gnawing doubt,
We dare to celebrate the affirmation.
In the midst of frantic, laughing death,
We dare this day to celebrate life.**

How can we have the audacity to be positive and hopeful in such a negative world? It is because our Jesus is yes. The Christian who is negative, and who says no more often than yes to life is a captive of the world mentality. We all fall into the no mode from time to time, but it is to be a fall and not the ditch we choose to walk in. We are to get back to the highway of yes, for that is where a Christian should always be walking.

Neil Eskelin wrote a fascinating book called Yes, Yes Living In A No, No World. He found Christians in large measure tend to be a drag on the body of Christ because of their no, no spirit. They tend to be critical and resistant to a positive way of doing all things for the glory of God. He learned the power of being a yes, yes father in relating to a no, no son. His five year boy had the living room full of toys, and it was time to go to bed. When he asked him to pick them up he said he was too tired. His immediate response was to force him to clean up the room, but then he got a better idea. He decided to try a more positive approach. He took his son into the bedroom and laid down with his knees up, put his son up on them, and played Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. The boy loved the sudden fall to the bed and was having a great time. Over and over he asked to do it again. But after the third fall dad said you first have to go and pick up the toys. The son ran and finished the task and was quickly back to play some more.

Dad learned a valuable lesson. If you can find a way to get a child to say yes I want to, then life is so much easier than when you are trying to push them with a no spirit. No is an uphill job, but yes is a downhill slide. No creates friction, but yes creates freedom. That is why he wrote his book on yes, yes living. He gives a number of examples of how yes people are the ones who do what no people say can't be done.

Cyrus Field was convinced a cable could be laid on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean to allow communication between the U. S. and Europe. He had a special cable laid and tried it, but it kept failing to work. The headlines read, "Field fails again." His friends and supporters were disheartened, and investors begin to pull out not wanting to risk anymore money. The no people were in control of the masses, but they could not stop Field from saying yes. He knew it could be done and he organized a new company and made it work. The first message sent on this cable under the ocean was, "Thank God the cable is laid and is in perfect order."

The history of progress is the story of people who can yes, yes when everyone else is saying no, no. Henry Ward Beecher, the great orator, recalled the day in school when he was demonstrating a problem in geometry. The teacher stopped him with a "No, No!" In a tone of total conviction. Beecher sat down in total confusion because he thought he was doing it right. The next boy went to the board and was stopped with the same loud "No!" But he went right ahead and completed the problem. Beecher raised his hand and said he was doing the exact same problem. The teacher replied, "Why didn't you say yes and stick to it? It's not good enough to know your lesson. You must know you know it."

This can be a powerful lesson that every parent should teach their children. They will confront a no, no world all of their lives, and if they do not have a yes, yes spirit they will be in bondage to the no. Humorous Sam Levenson knows what it means to look for the best. He is a short man, but he doesn't let it bother him. At a dinner he was surrounded by a group of rather tall businessmen. "Don't you feel quite small among these big men?" someone asked him. "Yes I do," was Levenson's reply. "I feel like a dime among a lot of pennies." That is a yes, yes way to look at it.

If we as Christians do not have a yes, yes spirit, we are part of the problem rather than part of the answer. Jesus is the yes of God, and if Jesus is in us, then we are to be yes people. This does not mean we are yes men and yes women in the negative sense that this terminology is used. When so used it means we go along with authority whether we really agree or not. The New Orleans man eased himself into the chair and called for a shave. The little barber was of a swarthy complexion that indicated that he might be of Latin-American blood. As he stropped his razor he opened the conversation with: "What's your opinion of this Mexican situation?" "Same as yours." "But how do you know what mine is?" "Don't matter. You've got the razor."

This is not the kind of yes people we are to be-saying yes out of fear. The Christian is to be a positive yes person out of the conviction that Paul had-I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Jesus is God's yes-he is the resource to give the energy and motivation to do whatever God wills you to do. The Christian can do whatever God wills, and so they are to be perpetually striving to do it with a yes mentality.

Paul says that by the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit in our hearts we can say amen to the glory of God. That is, we can say so be it, or yes to all God wills for us. Jesus never said no to God. He was tempted to say no, but He never did. He was always saying yes. Through Him Paul says we are to continue to say amen to the glory of God. Jesus is the everlasting yea and amen. 31 times in Matthew Jesus said amen; 14 times in Mark, 7 in Luke, 25 in John, for a total of 77 times in the Gospels. Jesus was single minded and so it was not sometimes yes and sometimes no. He was always yes. He said yes to God even when that yes took Him to the cross.

You can say no to Jesus and reject His love and sacrifice for you, but you can never change His yes to no. He will not change. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, for He is the everlasting yes. People came to Jesus in great crowds because He never said no. He had life to give and light, and He had healing and salvation. He gave freely and did not turn anyone away. His was a yes, yes life in a no, no world.

President Thomas Jefferson was riding horseback with some companions, and they came to a swollen stream. A foot traveler was there by the stream, waiting to ask someone on horseback to give him a ride across the rushing water. Jefferson responded and pulled the man up on his horse and took him to the other side. "Tell me," asked one of the men, "why did you ask the President to help you across?" The man answered, "I didn't know he was the President. All I know is that on some faces is written the answer "no," and on some is written the answer "yes." He had a yes face."

Jesus had just such a face, and Paul says this yes from the face of Christ is to shine yet in this world through us. In II Cor. 4:6 we read, "For God who said let light shine out of darkness made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." God sent His Son into the world to give light, hope, and salvation. The Gospel is good news, for it says that no matter what a mess life is, there is an answer, and it is a good one, and a positive answer in Christ.

Ilion T. Jones says that Paul is saying here, "That Christ is God's clear-cut, positive answer to all our human questions, to all our human needs, to all our human hopes and dreams." He is God's yes, yes, yes, and this makes Christianity a positive faith. The Old Testament was so much on a no, no, no level. Thou shalt not was the theme. But the New Testament rises to a

higher level and says we are to grow up and stop living on the child's level of no, no. Sink your teeth into the meat of maturity. Get off the bottle and start saying yes to life. Say yes to God, not because He will hurt you if you don't, but because you love Him as He loves you, and you desire to please Him and not the world, the flesh, and the devil. You don't spend all your energy saying no to sin and folly because you are too busy saying yes to love, service, and ministry.

Many have suggested that if David had said yes to his duties as king of Israel, and not been idle with nothing to do but lust after Bathsheba, he may never have fallen. All we know for sure is that he had opened the door for Satan to entice him to say no to God, and that no led to all the negatives of his life that blotted one of the greatest careers in history. Every sin in history from the first one in Eden until now has been very simply a saying no to God. Every virtue, victory, and act of righteousness in history has been simply a saying yes to God. Jesus was the only perfect man because He is the only person to never say no, but always say yes to God. Jesus lived the only completely yes, yes life in a no, no world.

To be Christ like is to be one who is always saying yes to God. All of the battles of life can be seen in this ultimate simplicity of what the poet has God say at creation. "I will leave man to make the fateful guess: Will leave him torn between the no and yes." These are the only two choices we have in our relationship to God. To make it easier to say yes, God gave us Jesus who is the yes to all His provisions. This becomes the foundation on which we build the yes life. William Green put it, "Christ is God's ultimate yes to man, and when we find that God has said yes to us we are able to affirm ourselves and our world in spite of everything which drives us toward negation."

When we are negative about life it is because we have taken our eyes off Jesus. The Corinthians were negative toward Paul, and he is saying they ought not to criticize him for being inconsistent, for he always says yes to Christ and never no, and so he is being consistently positive in his decisions. If his plans sound like a no to them, it is not so, and they need to see his plans as a yes to Christ. He urges them to stop their negative thinking which is inconsistent with a Christ like spirit.

If you believe that God always says yes in Christ, you will not be so critical and complaining about my change of plans, is what Paul is saying. God who

gave His Son for you has proven His love beyond any doubt. You can count on it that He will do everything else necessary to keep His promises to you. So he urges them to stop saying no and start responding to God's yes with a yes, yes spirit. Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General of the U. N. from 1953 to 1961, and a dedicated Christian, said, "When everything has a meaning, how can you live anything but a yes."

Billy Graham has been deeply influenced by yes people. They have been people who had to deal with the no's of life, but they did not accept the no. They rejected it, and chose the yes. One he writes about in his book Storm Warning is former President Dwight Eisenhower. Graham says that he had a strong impact on his thinking, for though he was a general and fought great battles, he was not in favor of war. War is a no, and he fought for peace which was a yes approach to life. Graham quotes him saying in 1953, "Every gun that is made, every war ship launched, every rocket fired signifies-in a final sense-a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children....this is not a way of life at all in true sense. Under the threatening cloud of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron."

These words motivated Graham to take an interest in the third world countries, and take a tour of them to see first hand the poverty and hunger. He learned that it was a moral obligation for every Christian to get involved in the world suffering and be a part of the answer. Saying yes to God and yes to life means being Christ like in relation to a hurting world. In that same book he tells of his meeting with one of the great yes people.

"One of the people most identified with Christian compassion in our day is Mother Teresa of Calcutta. There are thousands of unknown servants of Christ who quietly and without fanfare invest their lives in feeding, clothing, and caring for the poor. But Mother Teresa has become a kind of representative of them all. I remember the first time I met this tiny, wrinkled, radiant lady. An American consul in Calcutta offered to drive me to Mother Teresa's compound in the heart of that sprawling city, when I was introduced to her, she was ministering to a dying person, holding him in her arms. I waited while she helped him face death. When he died, she prayed quietly, gently lowered him to his bed, and turned to greet me. We talked till dusk that day. I was surprised to

learn how much she knew about me and about our crusades. In her lilting, broken English she asked if I would like to hear some of her experiences with the hungry and dying."

He listened and was touched, for in the midst of a terrible no, no world here was a child of God letting the world hear the yes of God in Christ. E. Stanley Jones, the great missionary and author of numerous books, called his last book, which was written when he was 89, was titled The Divine Yes. This text was the basis for the book, and he wrote, "Jesus took the worse thing that could happen to Him, namely, the Cross, and turned it into the healing of sin. The Cross was hate, and Jesus turned it into a revelation of love. Jesus took everything that spoke against the love of God and, though it, showed the love of God. It is a Yes, a Yes over the very worst. Yes, about the nature of God. Yes, yes, yes!"

Jones gives many illustrations, but let me share one that shows just how close Christians can get to saying yes to every no of life. "There is a Lee Memorial Home in Calcutta, India. The Lees had 6 children in school in Darjeeling, a hill station in India. One night during the monsoon rains the whole mountain side, upon which their home was built, slipped and buried all 6 children at once! Instead of the Lee's saying, "Why did that happen to us when we were serving God in Calcutta?" They said, "Well, since our home has been broken up we will just set up a larger home for the waif children from the streets of Calcutta." For over 70 years that home has been filled with an average of about 500 homeless children a year. The family of 6 now became a family of thousands. On the monument set up to commemorate the memory of these children there are these words: "Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The whole point of Paul is to get the Corinthian Christians to stop being no people and become yes people. This is the point of all we do as a church. Worship, Bible study, fellowship, and service are all designed to help us be like Jesus, and to be ever saying yes to God. This has practical implications for all human relationships. We express our love for one another and our neighbor, and even our foes, by being yes minded rather than no minded.

Judieth Viorst, a popular writer, has this advice to married couples: "The answer to-do you love me isn't, I married you didn't I? Or, can't we discuss this after the ballgame is through? It isn't, well that all depends on

what you mean by "love." Or even, come to bed and I'll prove that I do. The answer isn't, how can I talk about love when the bacon is burned and the house is an absolute mess and the children are screaming their heads off and I'm going to miss the bus? The answer is yes. The answer is yes. The answer is yes."

If we really believe that Jesus is the yes of God, we should be able to respond to every negative in life with a positive. We should be able to counteract each no with a yes, and so be yes, yes people in a no, no world. In the light of this passage I wrote the following lyrics-

**IT'S A WORLD OF CAN'T
AND A WORLD OF DON'T.
PEOPLE RAVE AND RANT
AND THEY THRIVE ON WON'T.**

**BUT JESUS IS YES;
HE NEVER IS NO.
HIS GOAL IS TO BLESS;
GOD'S LOVE TO US SHOW.**

**CHORUS
YES, YES, YES MY JESUS IS YES,
EVERY PROMISE OF GOD IN HIM WE POSSESS.
YES, YES, YES MY JESUS IS YES;
THAT IS WHY ALL OUR PRAISE, TO HIM WE ADDRESS.**

**II
IT'S A WORLD OF NO
AND A WORLD OF NOT.
IT'S READY TO BLOW;
IT'S GOING TO POT.**

**BUT JESUS IS YES;
A POSITIVE NOTE.
IF HIM WE CONFESS,
HE'LL KEEP US AFLOAT.**

CHORUS

III

**IT'S A WORLD OF WAR
AND A WORLD OF NIGHT.
WHAT'S GOOD, MEN ABHOR;
THEY RESIST WHAT'S RIGHT.**

**BUT JESUS IS YES;
HE OFFERS US LIGHT.
IN THE MIDST OF STRESS,
HIS BURDEN IS LITE.**

CHORUS

IV

**IT'S A WORLD OF HATE
AND A WORLD OF CRIME.
THERE IS NO DEBATE,
IT'S NEAR END OF TIME.**

**BUT JESUS IS YES;
IN TIMES OF GREAT STRIFE.
HIS GIFT IS NO LESS
THAN ETERNAL LIFE.**

CHORUS

V.

**IT'S A NO NO WORLD,
AND IT'S FILLED WITH DOUBT.
MEN ARE TOSSED AND HURLED,
AND JUST THROWN ABOUT.**

**BUT JESUS IS YES;
HE'S THE ONLY WAY.
IF FAITH YOU'LL PROFESS
HE'LL SAVE YOU TODAY.**

CHORUS

VI.

**IT'S A WORLD OF DARK
WHERE NEGATIVES THRIVE.
SOME OFTEN REMARK
IT'S HARD TO SURVIVE.**

**BUT JESUS IS YES;
A RAY OF SUNSHINE;
THE WAY TO SUCCESS
AND A LIFE WITH DESIGN.**

CHORUS

**YES, YES, YES, MY JESUS IS YES;
EVERY PROMISE OF GOD IN HIM WE POSSESS.
YES, YES, YES, MY JESUS IS YES;
THAT'S WHY THIS SONG OF PRAISE
TO OUR SAVIOUR WE RAISE
NOW AND TO ENDLESS DAYS,
FOR HE'S GOD'S YES! YES! YES!**

4. GODLY CHANGE based on II Cor. 2:1-11

Many years ago the U. S. Army wanted to get off more rounds of cannon fire, and so they hired a consultant to study the problem. He went into the field and noticed that the soldiers stepped back from the cannon and waited for about 3 seconds every time they fired it. When asked why they replied that they were following directions laid down in the army manual. The consultant read through all the back issues until he traced the instructions to their origin in the Civil War. Soldiers were then advised to step back before firing to hold the gun horses head so that they would not bolt and thus jerk the cannon off target. These were important instructions at the time, but everything had changed, and horses were no longer there. These instructions had passed down for years and were followed even though they had no

relevance whatever. The manual was changed to fit the changed circumstances.

Change is wise when the old way of doing something can be done better to fulfill the purpose for which you do it at all. The Christian life is to be a life of constant change where we are getting better and better at pleasing God by loving Him with all our hearts, and by loving our neighbor as ourselves. The goal of all we do as a church is change. Change is the name of the game, and if we do not see change we are failing. Christ-likeness is only achieved by change. Christian education does not happen just because information is imparted. There are millions of non-Christians who can tell you the story of Adam and Eve, Noah, and Jonah. They can even tell the story of the cross and resurrection. They have the facts, but they are not changed by them. You do not have a Christian education until the facts of the Bible change your life, and lead you to a commitment to Christ as Lord of your life.

Nobody becomes a Christian without change, and nobody becomes a growing Christian without more change. Change is the essence of the Christian life, and when a Christian stops changing, they stop growing. The Christian is only learning if he or she is changing. A school teacher told one of her students he had to stay after school and write on the blackboard one hundred times, so he would learn the proper way of saying it, "I have gone." He laboriously worked his way through the 100 lines, and then he left this note for the teacher: "I finished and I have went home." All his efforts were not a learning experience for he did not change.

Learning means that you change in your thinking, feeling, or acting. If change does not happen, learning has not happened. You cannot measure Christian education by how many years you have gone to Sunday School, or how many books you have read. The only measure that matters is how much have you changed to become a Christ-centered person.

D. L. Moody wrote the entire theology of the Christian life on the fly leaf of his Bible. He put it in 7 stages of change.

- 1. Justification-a change of standing before God.**
- 2. Regeneration- a change of nature from God.**
- 3. Repentance-a change of mind about God.**
- 4. Conversion-a change of life for God.**

- 5. Adoption-a change of family in God.**
- 6. Sanctification-a change of service unto God.**
- 7. Glorification-a change of place with God.**

If the goal is to be like Jesus, and we are not yet there, then it follows that change is what the Christian life is all about. It begins with change and does not cease until we become like Him in the resurrection. An evangelist visiting a girls mission school in the South Sea Islands was greeted by two rows of girls singing, "What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought since Jesus came into my life." He was deeply touched when one of the staff members leaned over and whispered, "Everyone of those girls is either the daughter or granddaughter of a cannibal." Change is the sign of authentic Christianity.

Someone once very cleverly put up a sign in the church nursery using one of Paul's sentences to the Corinthians. It was from I Cor. 15:51 which says, "We will not all sleep but we will all be changed." Being changed is basic to the nursery care of babies, and it is basic to the plan of God for His people. The last thing that happens to us in time is change. The mortal puts on immortality. Both the living and the dead has this in common: They end time and begin eternity with change.

We could go and on with evidence to support the importance of change in the Christian life, but this should be sufficient to make the point. Now we have to deal with another reality, and that is the Christian resistance to change. This was a major issue in the Corinthian church, and it is a major issue in every church, and in every Christian life. To change or not to change-that is the question. Another one is, to adapt to change or resist it. That is the issue Paul deals with in chapter 2.

A major criticism of Paul by those in Corinth who did not like him was that he changed his mind about coming to spend a winter with them. They said he is unstable and undependable, and not to be relied upon. They could not accept Paul's change of plans as a good thing. They saw it as a defect in his character, and they used it to undermine his authority. One of Paul's major goals in this letter is to defend his change of mind. In 1:23 he even calls God to witness that his motive for changing his mind was to spare them. Paul is saying that there are times when you should change your mind, and not follow through on your original plan.

If you discover that your plan will lead to unnecessary pain and not solve a problem, but only add to it, it is wise to change your plan. This is not being inconsistent or wishy-washy. It is being flexible and open to adapt to new information. Paul's critics were being legalists. They were saying that once you commit yourself to a certain course of action you should stick to it no matter what. They expected Paul to be like a machine that does what it is programmed to do, even if by doing so it starts to crush the product and spew the contents out on the floor. Paul says, "No way! I have considered the consequences of not changing my plan, and I see it would be a painful thing to come to you at this time and have to deal with so many hard issues that call for severe judgment. I have decided to wait so I could come when you have settled some of these issues, and so be able to have a more pleasant experience for all of us."

Paul is adapting to change. He understands the importance of timing. You are not wise to deal with sensitive issues when the timing is such that it guarantees greater pain. Paul knew things would change and there would be a better time to come back to Corinth. If he came now, when he said he would, it would lead to a lot of grief, and Paul is not a saddest. He does not have any interest in pain for pain's sake. He avoids unnecessary suffering for himself and others, and that is why he changed his mind and plan.

What we need to see is the paradox of how change is a key factor in being consistent. The critics of Paul had the concept that a consistent person is one who does not change. They were like the woman who stood before the judge and he asked her age. She said that she was 30, and he said that she had given that same age to the court for the last 3 years. She responded, "Yes, I'm not one of those who says one thing today, and another thing tomorrow." She was being consistent but dishonest. Change was necessary to be honest about her age, and change was necessary for Paul to be honest and consistent with his love for the Corinthians.

If a face to face confrontation is only going to lead to painful conflict, Paul says that he chooses to change his strategy. Paul had to be confrontational at times, but he did not enjoy it, and he avoided it if he could. He had no pleasure in being critical and judgmental toward his spiritual children. He had come to them before and it led to conflict, and he was not ready to go through that again. In the light of the evidence he changed his mind, and he stayed away and sent a letter instead. The Christian principle here is this: In

any area of conflict you seek to work out problems so as to avoid unnecessary pain. This means you evaluate the situation and be ready to adapt and change to meet this goal.

If you are tired of waiting for the leak in the sink to get fixed, and you say, "I am going to confront my husband tonight and insist that he get this job done," and then you tell your neighbor that this is the night we are going to settle this, you have made quite a commitment. But let's say that your husband comes home from work and the first thing he does is tell you that he never got the promotion he was expecting, but was passed over. Now you have a choice. You can be true to your commitment to deal with the sink issue like you told your friend, or you can choose to change your agenda and adapt to the change in your husbands life, and seek to be a comfort rather than to add to his pain.

The legalist would say to stick to the original plan whatever the cost. You told your friend that you would, and she will ask you the next day, and you will look like a wimp if you back off. But the spirit of grace says that being consistent could lead to conflict and pain that will hurt your relationship. It is not worth it to be consistent. You must change your plans and deal with this at a more appropriate time when the result is more likely to be pleasant rather than painful. Change for the sake of peace is not being inconsistent at all. It is being consistent with love. God, who is unchanging in his character and attributes, and so never inconsistent, will change in his response to men when they change in response to Him. The only way God can be consistent and unchanging in His love and honesty is to change.

He told the city of Nineveh through Jonah that in 40 days the city would be destroyed. But the people repented and God changed His mind, and He did not destroy them. Was that being inconsistent? Not at all. God whole plan of salvation is based on His willingness to forsake His wrath and show mercy to all who call upon Him. He is ever consistent in this, so that even if someone is only minutes away from judgment and they turn to Him, He will halt His judgment and reach out the hand of redemption and spare them. God is unchanging in His mercy, and so He will change from wrath to mercy anytime man is open to receive it. It is a paradox, but the only way God can be consistent and unchanging is to be ready to change at any time when there is a change in man's response to Him.

If God could not change and respond freely to the changes in men, He would be at the mercy of a legalism greater in power than His love, and so law rather than love would be the highest force in the universe. But it is not so, for love is supreme, and God is free to change in an instant to meet every change in man with mercy. This is not inconsistency in God, but it is the ultimate in consistency, for it means God is never locked in but is free always to make the loving choice in every situation, so that love always reigns.

That is what Paul is saying about his own change of mind and plan. He is being consistently loving by adapting to change so as to avoid giving Satan any advantages in the warfare of the spirit. Let's say you promised your child or grandchild you would take them to see the movie Jurassic Park, and then you read that some children develop severe nightmares after seeing this film. You know your child is sensitive to this sort of thing. Now what do you do? Do you keep your promise, or do you adapt to the new information you did not have when you made the promise? Since your original motive was to please your child your choice now has to be consistent with that motive. They may be hurt by your change of plans, but if you choose something else that pleases them you are being consistent with your original purpose. If it will hurt your child to keep your promise then you have to change your plan, for your goal is to please them and not to hurt them. Change is consistent with consistency.

The Corinthians were not only having a hard time accepting the changes of Paul's plan as loving, but were having a hard time seeing the need to change their attitude toward the man they had disciplined for his sin. They became his judge and jury and found him guilty, and they punished him. That was all consistent with the facts and the need. But they apparently did not realize that if the discipline worked, and the man repented of his sin, they were to change in response to that change in him and forgive him and restore him to the fellowship. They apparently thought the Christian needs to be consistent and go on shunning this sinner. Here is where we see all the folly of consistency. If they refused to change in response to the change in the sinner, they were in bondage to legalism. They were not free to be agents of grace, for to be free like that you have to be willing to change and from an attitude of judgment go to an attitude of forgiveness. This is radical change to go from such a severe negative to such a great positive. It is such a radical change that it seems like inconsistency, but it is, in fact, the only way to be consistent with the love of God.

What we need to see is that changing is always good if the change is to keep you in conformity with the spirit of Christ. We often worry about how things appear on the human level and let that be our guide rather than the higher principle of conformity to the will of God. Spurgeon reveals a marvelous spirit of willingness to change even if it means renouncing a cherished opinion if he sees change as essential to conform to the Word of God. He writes, "I confess that sometimes I come across a text which does not at the first blush agree with other teachings of Scripture which I have already received, and this startles me for the moment. But one thing is settled in my heart, namely that I will follow the Scripture wherever it leads me and that I will renounce the most cherished opinion rather than shape a text or alter a syllable of the inspired Book. It is not mine to make God's word consistent, but to believe that it is so. When a text stands in the middle of the road I drive no further. The Romans had a god they called "Terminus," who was the god of landmarks. Holy Scripture is my sacred landmark, and I hear a voice which threatens me with a curse if I remove it. Sometimes I say to myself, I did not think to find this truth to be just so; but as it is so, I must bow. It is rather awkward for my theory, but I must alter my system, for the Scripture cannot be broken. Let God be true, but every man a liar."

History is filled with many Christian leaders who could not do what Spurgeon could do. They feel obligated to be consistent, and so if they make a mistake in understanding the Bible they would rather cling to and promote that mistake rather than adapt and admit they were wrong and change to conform to a new understanding. New light makes many a preacher have to change the way he preaches on a text. Pride says stick to your guns and do not admit a mistake or blunder. If you change it will reveal your imperfections. But love says to change and conform to the new light for this is godly change and will make you pleasing to Him.

It can be costly to change, for even Christians will be your critics, just as they were of Paul. Christians are often legalists and do not like to change but stay locked into what they feel is comfortable and not be open to new light. Paul is saying that it is an obligation for Christians to change their minds when they get new light and new understanding. It is folly to remain unchanged when new light makes change wise. The point is that a person is not unstable and vacillating because they change. It could be, as was the case with Paul, that their change is a sign of their consistency. Paul is pleading with them to listen to the reasons and motive for his change. If they will do so

they will see that his change is consistent with his love for them.

There is an old joke that has the judge asking why the defendant broke into the parking meter, and he responds, "I thought the change would do me good." Paul felt the change would he made would do both him and the Corinthians good. He knew that a change on their part to forgive the fallen saint would do the whole church good. Paul is teaching that we need not fear change, but grasp it as a friend and learn the value of it. The critics of Paul were anti-change and were hardened against the value of change. Their inflexibility was not good, but it was like a noose that was robbing them of the freedom to be forgiving and loving. It was choking them and making them so unlike Christ.

Paul wants Christians to be more like thermostats and not like thermometers. The thermometer just registers the temperature, but the thermostat changes the temperature to make it more comfortable. Paul's stress in this letter is that Christians are to be agents of comfort, and that means that they are to be in the business of changing the temperature. If they are cold because of sin and folly on the part of other believers, they are to change the atmosphere and warm it up with loving acts of kindness and forgiveness. Where sin abounds grace is to much more abound. This can only happen where Christians recognize with Paul that Godly change is necessary.

5. THE WEAPON OF FORGIVENESS Based on II Cor. 2:5-11

Paul Aurandt tells this story of General Thomas Jackson who was the right arm of General Lee. The Confederate soldiers were so impressed with his bravery in battle as he stood out in front that they called him Stonewall Jackson. His first brigade was the most devastating war machine the South had in the Civil War. The Union Army dreaded any encounter with his troops.

In May of 1863 he pulled off a victory near Chancellorsville, Virginia that made it into the textbooks. He divided his troops, and then divided them again, and made a surprise attack. The Union Army had never seen such a strategy, and they were defeated. But as Stonewall returned to his own camp

his own men hearing him come through the woods opened fire. He was hit three times and died a few days later, and this ended the unbeatable war machine of the South.

So often good men die at the hands of their own troops. Our own recent history as a nation reveals how often our own soldiers perish because of friendly fire. Warfare is complicated, and it is hard to avoid mistakes. The same thing is true in spiritual warfare where the forces of light fighting the forces of darkness often shoot out the lights of their fellow soldiers. When a soldier of light comes under attack by the enemy and falls wounded on the battlefield of life because of being enticed into sin, the rest of the troops often leave them to be captured by enemy forces. This was not the strategy of General Paul. Every Christian soldier was precious to Paul, and he established a tradition in spiritual warfare that has become a tradition for American soldiers. That tradition is that you pay the cost and suffer great risk to rescue your own.

The wounded soldier may have been stupid to do what he did. He may have been disobeying orders even, and deserved to be left bleeding and dying alone for his folly, but the effort is to be made to rescue him and not leave him to the enemy. So Paul says to the Corinthians that the Christian man who has been so sinful in your midst, and who has brought grief to us all by his immoral behavior, is to be rescued from the clutches of Satan and restored to fellowship. The man he is referring to is the man who was sleeping with his step-mother, and bringing shame on the whole church, for even the pagans round about them did not condone such immorality.

The church listened to Paul and put this man out of the church, and they shunned him, but now Paul says to them that the goal is not to get rid of him and let the enemy have him. The goal of punishment is to get him to repent so that he can be forgiven and restored to the ranks of the soldiers of light. The bottom line Paul says is not to let Satan outwit us, but to outwit him, and the key weapon of spiritual warfare to achieve this goal is the weapon of forgiveness. This is a weapon that comes from the arsenal of heaven, and from the very heart of God. If God was not a God of forgiveness there would be no spiritual warfare, for all men would be captives of Satan with no hope of escape. But God is a God of forgiveness. Here are just a few texts that focus on this fact:

**"Thou are to God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful. (Neh. 9:17)
Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people, thou hast covered all their sin.
(Psa. 85:2)
Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive...(Psa. 86:5)
Who forgiveth all thine iniquities...(Psa. 103:3)
I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer.
31:34)
If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to
cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:9)**

**These do not exhaust the subject, for the forgiveness of God is
inexhaustible. God knows how to use this weapon perfectly. He is the expert
in forgiveness, but for us it is not automatic. We need a lot of practice before
we can wield this weapon well and be affective in rescuing the fallen from the
clutches of the enemy. Dr. Neil T. Anderson is the leading authority today in
dealing with helping Christians and churches get released from the bondage
of sin and ignorance. In his many books he makes it clear that there is no
escape from bondage without forgiveness. The truth will set you free, and the
truth in forgiveness is the key to getting out of almost every kind of bondage
that Satan has in his bag of tricks.**

**In his 7 Steps To Freedom In Christ the third is forgiveness, and I want to
give you the gist of his teaching, for he has helped thousands of Christians
learn how to use this weapon to outwit the devil. The thing I find fascinating
about his teaching is that his focus is on the forgiver, and not the forgiven.
That is, the value of forgiveness is in what it does for you, and not just in what
it does for the one you are forgiving. He begins by encouraging Christians to
pray this prayer: "Dear heavenly Father. I thank you for the riches of your
kindness, forbearance and patience, knowing that your kindness has lead me
to repentance (Rom. 2:4). I confess that I have not extended that same
patience and kindness toward others who offended me, but instead I have
harbored bitterness and resentment. I pray that during this time of
self-examination you would bring to mind only those people whom I have not
forgiven in order that I might do so (Matt. 18:35). I ask this in the precious
name of Jesus. Amen."**

**The point of forgiving is to get Satan's foot out of the door of your life so
that he cannot use the offenses of the past to spoil your present and future.
As long as a person holds on to a past offense it is still hurting them. If you**

forgive it you cast it into the past and eliminate its present impact. The Corinthian church was still feeling the pain of the punishment of this offender, and he was still feeling it. Paul feared he could become overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. There is no point in letting pain dominate your life is Paul's point. There is a limit to the value of suffering. After it has done its work it is to be eliminated. It is an abuse to go on punishing when the offender has repented. It is time then to put the pain of the past behind you, and move on to the pleasure of love and forgiveness. If you keep focusing on punishment you are in a spirit of bitterness and revenge, and you will be playing right into the hands of Satan.

All negatives have their proper role in the Christian life, but they are only temporary, and they are to be quickly replaced with positives. Any negative that is prolonged will aid the enemy in spiritual warfare. If you have any negative attitude that goes on for a long time, you can count on it that it is a defect in your life, and you are letting Satan have an advantage over you. But Christians will often protest: "You don't know how much I was hurt by so and so. I just can't let it go, for it was terrible." But the fact is, because you can't let it go you are allowing the hurt to go on and be magnified over and over. They hurt you a weeks worth of pain, and because of your lack of forgiveness you have multiplied it into a year, or even decades of pain. The magnifying and multiplying of pain is not the work of the kingdom of light. It is the work of the kingdom of darkness. As long as you persist in letting past offences affect your present, you are, in that area of life, in bondage to the enemy.

Dr. Anderson deals with the protest of the Christian: "Why should I let them off the hook? You may ask. That is precisely the problem-you are still hooked to them, still bound by your past." Then he says something profound. "You don't forgive someone for their sake; you do it for your sake, so you can be free. Your need to forgive isn't an issue between you and the offender; its between you and God." In other words, forgiveness is a weapon by which you outwit the devil, and eliminate any foothold he may have in your life. It blows to pieces the sins, the mistakes, the follies of the past, so they cannot control or obstruct your present and future. Dr. Anderson says in conclusion: "Freeing yourself from the past is the critical issue."

If you want freedom from bondage, then learn to wield well this weapon of forgiveness. It is a Satan smasher, and it destroys the devil's devices. It

pulverizes his use of the past, and it fractures his formations. It shatters his schemes, and it ruptures his resources. It demolishes his demonic delight in destroying your peace of mind. The victorious Christian life is a life where forgiveness plays a major role. If anyone in all of history had reason to hold a grudge and be filled with resentment it was Jesus. He did nothing but good, and He loved all people. He brought joy and healing wherever He went, and He proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God, and yet He was despised and rejected.

Our human nature would love to see a Rambo-like ending of this story where Jesus rips His hands from the cross, grabs the sword of the Roman soldier and begins, like Samson of old, to slay the enemy. A field of dead and bleeding Pharisees and Saducees seems more fitting than one dead and bleeding Savior with two dead thieves beside Him. The only problem with that scene is that Satan would have been the victor. The kingdom of darkness would have won that day, but Jesus outwitted the devil. He died with not one note of bitterness and revenge. He cut Satan's influence out of His life completely with the weapon of forgiveness. He prayed, "Father forgive them," before He died, and He entered death and Satan's kingdom ready for hand to hand combat with no bondage whatever which would have given Satan an advantage.

Jesus died totally free and victorious by means of the weapon of forgiveness. That is why His sacrifice was accepted by God for atonement for the sins of the world. By means of forgiveness Jesus was the only perfect and sinless sacrifice that could be acceptable. If Satan could have gotten Jesus to hold on to a grudge, and gotten Him to cling to bitterness and resentment, he could have derailed the whole plan of salvation. Jesus knew his schemes, as did Paul, and that is why they won with the weapon of forgiveness, and that is how we will win the battle as well.

We have something in common with God. We have the capacity to forgive those who offend us, hurt us, and defy us. We have the power to forgive sin. Not only can we do it, we are obligated to do it, for God gave us this ability, and if we do not use it we will not receive forgiveness from God. In Luke 6:37 Jesus said, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Jesus adds these words after the Lord's Prayer in Matt. 6:14-15: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their

sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." If you are not a forgiver, you are not forgiven. It is that simple.

Jesus calls us, not just to be forgiven sinners, but to be forgiving sinners, and if we do not obey this order of our supreme commander we betray His cause and support the enemy forces. Not all Christians soldiers are issued all the weapons of spiritual warfare, and not all have all the gifts, but all Christians are issued the weapon of forgiveness, and they are expected to use it effectively. That is what Paul is teaching the Corinthians in this passage. The goal is not punishment, for that is a means to the end, and the end is forgiveness and restoration of the sinner to fellowship with the forces of light. This was no petty sinner he was dealing with. This is a matter of major moral failure, and yet Paul says the goal is to not let Satan have any victory, but get back to a place where the past is overcome, and the present is as good as it could have been if he had never fallen.

This is easier said than done, but if it was easy it would not be hard to be a Christian soldier. Anybody could do it, and Christians would have nothing distinctive to offer a fallen world. There are some notable successes, but there are many failures to use this weapon of forgiveness well. I was recently shocked to learn that one of my favorite Christian authors was a fallen saint who had been restored to the ranks of the soldiers of light. Many of you may know Jamie Buckingham. He has authored dozens of excellent books.

When he was a young pastor in South Carolina he yielded to lust and had an affair. It was devastating to him and his family, and he was dismissed from the church. He moved to Florida, and because he was a powerful personality he convinced a large church to call him as their pastor. He had a great honeymoon time there, but then the rumor followed him of his secret sin. He was soon asked to leave that church as well. The rumors were packed with half truths and lies that made a shameful sin even worse. His ministry had come to a pitiful dead end, and he would have been lost to the kingdom of God.

He saw a contest for Christian writers one day and decided to submit a story of a missionary friend. Out of 2000 submissions he was a winner, and this led to his being offered an assignment by a major book publisher. A whole new world opened up to him, and he became one of the most effective Christian authors of the 20th century. He wrote *Where Eagles Soar*. In it he

describes his fall, rebirth, and restoration as a soldier of the cross. Here is one of his paragraphs: "Perfection still eludes me. I am still vulnerable. But most important, I am no longer satisfied with my imperfection. Nor, thank God, am I intimidated by it. I reached the point of recognizing that God uses imperfect, immoral, dishonest people. In fact, that's all there are these days. All the holy men seem to have gone off and died. There's no one left but us sinners to carry on the ministry."

Had he not been forgiven for his failure and folly he would have been lost to the kingdom of God, and his talent may have been used to the kingdom of darkness. This happens when Christians do not know how to use the weapon of forgiveness. They force the fallen Christian to forsake the church and find their fellowship in the world. This means that Satan wins the battle. This happens often as Christian soldiers shoot their own wounded and abandon them on the battlefield to be taken captive by the enemy. Paul says not to let this happen even to the worst of Christian offenders like this man who was so offensive that he had to be put out of the church.

There was only the one church in Corinth, and so if you intended to be part of the church you had to deal with the sin issues in that body. It was a social issue, but today it is often a personal issue, and Christians need to deal with forgiveness on an individual level. Today discipline is not effective, for the sinner can just go off to another church and the church does not deal with forgiveness and restoration. This means that self forgiveness has become a major factor in modern Christianity. Many sins never become public, and so they are never dealt with like the one Paul refers to here. Paul deals a lot with the open sins known by the body, and so he writes in Eph. 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." He writes in Col. 3:13, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Forgiveness was a major message of Paul, and he preached it everywhere, for it was at the heart of the Gospel. But we need to turn to John to see the need for personal and private forgiveness. In I John 1:9 we read, "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The Jewish Talmud says, "There is no happier person in all of Jerusalem than the one who has brought a sin offering to God's altar and leaves the temple feeling forgiven." Unfortunately, the world is filled

with Christians who cannot see the sufficiency of Christ's offering on the cross to atone for all sin. The result is that they cannot forgive themselves for their failure to be what they know they ought to be. There is a vast number of Christian soldiers who are crippled and out of action because they do not know how to use the weapon of forgiveness to achieve their own healing and restoration. That is why the world is so full of Christian counselors.

Leslie Weatherhead, the great English preacher and counselor, dealt with many such Christians. The walking wounded who cannot be of much service to the cause of Christ because they are trapped in one of Satan's snares and are unable to forgive themselves. A young Christian girl had been engaged to a dentist and the dentist died. She became physically and mentally ill, and could not function as a person let alone as a soldier of the cross. Weatherhead suspected sin and in counseling he learned that she had had sex with the dentist, and now she felt unworthy to even have another relationship. He led her to see the grace of God and experience forgiveness. She was set free from her bondage, and she went on to marry a young man and have a happy marriage. Here was a prisoner of war set free to live the life of grace.

There are millions of Christians who go through this bondage to Satan, and they are paralyzed and ineffective as Christians because they cannot experience forgiveness. Jesus knew this would be a problem all through history. That is why He instituted the Lord's Supper. He knew Christians needed to keep coming back to the cross and to what He did there for them. He knew Christians would fall in the battle of life, and they would be wounded in the warfare. As we meet again around the Lord's Table and celebrate His sacrifice for sin, let us recognize that this is our spiritual warfare medical center. This is where the Great Physician heals our wounds and mends our brokenness, and where he restores us to a state of readiness to march again for His cause and glory. Let us confess our sins and be cleansed, and go forth to help others to conquer as we wield the weapon of forgiveness.

6. THE FACE OF GOD based on II Cor. 4:1-6

John Mcgee Jr. wrote the poem High Flight. It is so meaningful to some

pilots, they repeat it as they sit in their planes soaring though the skies. It goes like this-

**Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds-and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of-wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence.-Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew.
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.**

Flight does link man with the angels but it does not get man any closer to God. It is only poetic license to say you can fly so high as to touch the face of God. Man could never reach that high but the message of Christmas is, God stooped low enough to literally allow men to touch His face.

**On Christmas day God did embrace
The planet earth with loving grace,
Making Bethlehem the birth place
Of Jesus who revealed God's face.**

When Mary pressed the soft warm cheeks of baby Jesus to her own, she was touching the face of God. When the shepherds and the wise men came to see Jesus they were seeing the face of God. Christmas is about the face of God. Before Christmas God was veiled, and men were not allowed to come into His presence to see His face. Whenever God did, on rare occasions, let men see His presence, they were terrified of His glory. But on Christmas God entered human flesh where men could see Him face to face and not be afraid. Nothing is less fearful than seeing a baby.

Jesus grew from His baby face childhood to mature manhood, and by degrees He exposed man to His Deity. Three of the disciples saw the glory of

His divine face on the Mt. of Transfiguration where we read in Matt. 17:2, "there He was transfigured before them. His face shown like the sun..." This glory was shown only to a few, for that was not the face Jesus came to show the world. One day all the redeemed will see their Savior face to face in all it's splendor. But this is the face He will have in His second coming. His first coming-His Christmas coming, revealed to us the face of God which is more practical for life in our fallen world. It was a face of compassion and love; a face of mercy and understanding. It was the face of a friend.

Christmas is unique in all of history for it was the day God let men see His face, and begin to know Him as He really is. Jesus was the light of the world, the light that lit up the face of God for man to see their Creator. This is what Paul was getting at in verse 6, "for God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

How do we know who God is, and how He feels about us and His lost world? Where do we go to get this kind of knowledge? Do we go to the Information Super Highway? No, we go to the face of Christ-the face first seen on the first Christmas morning.

Robert Coles wrote a fascinating book titled, The Spiritual Life of Children. He is a Harvard Univ. professor who has written about the inner life of children like no other author. He has studied children around the world in all different cultures. One of the things he does is to get children to draw the face of God. Jewish and Muslim children will not do it, for they are taught not to make pictures of God. But Christian children all over the world feel free to make pictures of God. Why? Because for Christians, God has shown His face to the world in Jesus Christ. All the religions of the world have invisible gods, but Christianity has a visible God; a God who was seen and touched. That is what the incarnation was all about. God became visible in flesh so men could see Him face to face.

Professor Coles has 293 pictures of God, and all but 38 are of His face. When Christian children visualize God they primarily see His face. All around the world, artist in every land and culture paint the face of Jesus. There are oriental faces, and Negroid faces, or Italian or German, and dozens of others. All facial features are found in the face of Jesus. He is the man of a thousand faces yet His is the face of one-the face of God. ,

A Sunday school teacher and her second grade class were looking at a painting of Jesus. Little Billy exclaimed, "Isn't it wonderful! It looks just like Him!" If it's a face that children fall in love with, that is truly a legitimate face of Jesus.

I have not seen it but I have read about an artist that painted a portrait of Jesus, which if you look at it close, is composed of 48 different faces. There are all kinds of people of every race, color and age. He was conveying a theological reality. In Christ the entire human race with all of it's variety becomes one. Jesus was the son of man, the perfection of all men. Many feel the reason we have no description of the face of Jesus is so all can portray Him like themselves.

Artists all through history have conveyed many theological truths by means of the face of Jesus. Thorwaldsen has his famous sculpture of Christ in the Cathedral of Copenhagen, Denmark. The beautiful white marble statue of Jesus has His arms outstretched for all who enter. It draws you down the isle like a magnet. But when you come near you still can't see the face of Jesus. You have to get down on your knees and then look up to see His face of love and compassion. No one can see His face unless they first kneel. Whoever humbles himself will be exalted, said Jesus. He humbled himself to come and show us God's face, and we need to bow before Him in humility to see that face.

Leonardo da Vinci became very angry with another man when he was painting the famous Last Supper. He was trying to finish the face of Jesus, but he just could not get it right. Finally he humbled himself to go to the man and seek forgiveness. The man accepted his apology and Leonardo was then able to complete the face of Jesus. Jesus said get right with your brother before you come before God, for then you will see the face of God smiling with pleasure as you offer your gifts.

One of the major goals of Satan is to keep men from beholding the face of God. In Rev. 12:1-9, we have one of most amazing accounts of the Christmas story. It is Christmas from the perspective of spiritual warfare. Satan desperately wanted to keep mankind from ever seeing the face of God in Jesus Christ. The birth of baby Jesus, the Prince of Peace, led to the greatest warfare this universe has ever seen. Satan, called in this text the dragon, had

power to sweep a third of the stars out of the sky. We are talking of power that makes all of man's atom bombs look like the power of a gnat. He was determined that Christmas would never happen, and he risked everything to prevent God from showing His face. Listen to this account of Christmas from a heavenly perspective.

"A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."

The dragon wanted to devour the Christ child so that no one, not even Mary, would ever see the face of God in the flesh. Satan knew if this baby lived the whole relationship of God and man would be changed for the better. The whole power structure of the universe would be altered, and so he fought desperately to stop the Incarnation. The angels not only sang that first Christmas, they fought the devil and his angels to make sure there was something to sing about for all mankind. We know of no other event in the history of the universe that was so important to all the forces in the universe, both good and bad. The destiny of man was wrapped up in that baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger-for in Him was the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. The entire Christmas story can be seen as revolving around the face of God revealed in the Christ child. I have said it in poetry-

**Christmas is God's great invasion
Of this earth from beyond space.**

**On this marvelous occasion
He revealed to man His face.**

**At the start He was a stranger
Just a baby out of place.
Earth's Creator in a manger
Was not to Him a disgrace.**

**Shepherds watching their flocks by night
Heard the good news of God's grace.
When the angels had left their sight
They left too with hurried pace.**

**They ran to Bethlehem's stable
Where the Christ child they embrace.
Praising God that they were able
To behold Him face to face.**

**Wise men saw His star in the East
It was rare, not commonplace.
When heaven celebrates a feast
They it's meaning long to trace.**

**No journey could be on a par
Nothing could that sight erase.
They would ever follow that star
Till they saw Christ's shining face.**

**He came here to be one of us
To stand with us face to face.
Taking on Him the name Jesus
Savior of our fallen race.**

**To the heavens He's ascended
He has returned to His base.
All that's broken will be mended
And all evil He'll replace.**

When we see the face of Jesus

**We behold the face of God.
May this amazing truth seize us
As we through this season trod.**

**We look upon the face of God
When the face of Christ we see.
Let this Christmas spirit, you prod
To look and in Him be free.**

Jesus said in John 3:14-15, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life." People in the Old Testament could look at the serpent on the pole, and they would be healed when bitten by poisonous snakes. Their salvation was in looking to this symbol. Jesus said He was lifted up on the cross for the same reason. Men bitten by that old serpent the devil will die in their sin unless they look to Him on the cross. If they look they will live

Some of the greatest conversions of history have happened because of this text. Charles Hadden Spurgeon heard a Methodist preacher preach on looking to Jesus on the cross. He looked and was forgiven and became one of the most famous preachers in history. He then pointed thousands of others to look to the face of Jesus and become children of God.

416 times the face is mentioned in the Bible. It is an important part of the human anatomy. It is also an important part of our theology, for it is in the face of Christ that we come to know God. For centuries the hope of heaven revolved around the beatific vision-the seeing of God's face. Christians do not stress this today for the modern Christian is more interested in seeing the streets of gold than seeing the face of God. In a materialistic world rewards become a priority over the personal. But the personal is the primary focus of the Bible. When Stephen was stoned to death for being a Christian, we read in Acts 7:55, "but Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." What he saw was Persons. It is true John was caught up to heaven and showed us a lot of the things that will be there, but the first vision he had in Rev.1 was of the glorified Christ. Our primary hope is not to see things but to see Him. "Face to face I shall behold Him, Far beyond the starry sky; face to face in all His glory I shall see Him by and by."

A little Italian boy once said, "Jesus is the best photograph that God ever took." that is what the writer of Hebrews says as well for Jesus is "the express image-the exact likeness of God." In the famous text of Isa. 9:6 we read, "unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." How can this Christ child be called Everlasting Father? How can the Son of God be called the Father? It is because the Father and the Son are one and when you see the face of Jesus you see the face of God. Jesus is God with a face.

The Incarnation means God can be known as never before in history. The shepherds were not content to take the angels word for it. They wanted to see the Christ child face to face. The wise men were not content to see the miraculous star. They did not stop their pursuit until they saw the child face to face.

When you go to the hospital to see a new born baby you are not content to see a blanket-wrapped bundle. You want to see the face-not the back of the head, or the bottom-but the face. No one is satisfied until they see the face. The face makes the bundle personal. It is seeing the face that makes you feel you have met the person. We need to see the face of God in Jesus to feel that we have met God personally.

God becomes a real person in Jesus. I saw the cutest cartoon of a father reading to his little boy a bedtime story of the first Christmas. The little guy with his head on his pillow with two pictures of his dog on the wall over his bed says to his dad, "Gold, frankincense, and myrrh? I bet what he really wanted was a puppy." The baby Jesus was a real person to this boy, and he could feel the sense of identity with him, which was the whole point of the Incarnation.

**Christmas is more than mistletoe and ho ho ho
And brilliant lights that reflect in snow,
And the warmth we feel in the fireplace glow.
Christmas is about the God we can know
Who descended from heaven to earth below
To His kind face to mankind show.**

Paul Reese, the great preacher, tells of reading about the French Revolution. A lawless mob broke into the king's palace. They were wild for vengeance and loot. They rushed down a long corridor and busted into a room at the end. Suddenly the looters grew quiet; the yelling and cursing ceased, and some of them even knelt on the floor as others removed their hats. What happened to cause such quiet reverence? It was the face of Jesus on the wall.

Unfortunately the story did not end there. One of the leaders stepped forward and turned the picture of Jesus toward the wall. He then shouted to the crowd to continue their plundering. This is a parable of what the whole world is now doing. They are either, like the shepherds and wise men, seeking to bow before the face of Jesus, or, like Satan and Herod, seeking to turn the face of Jesus to the wall.

We all have a choice. The call of Heb. 12:2 is, "let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfection of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning it's shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The greatest sight you can see this Christmas ,and any other time of the year, is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

7. SEEING THE INVISIBLE based on II Cor. 4:8-18

A young sportsman just back from a hunting trip in India was criticizing the efforts of the missionaries there. He said that in all the months he was there he never saw any good they were doing. It was all a useless waste of money and effort. A returned missionary overheard him and asked him a question: "While you were in India did you see any of those lions and tigers we hear so much about?" He responded, "Indeed I did. I saw many of them." The missionary then added, "I spent about 7 years in India but in all that time I never saw any lions or tigers, but I saw much important work being done by the missionaries." The point is clear, men see what they are looking for. There is much even on the level of the visible that men miss because they have no eye for it. Their interests capture their vision and monopolize it, and this blinds them to the reality of all that lies beyond the narrow realm of self-interest.

Lichtze, the Chinese philosopher, told of a man who went into a shop that sold gold. He grabbed some and ran. The police easily arrested him and asked him how he could be so foolish as to try and rob in broad daylight before all of those people. The thief replied, "When I reached for the gold, I saw only gold, I didn't see any people." His greed for gold blinded him to the reality of the visible world that ordinarily would have prevented such folly.

If men can be blind even to the visible world, then it is no cause for wonder that they cannot see the invisible. It would seem by the very definition of the word invisible that it would be impossible for anyone to see it. But Paul speaks of looking at the unseen and in Heb. 11:27 we read that Moses endured "...as seeing him who is invisible." In Rom. 1:20 Paul says the invisible nature of God has been clearly revealed in the things he has made. Paul is again in the realm of paradox. How can we see the invisible? It means that we see it by means of the visible, which we can see, but we see behind the visible to the invisible cause for it to be. It is being aware of the more than the visible.

The first thing we need to do is recognize the reality of the invisible. This should not be hard in a day in which even science is preoccupied with the unseen. Atoms, forces, waves, and rays innumerable are invisible, but are the tools science works with every day. Even materialists recognize that the greatest powers man knows of are invisible. Behind visible phenomena are invisible forces. It is the unseen magnetic pole that controls the compass needle. Invisible wind forces can cause planes to crash even though nobody can see them coming. We can see acts of good and evil, but we cannot see the invisible forces and motives behind them. It is the ability to grasp the reality of the unseen forces behind history that enables the Christian to enter into the purpose of God for history.

Man has the capacity of dual drive in the motor of his mind. He can chug along on the road of life in low gear and see only the reality of the ruts, mud, detours, and dead ends, or he can, by the grace of God, shift into high and glide down the superhighway of the spiritual with all of its fuel stations of faith, motels of meaning, and visions of eternal values. Those who receive Jesus as Savior can travel along sky line drive and catch glimpses of the city of God. Now this may sound like unrealistic mysticism of no practical value. We need bread and butter food for our souls and not fancy cotton candy visions spun out of a hyper-active imagination. This would be a valid objection if all of reality was on the level of the visible, but since the Bible teaches that the

majority of reality is on the level of the invisible, it will be my challenge to show that nothing is more relevant and practical than the ability to see the invisible.

It is the key to the effective Christian life to be able to see the invisible. It is the very essence of worship. Herman Hagedorn wrote,

**Lift up the curtain: For an hour lift up
The veil that hold's you prisoners in this world
Of coins and wines and motor-horns, this world
Of figures and of men who trust in facts;
This pitiable, hypocritic world
Where men with blinkered eyes and hobbled feet
Grope down a narrow gorge and call it life.**

One has not really begun to live until he begins to look, not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen, for these alone are the things that last forever. What is the practical value Paul gained by focusing his eyes on the invisible? In verse 16 we see that Paul's awareness of the reality and value of the unseen made him an optimist in spite of the discouraging circumstances he faced. We faint not; we do not lose heart, and we never give up says Paul, even though our bodies are weary and our health is broken. Our outer man is perishing, but our inner man is being renewed every day. It was his vision of the invisible that kept him pressing on even unto death in the service of his Lord.

the eyes of flesh see the cross it is all negative and awful, but to the eye of faith it was a glorious act of love that brought more joy into the world than any other act in history. Jesus saw the end results of the cross and that is why he could endure it. It was the joy of all eternity that kept him on the cross. The invisible kept him there where the visible was all seeming evil to be avoided. Seeing the invisible was the key to our salvation. We all need this vision to endure the sufferings of this world. Paul's body was heading down hill and he had many problems. He knew his physical body was decaying and wasting away, but he saw beyond the body to the eternal soul that would be with his Lord forever, and this gave him the energy and the joy to press on.

If we look only on the level of the visible we can get discouraged by this world of suffering. We need to look through it to the greater world of the invisible. You do not buy a telescope to look at, but to look through to what is

greater than it is. So also when we come to the Lord's table we do not look just at it, but through it to the invisible behind it. The eye of flesh sees only the broken bread and juice. But the eye of faith sees the invisible values which are represented by these elements. It sees the sacrifice they represent and the offer of forgiveness they represent. It sees them as the gift of God that can give us assurance of eternal life. They are symbols of what is not visible. It is like the flag. We cannot hang up a picture of patriotism, for it is an unseen value. But we can put up a flag that is a visible symbol of that unseen love of country. So these symbols are visible signs of invisible values that are of infinite worth. They are trivial amounts of matter, but they represent what most matters for all of eternity. They enable us to see the invisible love of God which is beyond all understanding. These elements are not much to see, but if you see the invisible they represent you are seeing the highest values in this universe.

Jesus was the master of seeing the unseen. It was not just on the cross, but in every day life that he saw what others did not see. He did not just see the measly widow's mite. He saw a heart of gold in the widow. He saw a woman being guided by love for the glory of God. What others were seeing was not worth a mention, for it was what we would say, "mere chicken feed." Jesus was seeing what was beautiful while others saw what was pitiful. He was seeing the invisible forces that motives people all the time. It was his ability to see the invisible that made him unique among men.

Men who do unusual things are men who have a vision that others do not see. They see possibilities that others cannot see. Columbus was highly honored in Spain for his discovery of the new world. There was much jealousy, and many were saying he had done nothing they could not have done. He knew their thinking and took an egg from the dish and challenged them to stand it on end. None could do it, but he took it and broke off one end and it stood easily. They cried out that they could have done that. He replied, "Yes, if the thought had struck you. And if the thought had struck you, you could have discovered the new world, but it was I who had the vision." Swift said, "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible."

Sakormoto was an old Japanese farmer who lived in a small hut on top of a hill behind a little fishing village on the bay. He was known and loved by all in the village, and people would often climb the hill to talk with him. One day the water in the bay suddenly retreated and fish were flopping in the mud. Everybody came running to pick up the fish in baskets. Up on the hilltop

Sakormoto saw what had happened and he was alarmed. He had seen this happen once before as a child and knew that an earthquake had caused it, and that soon a tidal wave would soon return. He had no time to run and warn them and so he set his house on fire. When the people saw it they all ran up the hill to save his home. When they got there he was just watching it burn. He told them to never mind, but to look down on the bay. They all looked and saw a tidal wave come it and destroy their whole village in a moment. They lost all, but their lives were save by the old man's sacrifice. Jesus did the same for us. He saw we would all be swept into hell by the forces of evil, but he gave us the hill of Calvary to look to and flee to in order to escape those forces, and instead have the right to enter the kingdom of God. May God help us to see beyond the visible and gain the values he wants us to have by seeing the invisible.

8. THE SECOND BODY BASED ON II COR. 5:1-10

Most of us could tell true stories of our forgetfulness that allowed us to put a book, a casserole, or some other object on the top of our car, and then get in and drive off. Some of these stories will have sadder endings than others, but it is not likely any of our stories could match that of Paula Horowitz of Amherst, Mass. The object she absentmindedly placed on the top of her car was a \$31,000 violin that was thirty years older than the United States of America.

The Springfield Symphony Orchestra had loaned this valuable instrument to her son Jason, who was the concert master for the local youth symphony. She put it on the top of her car and drove off, and where the violin landed nobody knows. Police say witnesses reported seeing an empty violin case by the road, but no violin. The woman said, "In one minute's carelessness I feel like my life has been destroyed." She groaned in grief for her loss.

That is rare to bear such a burden because of the loss of a musical instrument, but all of us at sometime will have to groan in grief because of the loss of the instrument called the body. The body is a wonderful thing, but it can also be a pain and a burden. There are those who teach that Christians should not have bodily pains and problems, but should always be in a state of ideal health. All of us could wish this was true, but the facts are, and the Bible makes it abundantly clear, our bodies are a part of a fallen world, and they

lead to groaning.

Paul in verse 2 and 4 says we groan in this present body. The Greek word he uses here twice is stenazo. This is the primary New Testament word for groaning and sighing because of life's burdens. Someone said, "the optimist says this is the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist believes it. "Paul was one of the greatest optimist of history, but he never believed this was the best of all possible worlds. It is a lost and fallen world, and in Rom. 8:22-26 Paul uses the word groan three times. In verse 22 he writes, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of child birth...." In verse 23 he writes, "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

Paul is making it clear that we live in a fallen world and our bodies are subject to all sorts of sufferings. The only way to escape is to get out of this body into a new body which is not subject to all the burdens of a fallen world. Anyone who promises you a life in this earthly body without burdens is offering you something that God has never offered. In verse 26 of Romans 8 Paul even says that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. Even God enters into the burdens of this fallen world.

We see it especially in the groans of Jesus. It was a messed up world that Jesus came to. That is why He came. It is the sick who need the doctor, and this is a sick world. But Jesus also got sick of the folly of man, and he sighed under the burden of it. In Mark 8, right after Jesus fed the 4,000, one of His greatest miracles, the Pharisees came to Him and asked Him for a sign from heaven. Their blindness was more than He could tolerate. Jesus knew what frustration was all about, and in verse 12 it says, "He sighed deeply and said, why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given it." And Jesus left there. Don't let anybody tell you that a good Christian should never be frustrated with this fallen world. If it was a pain and a burden to Jesus, it is folly to expect to live without groaning.

We also see a positive side of His groaning. It is usually a negative response to the negatives of a fallen world. But it can be a sympathetic sighing. We see this in Mark 7:34. A man who was deaf and who could hardly talk was brought to Jesus. It was a sad sight to see a man made in the image of God in so pathetic a body. It was not the work of art He created. It was totally defective

and flawed. Jesus was moved with compassion, and verse 34 says, "He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh (this is the same Greek word stenazo) He said to him "be opened" and the man was healed.

There are whole sermons preached on this sigh of sympathy, and we could spend the rest of our message on it, but for now, I am just trying to establish beyond a doubt what we already know. This is not the best of all possible worlds. It is a fallen world where much in it is not the will of God. Jesus felt the burden of it with bodies having lips that could not praise the Creator; with eyes that could not see the wonders of His creation; with ears that could not hear the good news of His love. Jesus hated what sin had done to this world and to man, that is why He came to die, so that sin might not have the final word, and that man might have the chance to live in a sin free body in a sin free environment.

While Jesus was here in the flesh He, like Paul, felt the burdens of the body with its weakness, defects, and handicaps. When Paul groaned about his body he was in good company, for Jesus did it as well. Those who pretend that this tent can be patched up permanently and never wear out are trying to create their own paradise on earth. But it is a foolish paradise. The wise Christian will do his best to keep his body in shape, but he will not make this flimsy tent the foundation of his hope. Those who do are facing inevitable disillusionment, for there are no earthly tents that do not tear and force their tenants to evacuate.

Christians should aim for a life of good exercise, good diet, and a healthy life-style, but they should also recognize that these things are used as a humanist escape from the reality of aging and death. The Christian has to face up to the reality that nothing man can do can make this fallen world the paradise that only God can make.

Everything made by man is doomed. Only the God-made body, and the God-redeemed world can be the focus of the Christian hope. That is why Paul groaned and longed to be clothed with the heavenly body God had for him. He could have said with the poet Frederick Knowles-

**This body is my house-it is not I.
Here in I sojourn till, in some far sky,
I lease a fairer dwelling, built to last
Till all the carpentry of time is past.**

**This body is my house-it is not I.
Triumphant in this faith I live, and die.**

The Christian is not an either-or person: Either a pessimist or an optimist, but a both-and person. He is both a pessimist and an optimist. When he looks at this fallen world and these tent-like bodies, he is a pessimist about any man-made scheme to develop immortality. The hopes of cryonics to freeze people until they find the cure for the disease that killed them, and then bring them back to life, is the world's version of the health and wealth gospel that pretends this world can be the best of all possible worlds. The Christian is skeptical about all attempts to make this fallen world a paradise. But he is optimist about the God-made body he will enter as soon as he leaves this tent body of time.

Paul says that when we are clothed with that heavenly dwelling the mortal will be swallowed up by life. As soon as we die we begin to live as never before. This tent we dwell in now is a hindrance to life. We cling to it because it is all we know of life, but it is only when we leave this body that we really live. The abundant life is possible on a temporary basis even in this tent, but for permanent and persistent living of the good life we need the body not built by human hands.

The question is, when do we get this heavenly body so we can get on with the joy of abundant living where all groaning is gone? This was the hope of the Old Testament saints: And environment of joy where sighing will be no more. In Isa. 51:11 we read of this hope- "The ransom of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing: Everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." This has ever been the hope of God's people. When does this kind of life begin?

If we say, as many Christians do, at the resurrection when Christ comes again, we are unconsciously creating a Protestant purgatory. The Christians who hold to this idea of a disembodied state until the resurrection do not intend to create a purgatory, but that is what they do. For if Paul groaned longing to be clothed with the heavenly dwelling, and he still does not have that dwelling, and neither do any of the dead in Christ, then they are left to groan and sigh, and wait until the resurrection.

This is a rather grim picture of the intermediate state, and makes it a major

disadvantage to die before the rapture. Paul's whole point in writing to the Thessalonians is to make it clear it is not a disadvantage to die before the rapture, for the dead in Christ will be the first to be raised, and they will come with Christ in His second coming. But if they have been in a disembodied state for centuries, that does not sound like the ideal. Patience would need to be the basic virtue for those who died before the rapture, for they are going to have to wait for who knows how long to put on their heavenly bodies. Paul and other New Testament Christians have been waiting for nearly 2,000 years, and this seems to be a very inefficient plan that makes early Christians suffer a purgatory that the last Christians do not have to endure. The whole idea of the dead in Christ having to wait for centuries to enter into the heavenly body is absurd the more you think about it.

On the other hand, the more you think about what Paul is saying here, the more logical it becomes that we enter the God made body as soon as we leave this one. The Biblical evidence for this is abundant. Consider first of all the major issue of the book of Hebrews which is that the man made earthly tabernacle was a copy of the heavenly tabernacle. In other words, we have a parallel here with the man made tent and the heavenly dwelling. In Heb. 9:11 we read, "When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation." This perfect heavenly tabernacle existed before the earthly one and was a model for it. Heb. 8:2 says that Jesus "serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man."

All that was done on earth in the temporary tent of the tabernacle was a mere shadow of the real and eternal event of the offering of the Lamb of God in the sanctuary of heaven. Heb. 9:24 says, "For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one: he entered heaven itself." The parallel is that our earthly tent, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit, is also just a copy and mere shadow of the original and God-made body in heaven. The temple on earth was destroyed, but the temple in heaven is not touched, and Jesus as our high priest goes on ministering and interceding for us. The God-made temple is a present reality even if its man-made copy is long gone and non-existent. You can see the parallel with the present body as a tent, and the heavenly habitation not made with hands. This intermediate state body is a present reality, and not something the dead in Christ have to wait for until the resurrection.

The resurrection body is clearly distinct from this present heavenly body. In I Cor. 15 Paul writes much about the resurrection body. It is clearly linked to this present body. He writes in verses 42-44, "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable, it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory, it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power, it is sown a natural body it is raised a spiritual body." The resurrection body is our present tent-like body glorified and made everything it is not now. It comes out of the grave, but it began its existence on earth. The body he is writing of in our text has its beginning in heaven. It is not raised up, but is God-made from scratch.

The body Paul is writing about here in II Cor. 5 is a heavenly dwelling that has no connection whatever with our present tent. It is a body we now have ready to enter when we move out of this tent. Every reference we have of a created being in heaven has a body. When Moses and Elijah appeared on the Mt. of Transfiguration they had clearly identified bodies. These are not their final resurrection bodies, but bodies God made for them for these many centuries of heavenly dwelling. Enoch was taken into heaven without dying, and it is a logical assumption that his body was transformed so that he has been in a body all these centuries. If not, it is certainly no advantage to get to heaven before the resurrection. But Paul says it is in Phil 1:21: "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." And in verse 23 he writes, "I desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better." Paul knew he would not be a naked soul waiting in anxiety for the day of resurrection.

He also had the promise of Christ which he gave to His disciples, and then to all the children of God in John 14:1-3: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms, if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." This is a very exciting and comforting passage unless you push the fulfillment off to the day of resurrection, and fail to see it is the very thing Paul is writing about-the intermediate state.

The room, or mansion as the King James Version has it, is this very heavenly dwelling Paul is referring to in II Cor. 5. If you push this off to the second coming, you have made it an issue that greatly troubles the heart rather than relieves it of trouble as Jesus intended. If Jesus is not going to have these rooms ready in the Father's house until the resurrection, then Jesus has lost something radical in His new body. He created the whole universe in six days,

and now He has spent nearly 2,000 years and does not even yet have these rooms ready for His disciples. That does not sound like the Carpenter we see in the New Testament. He said, " All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me." Jesus does not need to labor for centuries to get ready. It is only logical to assume that these rooms in God's house are ready now for all who entered heaven. To think there is a lack of housing in heaven, and that anyone has to wait for centuries is totally inconsistent with the nature and power of Christ.

Jesus knew all of His disciples would be dead in a matter of a few decades. His promise was not that someday at the end of history they would be with Him in the Father's house, but that they would be with Him soon. The thief was there the day Christ died. It is nonsense to think that the disciples were not there the day they died. If this is not so the disciples had more need for comfort than they could ever dream, for they have been homeless for 20 centuries, and are not even yet in the Father's house, if this only takes place at the resurrection of the body.

The obvious truth is Jesus had these places ready before any of disciples died, and each of them as they died did just what Paul expected to do. They left their tent and entered their home in heaven not made with hands. The alternative is too ridiculous to think of, for it would mean Jesus has been a prodigal carpenter roaming all over heaven neglecting this project, and leaving the disciples waiting somewhere in a homeless state-disembodied, and not yet in the Father's house. You are free to choose which you think is reality, but I choose to go with Paul and believe the house in heaven is ready now for all who die in Christ.

Again, let me remind you, this glorious hope of an immediate heavenly dwelling does not undermine the significance of the final resurrection body. The first two bodies of man have their limitations. The one we are in now is very limited, and we experience so little of the spiritual realm. Paul even says to be at home in this body is to be away from the Lord. It is a severe limitation to be in this body of flesh. In the body we get when we die we will experience the glory of being with Christ and all the joys of heaven, but we will then be limited in what we can experience of the physical creation. God let Moses and Elijah come back into time to experience some of physical life again, but this was a rare exception. None of the New Testament Christians ever got that opportunity. That is why the final resurrection body is still the hope of all

God's people. Man is not complete until he can enjoy all that God's has made both physical and spiritual.

The whole point of the new heaven and the new earth is that in our final resurrection body we will be able to enjoy a new earth. The saints in the intermediate state have a foretaste of heaven, but they do not have it all, for they cannot now enjoy the new earth. That will be a spectacular example of the creative power of God. We will be able to experience what life would have been like in an eternal Eden with no sin. The intermediate state is marvelous beyond our comprehension, but the best is yet to come when that heavenly body and our earthly body are united in an eternal combination that makes us fit to enjoy the best of both worlds-heaven and earth. Our first body can enjoy earth, and our second body can enjoy heaven, but our third and final body will enjoy both forever and ever. Calvin called the intermediate state body the commencement of the building to be completed at the resurrection.

Without a body there is no enjoyment of any kind for man. The idea of being disembodied is not new. The pagan world had this view of the intermediate state long before the New Testament. If we go back to Homer in about 1900B.C., we get a picture of just how comforting the intermediate state is if you believe it is a disembodied state. Odysseus has three encounters with the dead in Hades while he is yet alive. The first is with his mother. He described the experience-

**"Longing filled my heart to clasp the shade of my dead mother.
Three times my heart drove me to make the attempt. Three
times she slipped from my hands like a shadow or a dream.
Bitter distress grew even greater in my mind, and I cried out:
My mother, why won't you stay when I try to embrace you?
Even in Hades surely we can throw our arms around each other
and weep to our hearts content. Can it be this is some phantom
sent by the Queen of the Dead to torment me?
Alas, my child, replied my dear mother..... This is what death
is like for all men.....There is no strength left in flesh and bones,
they have been destroyed in the blazing funeral pyre, and
ever since life left the whitened bones, the spirit has fluttered
and flitted about."**

The interesting thing here is that Homer could conceive of a better way. He

could see that having a body that could be felt, and which could still be a means of contact and expressing of love would be wonderful, but he had no idea how this could be once the body was destroyed. He had no revelation as we have about a body ready and waiting, and one that loved ones could embrace.

If the idea of a disembodied state is true, then Christians have nothing to offer the world that they did not already have in paganism. This is one of the most powerful arguments for the reality of the intermediate body. It makes Christianity unique, and makes the after life so much more a paradise than what you find in the Old Testament or in pagan literature.

There are incidental arguments for the intermediate body that are based on the symbolism of revelation. The dead in Christ, who are the saints of heaven, where robes of white. A strange garment for a disembodied soul. I have never seen a disembodied soul but I suspect it would be hard to keep a robe on without a body. This is being silly, but on purpose so as to emphasize the necessity for the intermediate state body. Equally absurd is the picture of the saints playing on their harps. I've never tried it, but I'm sure it is no snap even with fingers. Take these and the rest of the body away and you really have a challenge. For a disembodied spirit, the harmonica seems more appropriate, or one of the woodwinds. But enough of nonsense. The point is, a body is necessary to make sense out of the intermediate state.

There are no disembodied beings in heaven. Even the angels are in bodies. Revelation 7:11 pictures this clearly. "All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God." If you can tell me how an angel can stand and also fall on his face without having legs and a face, then I will consider the idea of disembodied angels, but I suspect nobody has any such explanation. Bodiless beings are just not a part of any picture we have.

Why would any Christian hold to a disembodied state? It was the result of an over reaction to the theologians who said the resurrection of the body is not necessary. We get a body after we die and are with Christ, and so the resurrection at the end of history is not needed. This led to strong reaction of those who exalted the resurrection at the last day. They rejected the idea of a body immediately after death. Christians are always doing this: Taking part of the truth and rejecting the other part when the solution is to see that both sides are true. Both the intermediate state body and the resurrection body are

valid truths. The Christian hope is based on the reality of both of these bodies, for there is no time in the plan of God when His children will be without a body.

9. A HEAVENLY HABITATION BASED ON II COR. 5:1-10

Carl Sagen is one of the leading minds in our world in the realm of astronomy. He has played a major role in the space expeditions to the planets. He is responsible for a record which was on board the Voyager's one and two. It is now wondering between the stars, and it will tell any aliens who intercept the space craft about earth. I was impressed in reading his book Broca's Brain to find him in a very subtle way giving thanks to God for the kind of universe He has given us. He writes, "For myself, I like a universe that includes much that is unknown, and at the same time much that is knowable. A universe in which everything is known would be static and dull--a universe that is unknowable is no fit place for a thinking being. The ideal universe for us is very much like the universe we inhabit. And I would guess that this is not really much of a coincidence."

He is saying, God gives us plenty, but keeps plenty hidden also, so we have the joy of endless discovery. This is true also for the unseen realm called the intermediate state. What happens to us between the death of our body and the resurrection of our body? This period is called the intermediate state. God has revealed some fascinating facts about it, but has also concealed so much that it is a mystery that makes men curious, and sends them searching the Bible for every hint that opens up some light on the subject.

Here in II Cor. 5 Paul tells us some very interesting things about the intermediate state. It seems strange that Paul wrote more about heaven to the earthy and sensual materialists of Corinth than to anyone else. Paul knew that the only way to get people to overcome their earthiness was to get them to set their affections on things above. Heavenly minded people do more to change the earth for the better than those who affections are only earth centered.

John Wesley proved this in eighteenth century England. You think we live in a decaying society now, but the books and plays of that day were so immoral,

and language so foul, they would be considered offensive even in our day of declining morality. Prostitution was sky high, and the way they had of disposing of the fruit of their sin was even worse than the abortion scandal of our time. They just gave birth to their babies and then let them die. 74.5% of the babies in 18th century England died before the age of five. The rich brought their way out of every sin and crime, and the poor were hung at a rate of 10 to 15 a day for 160 different offenses. The church did nothing for it too was corrupt.

Then came Wesley, a man with heaven on his mind. He preached it and taught it, and people began to change their ways. Justice and morality were restored. Babies started to live again, and the death rate fell from 74.5 to 31.8%. People's health began to improve, more flowers were planted, and the whole earthly scene was changed, because people were challenged to become heavenly minded. The prayer, Thy will be done as it is in heaven, can only be answered when people know more about heaven. It is not possible to be so heavenly minded you are no earthly good, for if you really are heavenly minded you will do earth a lot of good.

It is important that we know all we can about heaven, for it becomes a key factor in what we do on earth. This was certainly the case with Paul. Note, first of all--

I. PAUL'S ASSURANCE.

Paul begins this chapter, "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, and eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." Paul was fully assured that the death of his body was a loss of a tent and a gain of a building. It is not much of a threat to tell the homeless, I will destroy your tent, if by so doing you made them eligible to live in a mansion. No wonder Paul was not afraid to die, for he said it was far better to die and be with the Lord. Paul knew he had a better body awaiting him.

This body of time is but our temporary dwelling, and Paul calls it a tent. It is as if this life was but a nomad journey, but our body, after we die, is a permanent residence, where we settle down for good. Paul was a great pioneer. He lived in tents often as he traveled the world, but no man wants to do this forever. Even Paul longed for the day he could settle down and have a

permanent address he could call home. He knew this was what God had waiting for him when his tent was no longer fit to house his spirit.

Paul was not putting his body down by calling it a tent. He was just emphasizing that by comparison his earthy body was no big deal in light of the body God had made for him in heaven. The comparison is between a tent and a building. Take your pick, Paul would say in our day-a night in the campground or a night at the Ramada Inn. This life is roughing it. The life to come is luxury at its best. Having this kind of assurance makes it easier to face death, and to except the death of loved ones. It is better than trading in your tent for a pop up camper, or even a luxury hard top, or motor home. It is trading in your tent for your own permanent Holiday Inn. Paul was not frightened by that kind of trade, but looked forward to it with anticipation.

Here in the body pent,
Absent from Him I roam,
Yet nightly pitch my moving tent
A day's march nearer home.

It is surprising how many of God's people have lived in literal tents. All of the great people of God for centuries lived in tents. There are many references to this in the Old Testament. In Heb. 11:9-10 we read of Abraham, "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country. He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

This life has been, for most of God's people, a tent life. It has been temporary, and not settled and secure. They have always looked for their security to the place God has built for their permanent residence. It has been called the city, the mansion, the house, the building, the room, or the body. God has built them all for His people, and designed them to fit the personally and uniqueness of each of His children. In the light of this assurance, the presence body is seen as tent-life. John Oxenham wrote-

Fold up the tent! The sun is in the West
This house was only lent
For my apprenticeship
And God knows best.

**Fold up the tent!
It's slack ropes all undone.
It's pole all broken, and it's canvas rent,
It's work is done.**

Paul made tents, and slept in them for many a night. He knew it was not the top of the line dwelling. He did not fear that men would destroy his body, for that would only propel him into the building God had waiting to house him, and he knew it would be far better. This robs death of its sting, when you have this kind of assurance. If I see my house burning down, I will not be devastated if I have been assured I can immediately move into a mansion prepared for just such an emergency. Loss of something is not so tragic if the loss is more than compensated for by what is superior to the loss. If I loss a hundred dollars, but am given a thousand dollars to compensate, I will not morn the hundred dollar loss. That is how Paul saw death, and, the thus, he was facing it with assurance rather than anxiety.

Paul would have loved the story of the three pigs, for it illustrates his faith. The wolf, like Satan, can huff and puff and blow our weak house down, but that is not our last resort. The brick house awaits us, which is beyond his strength. It was this assurance that enabled Paul to close chapter four of this epistle with these words of encouragement, "Therefore we do not loss heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light momentary troubles are achieving for us and eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." Paul was full of assurance, but he was no Pollyanna. He faced the reality of troubles in his earthly tent, which was wasting away, and this lead us to look at--

II. PAUL'S ASSUMPTION.

He says, if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, and thereby assumes that Christians can and will die, and their bodies be destroyed. Paul did not assume that all Christians would escape death and be raptured into heaven without enduring this negative detour. I have known many Christians who hoped to live till the rapture, but they did not. It is a legitimate hope, but it also wise to assume that you will die, and that your body will be destroyed in one way or another. The Christians who gets too attached to his body will tend to fear

death more. After all, when you live in one place for 40 or 50 years, you tend to become attached to it and get offended by the very thought of being evicted.

It is healthy to assume that this old house will one day be unfit for habitation, and therefore, I must give thought to my second home, which is a heavenly habitation. Not everybody can afford a second home by the lake, but every Christian has a second home already, by the river of life, where the winters of this world are gone forever, and there is everlasting summer. All death can do is make you move out of your tent into your summer home. Paul's assumption is that the body, our present tent, can be utterly destroyed, and it has no relevance to our being in the new place God has built. In other words, we do not have to worry about the fate of our bodies, as if that had any bearing on our destiny in heaven.

I have to admit that cremation of the body has given me strange feelings, and the thought of my godly aunt being cut up in a lab so a medical student can learn about the body has given me shivers, but the fact is, this text makes it clear that the destruction of the body does not in any way affect a believer's entrance into his heavenly home. The body can be buried and turn to dust, or burned and turned to dust or blown to dust in an explosion. That does not make any difference in terms of our eternal destiny. The Greek word that Paul uses here for the tent being destroyed is used nine other places, and five of them refer to the destruction of the temple, which was total, with not one stone left upon another. The temple ceased to exist, and so does our body.

The fate of one's body does not hinder the destiny of the soul and the new body. The thief on the cross was promised he'd be in paradise that very day. His body was likely thrown into the city dump and burned. Christians have been burned, fed to lions and other creatures, and have had their bodies blown to pieces, and in other ways destroyed. None of this matters, for the building God has prepared for us to dwell in does not depend on the tent we dwell in now being whole and undamaged. If this was the case, Christians would have followed the old Egyptian practice of mummification of the body to preserve it. Christians are not anti-body, and they do not encourage disrespect of the tent we now inhabit, but neither do they feel that its destruction is any detriment to their destiny in the new body God has waiting for them. The third thing we want to consider is--

III. PAUL'S ANNOUNCEMENT.

Paul announces to the Corinthians the good news that they do not need to fear that death in robbing them of their body will leave them as naked spirits. We do not enter at death into some vague disembodied state. Paul announces that we have a building from God, and eternal house in heaven. At no time is a Christian like the disembodied demons who look for a body to inhabit, even a herd of pigs if necessary. A legion will inhabit one human body if they can, for they have no body of their own. God made man to be a body oriented being, and so even after the death of their physical body they are immediately endowed with an after death body. No where is there a picture of a human being who is disembodied--that is a spirit without a body. It is inhuman to be a spirit without a body. That is to be a ghost.

In Luke 16 we see even the rich man in hell with a body. He had eyes to look up and see Abraham, and he had a tongue he longed to have cooled. The lost as well as the saved have after death bodies. A human being is not a human being without a body. There are some theologians who do not like to admit this is so because it seems to them to detract from the resurrection of the body. If we already have one right after we die, what is the big deal about the great resurrection at the second coming of Christ? The big deal is that only then will be complete as Jesus is complete. Jesus is an eternal man with His human body raised up to be combined with His God made body. This makes Him the only complete man in the universe right now. No one else will be complete until the great resurrection of all God's people.

When Jesus died, His body was buried, and He took on His eternal spiritual body. When He rose from the dead His spiritual body entered into His body of flesh and transformed it into the final body that was both earthly and heavenly. He could eat, talk, and the nail holes in His hands could be touched. He was physical, and yet He could go through walls, disappear, and change His appearance so He was not recognized. He was both physical and spiritual. This is the ultimate body, and we will only be fully like Jesus when we too are raised up in our earthly bodies to be combined with our heavenly body.

Meanwhile the saints in heaven do not float about like a vapor with no body. When Moses and Elijah appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, they were not spirits only, but bodies that could be recognized and identified. Every picture we have in the Bible of a person in the intermediate state has a body. When Christ comes again, all the dead in Christ will come with Him, and be reunited with their earthly bodies. Those who are alive will be instantly

transfigured so that their earthly and heavenly bodies become one. Then, and only then, will all the redeemed be like their Lord.

Paul's point in his announcement is, do not fear the loss of your tent, for you are not left naked, but are immediately given a new and greater body as a heavenly habitation. Do not fear death, for those who have this new body will come with Jesus, and play an active role in the resurrection. Those alive at the second coming will be spectators as they are changed in a twinkling of an eye. But those in the intermediate state will be in on the whole thing, and have a far more exciting adventure. Many Christians feel it is to be a great honor to be alive at the second coming, but, the fact is, it is a greater honor to be among those who come with Christ. Do not feel bad for Christians who have died, for they are the first to get their complete and eternal body.

This complete body will be able to, like Jesus in His complete body, travel between heaven and earth, and manifest its earthly identity so that for all eternity Christians will be able to link themselves to their earthly identity, and be known by all who knew them in history. But just as Jesus took on another identity in His resurrection body, so we will be able to do likewise. This is only speculation, but it is a logical conclusion that we will be able to look like we want to look. After all, God and His holy angels are beautiful, and all heaven and earth will be beautiful. It is a logical assumption that all the redeemed will also be beautiful as the eternal bride of the Redeemer.

Until that glorious consummation of the union of the resurrection body and the spiritual body, the Christian is not waiting naked for history to end, so he can get back into a body. This would be a worse fate than soul sleep between death and the resurrection. If you were not conscious, you would not care that you had no body, but to be conscious and have no body would make the intermediate state a sort of purgatory where you wait in torment to be clothed.

There are many Christians who think this is the case, but it makes a mockery out of Christ's promise to the thief that he would be with Him in paradise that very day. What a false encouragement if that thief is still waiting to be clothed with a body to replace his earthly body. Paradise loses its appeal if for 2,000 years that thief has been there as a naked disembodied spirit, longing like the demons in legion for a body to possess. Christians who believe there is no body after death, until the resurrection, have robbed Christians of

the very comfort and encouragement Paul was offering the Corinthians in this announcement.

The whole point of Paul's teaching is, we are never without a body. We have an earthly body, and when we move out of it, we have an intermediate body, and at the resurrection we get an eternal body which is the perfected combination of the other two. The intermediate body is no mere shack. It is eternal, and is a building God has made for us. Death will take us from a tent to a temple, from a cottage to a castle. Paul makes a point of stressing this house in heaven is not made by human hands. It is not man made, but God made, which means it is a special creation of God.

We do not know of any body that is not man made. Made by man is the mark on every body we have ever seen. This body which is not man made is a mystery to us, and we have to take it by faith. It sure solves a lot of problems that theologians have about the resurrection body. People wonder about all sorts of problems with bodies scattered as ashes, or at sea, eaten by sea creatures, or even buried and being taken up into the plant world. How is God going to get it all together for a resurrection. If God can make a body for us that is ideal and glorious, and permanent, without one molecule of our earthly body, I don't think we have to worry about God's ability to raise up the physical body.

This passage makes it clear, we do not have to worry about anything concerning our after death experience, for our heavenly habitation will be far superior, and so death will be gain and not loss. These marvelous bodies that boggle the minds of scientists, as they study their complexity, are mere child's play compared to what we will dwell in the moment we fold up this tattered tent, and enter our permanent palace. In a very real sense, nothing of who we are is ever lost, and it will be a part of our eternal being. We all follow the three fold pattern of Jesus. His first body was the physical body which began at conception. That is where we all begin. It is a temporary tabernacle, but part of it will be a part of us forever, just as the body of Jesus is a part of His eternal being.

The second body of Jesus is the one He had in His intermediate state, when He left His body of flesh on the cross, which He entered again on Easter morning in His resurrection. This is our second body as well. The one we have after we die, and until we are raised again at the resurrection. The third body

of Jesus was His resurrection body, which was the combination of the heavenly and the earthly. This is our final body as well. Of these three bodies, the most mysterious is the middle one--the intermediate state body. Millions of Christians believe in the reality of this body, but millions of others do not. They are convinced of all sorts of other ideas about the intermediate state. For example--

1. Many believe in soul sleep. The soul does not need a body after death because it goes into a state of unconsciousness, and has no need for a body until the resurrection. The Anabaptist held to this view, and some Baptists do to this day. A number of the cults also follow this view.

2. The most wide spread idea is that after death the believer is in a disembodied state until the resurrection. In other words, there are only two bodies of man-the now body which is temporary, and the resurrection body which is forever. There is no middle body at all. The problem with this popular view is that it ignores the enormous amount of evidence that man is never naked, but always clothed with the body. We will consider this evidence in another message. Let me close this message by going back to our first point which was Paul's assurance. Paul says if our earthly tent is destroyed, we have a building from God. Note his present tense which says, "We have." This building is not something we will have at the resurrection. It is a building we have now. If not so, Paul is still waiting to enter what he thought he had, for the resurrection has not yet happened. He groaned, longing to be clothed with his heavenly dwelling. If this does not happen until the resurrection, Paul is still groaning after nearly 2,000 years. If this be so, it is a rejection of his whole point in comforting the Corinthians. We will examine this in another message, for I have a great deal of evidence to support the conviction that Paul expected to slip out of his tent, and not be naked for 2,000 years, but enter immediately into his heavenly habitation.

10. THE BRIDGE OF RECONCILIATION Based on II Cor. 5:27-21

One of the 7 wonders of the natural world is the famous Natural Bridge of Virginia. Tons of solid rock form a bridge over a creek 215 feet below. This massive masterpiece of God's bridge-building skill has caused many to stand in

awe and recognize that, not only the heavens, but the earth as well, declares the glory of God. Fifty feet thick, 100 feet wide, and 190 feet long, this bridge of nature was called by John Marshall, "God's greatest miracle in stone." French engineers visited the bridge during the Revolutionary War, and they called it the work of the Creator. One said, "It is the most wonderful thing I have ever seen. When you see it you seem to hear the angels sing." I've only seen it in pictures, but a woman who had seen it told me that it made her feel near heaven.

We want to consider in this message one of God's bridges that can not only make us feel near heaven, but can actually lead us to heaven. It is a bridge so magnificently marvelous that it cannot be ranked as one of the 7 wonders of the world, or even of the universe, for there are not 6 more of anything that can fit into its category. It is so infinitely superior to all of God's other works that it must stand alone as the Wonder Of Wonders.

There is a bridge that spans all space,
Unseen by our eyes.
A bridge that leads from everywhere
To God's throne in the skies.

This bridge of bridges, though unseen, is the very essence of reality for the Christian. It is symbolized by the cross, and can be called the bridge of reconciliation. Man spends a great deal to build bridges in order to save time. The Lackawana Railroad Co. built a 12 million dollar bridge to save 20 minutes between New York and Buffalo. God's bridge of reconciliation, however, was so costly that astronomical figures could not measure it. It was an infinite cost, for its purpose was not just to save time, but to save eternity for those travelling through this world to the next.

We could never have guessed what price God would pay to build such a bridge had He not revealed it. Even then it seems unbelievable, for the cost was the cross of His Son. It seems a strange way to build a bridge, but it was the only way to build the bridge of reconciliation. This bridge would enable sinful man to approach God without fear and trembling, but in faith and trust.

A young actress in Hollywood approached a pastor and said, "Pastor, I've heard you say again and again that Jesus died, and that because He died, our sins are forgiven. What I don't get is what's the connection?" Her confusion is

typical of man's understanding of the Gospel in the modern day. When the modern biblically illiterate American sees a sign saying "Jesus saves," he may very well think it is an ad by the banks to get people to open more savings accounts. Masses of people do not understand even the basic principles of Christianity. In part it is due to the fact that Christians themselves are not able to explain clearly what Scripture teaches.

Our aim in this message is to make the doctrine of reconciliation clear enough for the sinner to experience, and simple enough for the saint to explain. The whole Gospel is wrapped up in this word reconciliation. The ability to explain it will be a great asset in making us useful servants in the ministry of reconciliation. The word means to unite; to bring back to harmony, and to cause to be friendly again those who have fallen out. Reconciliation is what happens when a husband and wife have been fighting, and something causes them to cease the strife, and become friends again. This is known as kissing and making up. Whatever causes them to do so is a bridge of reconciliation. It opened the way for them to approach each other across the chasm they had dug between them. The bridge of reconciliation unites them again by spanning that chasm, and making it of no effect in separating them.

Such a bridge is usually built by one or the other of the parties involved humbling themselves before the other in either admitting their guilt, or in being willing to forgive. Often it is even the innocent party in the quarrel who takes the initiative, and builds the bridge, and asks the guilty one to cross over and live in peace, rather than pieces. It is often the most innocent who builds the bridge.

This was the case in the strife which separated God and man. Sin had gouged out a chasm between God and man infinitely greater than the Grand Canyon. Sin set God and man at war. The offender was man, for he was guilty of breaking the bond of unity by his disobedience. God, however, though the innocent party in the conflict, humbled Himself, and built a bridge of reconciliation by which man could return to fellowship with Him.

God could have easily crushed man, and ended the battle as total victor over his rebel enemies, but God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He gains no satisfaction in the victory of sheer power, for He is all powerful, and there is no challenge at all in gaining a victory which depends on might alone. God's satisfaction comes, not in destroying enemies, but in reconciling enemies, and

making them friends again. This is a challenge even for omnipotence, and this alone could express His basic nature of love. Anybody can hate an enemy for life, but only the Godlike can make a friend out of an enemy. Therefore, Paul says in verse 19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself."

**O wisest love! That flesh and blood,
Which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against the foe,
Should strive and should prevail.**

Christ prevailed on the cross. He destroyed the works of the devil that hindered man from returning to God. He built an indestructible bridge of reconciliation by which the world could return. The chasm which sin had dug between God and man was made of no effect in separating those who longed, like the Prodigal, to return to the Father's home and love. What is surprising is that Paul says it was the world that God was reconciling in Christ. The world is God's enemy. The world represents all that is opposed to God. It is the realm where Satan's rule has corrupted all, and made all men enemies of God by nature, and by choice. John warned Christians to not love the world, neither the things in the world, for it is still the enemy of God.

How then can Paul say that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself? We know that God so loved the world that He gave His Son to die for it. We know He died for the sins of the whole world. We know He sent His Son into the world, not to condemn it, but that the world through Him might be saved. We know these things, and yet we look at the world and wonder if God's love was effective. Did His plan work? Was the cross really effective in building a bridge of reconciliation, for it appears that the world is still no friend of God.

We have here another of the great paradoxes of Scripture. The world is reconciled and yet unreconciled. It is reconciled in that all that hinders man from returning to God was nailed to the cross. Christ's atonement for sin was a complete victory.

**And e'er His agony was done,
Before the westering sun went down,
Crowning that day with crimson crown,
He knew that He had won.**

It is finished, said Jesus. The cross was a success, and God in Christ did build a bridge which reconciled the world to Himself. The fact is, however, that this bridge, like any other bridge, only has value as it is crossed. An uncrossed bridge is no better than no bridge at all, and that is why the world is still unreconciled to God, even though God has reconciled it. It is reconciled in that the bridge is open and available, and God requires nothing but that the sinner cross it by receiving Christ as Savior. It is unreconciled in that men have not yet done so. This is why Paul says the ministry of the church is the ministry of reconciliation. The primary task of the church is to tell the world that God has built a bridge by which they can be united with God again as citizens of His kingdom. They no longer need to be rebels running from His wrath.

In a novel by Maurice Hewlett a servant of the king says, "There was a Father, my Lord King Richard, who slew His own Son, that the world might be the better." "And was the world much better?" Asked the Monarch. "Not very much, but that was not God's fault, for it had, and still has, the chance of being better for it." Because of the cross every man is a potential child of God. As far as God is concerned, every man is welcome to return and be forgiven, and restored to fellowship. What is amazing is the humility of God in building the bridge of reconciliation. We have no picture here of a rebel on his knees before the king pleading for mercy and pardon, but rather, a king before the rebel pleading for him to receive mercy and pardon. There is nothing that can compare with the condescension of God in His love for the rebel sinner.

I have heard men say in giving an invitation to receive Christ, "I will not plead, for Christ is a king, and kings do not plead." This is not true at all of our Sovereign Savior. On the contrary, He is a king who pleads. He built a bridge of reconciliation for a world of rebels, and has sent ambassadors like Paul into all the world to plead with men to cross that bridge. God did the stooping. He paid the cost in getting this good news to the world. Let us never be guilty of dividing the Father and Son in the plan of salvation. Some who have conveyed this misconception led a little girl to say, "I don't like God because He was going to destroy the world, but I like Jesus because He stopped Him and saved the world." Such a concept is totally false, for it was God who loved the world, and who gave His Son. It was God who was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.

In the National Gallery in London there is a painting of Christ on the cross

against a black background. Jesus looks alone and abandoned as if the whole universe was uncaring and indifferent. If one looks intently, however, there emerges from the blackness the dim outline of another crucified sufferer. It is the Father sharing Calvary with His Son. The nails that pierced the hands of Jesus pierced the Father's too. While Jesus atoned for our sin, God the Father built a bridge that made the chasm of sin of no effect in keeping men from God.

**There is a bridge that spans all space
Unseen by our eyes;
A bridge that leads from everywhere
To God's throne in the skies.**

That bridge is the cross of Christ. The way of the cross leads home because it reconciles us with God the Father. In Rome there is a bridge called the bridge of St. Angelo which crosses the Tiber. Statues of Peter and Paul stand at the end of it. Crowds going over it centuries ago caused it to give way, and 172 people perished. Many have perished in history because of bridges that collapsed, or were carried away by a flood. The only bridge that can never fail you, but lead to eternal life is this bridge that God built.

One of the greatest examples of such self-sacrifice in history occurred in the building of a bridge. Napoleon's army was at its wits end. They were pressed on all sides by the Russians who had destroyed all the bridges. The only hope was for some sort of bridge to be built, and so in spite of the cold icy water men jumped in and held a makeshift bridge as the troops marched across. When they were called to leave the water, not a man moved. Clinging to the pillars, they stood silent and motionless, for they were frozen to death. Even Napoleon shed tears at their sacrifice. The price had to be paid if the rest of the army was to be saved. And so also the cross had to be endured if mankind was to be saved and reconciled to God.

It has been made a proverb that you don't cross your bridges before you come to them. That is not bad advice, but another good saying is, do cross the bridge of reconciliation when you come to it, and trust in Christ as your Savior, for that is your only hope of being restored to fellowship with God.

11. THE COST OF CHRISTMAS Based on II Cor. 8:1-9

December in Peru is just as hot as July. The jungle is steaming and the insects are ferocious. Yet in that jungle setting more than 300 people from the Wycliff Bible Translators celebrate Christmas. The twinkling Christmas tree lights are not on a pine or fur tree, but on a banana or palm tree. It is radically different from our idea of Christmas, but it is nevertheless a precious time for the families there, and the children who grow up with this environment. They think ours is not really a true Christmas experience.

Bernie May is a pilot for Wycliff in that group, and his 3 boys were really excited as Christmas approached some years back. He had to fly some medical supplies to an Indian tribe in the jungle, but he was scheduled to return to his family on Dec. 23rd. He made the 5 hour fight and landed on the river near the Indian village. He would return the next day, but in the night fog and rain came and he could not fly out. It rained all day and night, and Christmas Eve was the same. He was so frustrated he slipped on his poncho and trudged down to the river edge. He crawled out onto the wing of the plane and sat there feeling desperately sorry for himself. It was Christmas Eve and there he was stuck in the jungle, and he would not be with his family on Christmas. That was what he most wanted in the world.

He sloshed his way back to the hut and laid down in his hammock feeling homesick, and he began to think. This is what Christmas was for Jesus. He was not home, for his home was heaven with the Father, and He was on earth far from His heavenly family. Christmas for Jesus was not going home, but leaving home. So it was also for Joseph and Mary. They were not home, but were far away from home and their family. It was a costly Christmas for those who made the first Christmas a reality. The rain finally stopped so that by Christmas night Bernie was home with family, but he had learned this lesson-there is a lot of costs involved in Christmas besides the presents.

Christmas cost him a lot of misery, for had it been any other day he could have missed it and not been so lonely, but because it was Christmas the hurt was so much harder to bear. Had there been no Christmas, however, he would not have been in the jungle in the first place, for he was there because Christ came into the world to seek and save the lost. He was a part of that on going effort to fulfill the plan of Jesus to reach the whole world with the good news

that unto you is born a Savior. Had Jesus never come, He never would have gone. So Christmas cost Him plenty, and it cost Him a life of compassion for other people. It cost Him a radical change in His life work, and because He cared it cost Him the loss of precious time with His family.

The real cost of Christmas is not just in the multiplied millions of presents that people purchase. In the United States alone people spend many billions of dollars for gifts. In the 1800's Christmas presents were for children, and adults gave simple things to each other like fountain pens and handkerchiefs. After World War I there was fear that the boom time of the war years would be followed by a stagnant economy, and so there was an all out push to get people to buy more expensive gifts. It was implied that the more expensive gift you gave the more you cared. In the New York Times on Dec. 15, 1919 this ad appeared that began the upward spiral of the cost of Christmas. It said, "Don't give your family and friends frivolous gifts that are sure to disappoint. Buy them worthy gifts that will let them know how much you care." This has led to Christmas being very costly in a monetary way.

As we focus on the biblical characters in the cast of the first Christmas drama we discover each of them had to pay a cost. Joseph and Mary had an enormous cost. It cost them a great deal of stress and loss of reputation. Joseph had to be devastated by the news that Mary was with child. Mary would also be hurt by his doubt, and heavy with frustration in trying to explain the virgin birth. It cost them the comfort of home to get to Bethlehem, and even more so during their exile in Egypt. They were not prepared for such a disruption of their lives. The birth of any baby brings added costs, but Jesus added costs to their lives that were extra-ordinary. God's greatest gift was freely given, but it was costly for those who first received it. There are all kinds of hidden costs we do not know about. The loneliness and frustration of having no room in the Inn, being forced to deliver a baby in the stable, denial of all civil rights, and being forced to flee from your homeland.

Mary and Joseph had the natural joy that a Son was born, but it was far from a season to be jolly, for they were surrounded by human folly and cruelty. They saved some money by not having to pay for a room, but the discount for spending the night in the stable did not make up for the cost in loss of dignity and feelings of being left out. It was trial and trouble, and it got even worse when Herod set out to kill the child. The good news is that their experience makes it clear that it is no sign you are out of God's will when things do not go

right, and much goes wrong, and there is great cost in following His will.

The wise men were committed to a costly and time-consuming journey to travel to the land the star led them too. It costs them a great deal of time and money, for they brought expensive gifts to the King. They also risked their lives, for had Herod discovered in time that they were going to depart without telling him the location of the Christ child they would have been killed. It cost them a great deal of research and thought as well. It cost them labor of mind as well as of body.

The shepherds did not pay a heavy cost, for they were closest to the Inn where Jesus was born. They doubtless lost a night's sleep as no one could go to sleep after what they experienced that night. Their cost was minimal likely, but we have no idea how many sheep they may have lost by leaving them to go to the manger. It may have been more costly than we realize. The shepherds were not the only ones to lose a night's sleep over Christmas. Matt. 2:3 says, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all of Jerusalem with him." Herod was a very insecure man. He was so threatened by the news of a birth of a King that this greatest news was bad news to him. Christmas cost Herod his peace of mind, and when he was nervous all the people were nervous, for he would murder anyone when he felt threatened.

Because Christmas cost Herod his sense of security it cost a number of innocent families to lose their newborn babies. Herod ordered all boy babies of Bethlehem two years old and under to be killed. Imagine if that was your two-year-old son or grandson, and you can see that Christmas cost these families a price that was way too high. Scholars estimate on the basis of the population of Bethlehem at that time that there would be between ten and twenty boy babies who were killed. It is a relief that it was not hundreds, but for those ten to twenty families it was as bad as it could be, for Christmas cost them the loss of a son. Someone suggested that Jesus may have experienced human guilt when He grew up, for He was alive and all of those other babies were not because of Him. It was Herod who was the source of the evil, but it was the coming of the baby King, which provoked this evil against the innocent.

We would all prefer to focus on the heavenly hosts rather than the hatred of Herod. We would rather point to the manger, the Magi, and the messages from heaven rather than this unpleasant picture of the murder of the innocent.

But that was part of the cost of Christmas. Light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light, and the result has been war between the forces of light and darkness. Herod tried to kill Christmas by killing Christ, and this wicked rejection of God's gift has continued all through history. Christmas has cost multitudes their lives down through the centuries. But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, and so it is worth the cost. Even if Christmas costs you your life it is the bargain of a lifetime, for to die in Christ is gain, for in Christ there is victory over death. Those 10 to 20 boy babies lost their earthly life for Jesus, but Jesus later died for them that they might have eternal life.

Christmas is clearly inadequate without the cross, for the birth of Christ alone was very costly, and by itself it did not save anyone. On the cross Jesus more than recouped the loses, and He made all those for whom Christmas was so costly rich forever. Evil made Christmas costly, but that is why Jesus had to come. Had the world been wonderful and righteous there would be no need for a Savior. It was just because the world was so filled with such hellish hatred like that of Herod that the incarnation was a necessity for man's salvation. Jesus could have washed His hands of the whole thing and cast the whole world into hell, but instead He paid the price of coming into the world to take upon Himself the full blow of evil in order that man might have a way out of hate and darkness into love and light.

The negative cost of Christmas, however, has been a reality all through history. Even Christians have had to pay the price of conflict because of Christmas. The Anglican Church decorated their churches for Christmas. The Puritans felt this was pagan and they went all out to rid the church of such pagan influence. They went to such extremes that they made it illegal to celebrate Christmas, and so we have the paradox of some Christians being sent to jail for celebrating the birth of their Savior, and the cost was being imposed by other Christians. The Puritans were very godly people, but their anti-Christmas stand earned them a negative reputation they have never been able to live down. It took America a long time to come out of the anti-Christmas slump. Dec. 25 was just another day until 1856. It was just another workday in Boston as late as 1870, and the Public schools were open on Christmas.

Historians tell us that had America been settled only by the Puritans of England we may not have had much of a Christmas celebration even yet. But

many of the Christians who came to America came from Sweden, Germany, Ireland, Poland, and Italy where there had never been anti-Christmas movement. The result was that America became a melting pot where the Christmas customs of all the world came together and this gave us a Christmas celebration on such a grand scale that even the world of non-Christians joins in the celebration.

There was a great cost for Christ to bring Christmas into the world. Paul says in II Cor. 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." Jesus left heavens brightest day to enter earth's darkness night. The cost of Christmas for Christ was bankruptcy. Before Christmas He owned the cattle on a thousand hills and the wealth in every mine. His riches would make billionaires look like paupers in comparison. Everything was His, for He made it all, and without Him was not anything made that had been made. He was equal with the Father, and so was the wealthiest being in the universe. He could have given whole worlds to each person, but instead He gave His Person to the whole world. He gave up equality with the Father and became poor. He went from riches to rags and from splendorous garments to swaddling clothes. He entered into poverty. The cost of Christmas to Christ is beyond calculation.

Geoffery Bell, a missionary to China, in his book When Iron Gates Yield, tells of his experience one Christmas Eve. He had been served a meal by his Chinese host, and then joined him as he went below to the stable to give the horses more hay. It was not very pleasant as he entered that atmosphere of manure and straw and the smell of animals. He writes, "I stood suddenly still in that oriental manger. To think that my Savior was born in a place like this. To think that He came all the way from heaven to some wretched Eastern stable, and what is more, to think that He came for me. How men beautify the cross and the crib, as if to hide the fact that at birth we resigned Him to the stench of beasts, and at death exposed Him to the shame of rogues. God forgive us.

Love to the uttermost, love to the uttermost,
Love pass all measuring His love must be;
From heaven's highest glory to earth's deepest shame,
This is the love of my Savior to me.

I returned to warm, clean room which I enjoyed, bowed to thankfulness and worship."

The cost of Christmas for Christ was so staggering that to dwell on it will lead you to wonder and then to worship. Such a sacrifice demands that we bow before Him as our Lord and King. There is nothing we can give to Christ like worship, for that alone conveys our partial grasp of the magnitude of the cost of Christmas to Him. It is costly to be unique and Jesus was the most unique person ever to be born. As Dr. Hugh Pyle said, "He was the earthly child of a heavenly Father and the heavenly child of an earthly mother. No wonder He bent the calendar of the world around that manger cradle."

We are grateful for the impact of Christ on history, but why pay such a price? It was because this is what it cost to redeem man and reconcile Him to God. This is the price for what God wanted. He wanted man saved and it was costly. It was not free to God to get this goal accomplished. It cost Him a Son, and it cost His Son His earthly life. It cost Him the cross to be born at Christmas. He was born to die, and die He did that we might be saved. We are saved freely, for it is a gift that Jesus bought for us, but the fact is it cost Jesus everything. Grace is free to receive, but it was costly to give.

The Christmas spirit is that spirit that gives as Jesus did to meet the needs of others, even when they do not deserve it or appreciate it. This is costly, and it is far more easily preached than practiced. It means being Christ like in sharing your riches of grace with those who are in such poverty that they do not grasp the value of what you seek to give. The cost of Christmas is giving your best regardless of how the gift is received. Jesus came to His own and His own received Him not. He knew they wouldn't before He came, but He still came, for that is the cost He was willing to pay to give man what He needed, which was a Savior.

The highest cost of all is for those who do not receive the free gift of Christ. He became poor that we might be rich, but if we do not receive Him, we remain poor forever. There is a cost involved in receiving the free gift, but it is nothing like the cost of not receiving the gift. This is one of the paradoxes of Christmas. It costs more not to receive the gift than to receive it. Those who do not receive Christ as Savior must pay the cost of their own sin, and that means they will be bankrupt forever, and never be able to get out of the debt of hell.

The day God dropped the babe of Bethlehem into time was more costly to the world than all the bombs that have ever been dropped. God's gift of life, love and light has blown away all excuses, and man is left exposed for what he is, and that is a rebel. The Christmas message leaves him no alternative but to come and worship, or to go to war. All are forced to make the costliest decision of their lives. They either receive the gift of a Savior, or they pay for their own sin forever. You pay the cost now of surrender, or you pay the cost later of eternal warfare. Anybody who is cost comparison conscience will see the utter folly of not being willing to pay the costs involved in surrender and worship of the Savior God gave the world at Christmas.

Nothing is so costly as the Christ-less Christmas of those who will not receive God's gift. People will spend a fortune on lights, but reject the light of the world. They will pay a fortune for gifts, but reject the free gift of God. They will put time and money into a tree, but never receive the forgiveness purchased for them on the tree of Calvary. It is the same old story-no room for Jesus.

**Room for pleasure, room for business,
But for Christ the crucified
Not a place that He can enter
In the hearts for which He died.**

May God help us all not to get so caught up in earthly presence that we miss the presence of God. His presence is His present to us, and if we miss this we miss His best and pay to high a cost for Christmas. Let us not be foolish, but make sure we get God's best by receiving all He gives us in Christ.

**Despised-forsaken-must He longer stand
Outside the door, with His dear, wounded hand
Still knocking? Nay! O Christ, the crucified,
Come, and forever in our hearts abide.**

**And, for our Christmas gift, we pray thee, bring
Life's truest happiness to us, O King!
The love that far exceeds our highest thought,
The riches which thy blood for us has bought.**

12. THE GREATEST GIFT Based on II Cor. 8:9

For all know that all of our gifts for Christmas will not be equal. We may have one or two big gifts, which are the center of our excitement, but there are also a number of smaller gifts that wet our appetite for the grand finale when we get to the one that is the biggest. No child is satisfied until they reach that biggest or best gift. That is, no child that is mature enough to know the difference between the trivial and the tremendous. Very little children do not have a system of values, and so they may be just as excited about the ribbon, the colored paper, or an empty box as they are about the finest gift. We laugh at them and excuse them, for we know they do not understand value.

We would feel bad, however, if an older child got so excited about a 59-cent plastic toy and ignored the 59-dollar gift we got for them. If they went to their room with their trivial toy and didn't even care to open their best gift, we would feel bad, not only because of all we paid for it, and all we did to get it wrapped, but because they would be missing out on something tremendous that we want them to have and enjoy. In other words, everybody loses when we choose the trivial instead of the tremendous.

I read of a wealthy merchant who decided to do a beautiful thing for a poor friend. He gave him some gifts and a sealed envelope. The man was so excited about the gifts he got that he forgot to open the envelope. The wife found it the next day in the pile of wrapping paper, and she put it in a dresser. It was a year later when they received word that the wealthy merchant had died. She remembered the envelope from him and got it out and gave it to her husband. When he opened it he was shocked at what he found. It was a blank check signed by his friend. He was free to fill in any amount he desired. He quickly filled in the blanks for several thousand dollars and rushed to the bank, but to his utter dejection he learned that the account had been closed, and all his possessions had passed to his heirs. He could have been rich, but he remained poor because he focused on the trivial rather than the tremendous gift. This sad story is repeated over and over again when people ignore God's greatest gift.

James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights.." All gifts are gifts from God, and so we need to be thankful for all we have received, even the trivial ones. Be thankful

even that little kids can even have so much fun with an empty box, but remember God also has a best gift. God is like that wealthy merchant. He gives so many things, but with the many he gives us the one that can make us rich. II Cor. 8:9 says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." God wants all of us to be rich, but the only way this can happen is for us to focus on the tremendous gift, and not the trivial gifts. The entire Bible has its focus on this greatest of gifts. In the Old Testament we see-

I. THE PROMISE OF THE GREATEST GIFT.

In Isa. 9:6 we read, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." This was the hope of the Old Testament from the beginning to the end, that God would send the Messiah to win for man the battles he could never win on his own. Those are the battles to defeat sin, Satan and death. This was the gift the people of God always longed for. This gift alone could make them rich as children of God. This gift alone would set them free and enable them to walk in the light and be reconciled to God. This promise of God's greatest gift was the foundation of Old Testament faith. When we come to the New Testament we see-

II. THE PRESENTATION OF THE GREATEST GIFT.

God had been giving good things to man all through history, but Christmas becomes the greatest day in history for giving, for on that day God presented to the world His greatest gift. The angels announced it was good news to all people, for that day God presented to the world His very best. He cared enough to give the very best, and that is why He gave His Son to be our Savior. This is what it means to be rich, for one who is truly rich is one who has salvation purchased, and Jesus purchased it for all who will trust in Him. All who do not have a Savior are terribly poor, for they are so far in debt they can never get out. They owe God a perfect life of obedience, or they owe Him a sacrifice that would pay for all their sin.

We know that all the blood of all the animals in the world could not take away one sin, and so those without a Savior are in debt forever, for there is no way they can ever pay their way out of debt. The poorest people in the world are people without a Savior. The richest people in the world are those who are

free of debt. They do not owe anything because all has been paid for them. Jesus came to make us rich, and those who open their heart to Him become rich forever. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Millions of lesser gifts will not make you rich, but having God's greatest gift makes you rich for all time and eternity. This means we must add a third point.

III. THE PARTICIPATION IN THE GREATEST GIFT.

A gift needs two people. It needs a giver and a receiver. God promised the greatest gift in the Old Testament, and He presented the greatest gift in the New Testament, but the Christmas story is not complete until we make this historical event a personal event by participating in the giving and receiving. John says, "To as many as received Him to them He gives the right to become children of God." That is what it means to be rich, for a child of God has forgiveness of sin, salvation, and the hope of eternal riches beyond our comprehension. That is why Paul says in II Cor. 9:15, "Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift." In other words, when we receive Jesus as our Savior, we have God's greatest gift, and it is so big, wonderful and tremendous that there are no words that can adequately describe it. It is so tremendous that this one gift makes us rich forever. Let us make sure we do not get so excited about all the trivial gifts and neglect the tremendous gift. Let us be always thanking God for the greatest gift.

13. GLAD GENEROSITY Based on II Cor. 9

When organized baseball was in its infancy a man by the name of Farrar was first baseman for the Philadelphia Phillies. He was a fine player, and he had a little girl who was his best rooter. She sat in the grandstand clapping and cheering every time he made a good play. She would shout "atta boy daddy, you show em." The team came to love this faithful fan, and had much fun joking about this most loyal rooter. There came a period when the father went into a slump and was not playing well at all. The manager approached him and asked if anything was wrong. He explained his anxiety about his daughter. She had a good voice, and he wanted to give her the chance to take

voice lessons, but he could not afford it.

This was in a day when professional ball players did not make much. The manager talked to the rest of the team. They wanted to help, but they could not afford it either. Then one of them got an idea. After every game there is plenty of tin foil scattered all over. He suggested that they collect it and sell it. I remember doing this as a young boy by peeling off the foil from cigarette packages and gum wrappers. That is what the Phillies did after every game until the end of the season. They had a large collection by then. The girl was able to take her voice lessons, and eventually went on to join the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York City. It was the highest honor in the musical world, and Geraldine Farrar became the idol of opera goers for many years. It all began with a ball team collecting tin foil. It is a story of sacrificial collecting which bore much fruit.

That is what our text is all about. Chapter 8 and 9 of II Cor. is the only place in all the Bible where there is an extended discussion of the principles of Christian charity, or the collecting of money to invest in other people's needs. Even this is only part of the material in the New Testament dealing with Paul's noble plan to unite all of the Gentile churches in the ministry of meeting the needs of the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Paul, as the Apostle to the Gentiles, wanted to prove to the Jewish Christians, who were skeptical about Gentile Christians, that the grace of God had truly changed them. How was he going to do this? It was by means of a collection from all the Gentile churches to put the Jewish believers back on their feet.

Paul knew the power of wealth to serve a great spiritual purpose. When the believers in Jerusalem would see gifts, which Gentiles had given to help Jews, they would know then, beyond a doubt, that the light of grace had penetrated the darkness of Gentile hearts by their fruits they would be known. We cannot imagine what a radical project this was. After centuries of prejudice and hate between Jews and Gentiles this collection idea as an expression of love, and as the symbol of unity in Christ, was without precedent. It is an historical monument to the power of Christ in breaking down walls that separate people. It is a testimony also to the value of money in fulfilling the purposes of God. Money rightly given is the biblical way of getting rich. We see here that it can also be a means of enriching the whole church. It is my purpose in the message to examine the principles for giving that Paul lays down here so we can be assured that we know what kind of giving it is that lays up

treasure in heaven. The value of Paul's teaching is that it is not abstract and separate from life, but it grows right out of an actual historical situation. He explains the method, the manner, the measure and the motive of giving. We want to look at the first two. First-

I. THE METHOD OF GIVING.

Paul knows that nothing is done well that is done haphazardly. There must be a plan, and the goal of the plan must be reached by a systematic method. Paul, therefore, insists on systematic giving. He states this clearly in I Cor. 16:1-2 where he writes, "Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made."

Paul is not into the special appeal type giving in which a need is explained with great eloquence and deep emotion, and then people respond to it on the impulse of the moment. Paul does not want to be an emotional pickpocket ringing money from them by an emotional appeal. He wants them to give systematically so that all will be ready when he comes. In our text Paul is somewhat concerned that they have not been systematic, and so he is sending some men on ahead of him to see that the collection is completed. So there will be no embarrassment.

Paul had boasted to the church in Macedonia about how the Corinthians responded to his plea for a great collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem. The Macedonians were inspired by this example to give also. The Macedonians went all the way and systematically reached their goal. The Corinthians, however, have let things slide, and they have not reached their goal. Paul is writing to urge them to get it done before he comes. It will be embarrassing for everyone if the Macedonians find that Paul's boasting of the Corinthians was without foundation. Paul is putting the pressure on them to be systematic, for this is the only method worthy of the believer.

If people give on the basis of impulse and emotion then they are not giving from an internal desire, but they are depending upon external circumstances, and there is nothing Christian about that. Anyone can be moved to give by an appeal to emotion. This is the method widely used by showing starving babies and poverty conditions. People do respond and millions of dollars are collected

for worthy causes, and this is good. The point is, it is not a method of giving that is uniquely Christian. Pagans, humanists and atheists give on this same basis. Christian giving must be done with the sense that one is in a partnership with God. It is a business like arrangement where you have made a commitment to invest so much in God's work. You make this investment systematically, and you keep records to make sure you are doing so.

If Christians do not develop this method of systematic giving they are liable to become victims of all kinds of self-deception. Many Christians, for example are dream givers, and they feel very generous even if they do give little to the cause of Christ. In their minds they have visions of all they would do for God if they had great wealth. New churches are erected by their bountiful generosity, and everyone is helped by their fanciful distribution. Such dream givers are serious, and they expect God to count them generous on the basis of their dream. Such dreams do not build churches, feed the hungry, send out missionaries, or in any way help extend the kingdom of God.

Other Christians expect to be asked for money. They like to be begged, and so in order to appeal to these givers churches develop elaborate systems of begging in which people are asked to make pledges. Others demand that money be wrung from them by the moving of the Spirit, and so men are trained for the special task of learning how to move these people to open their pocket book. The result is that the church spends half its time and money trying to get Christians to give, and this is a poor stewardship of time and money. The way to eliminate all of this is for Christians to follow the biblical method of systematic giving. A right method does not solve all problems, but it is the basis on which to build to solve all problems. If you are not a systematic giver, you are a problem to yourself and to the kingdom of God. Become a part of the answer by starting to follow the systematic method of giving. Next we consider-

II. THE MANNER OF GIVING.

Paul is the great defender of liberty and freedom, and he does not change his tune when it comes to giving. He stresses that the manner of Christian giving is to be voluntary. Giving that is compelled in any way is not truly giving. We do not give the government taxes, for they are taken from us under penalty of law. We do not give money to the phone, light and water company. They are bills we must pay, and they are no sign of generosity. Generosity can

only be expressed through voluntary giving. As Paul says in verse 7, every man must give as he purposes in his heart. A man must be free to make up his own mind as to what he should give. Paul does not want any giving that is done grudgingly or of necessity, for that manner of giving spoils the gift.

It is for this reason that tithing is not a law of Christian giving. I have tithed since I was a teenager, and I highly recommend it to all who have never tried it. It is a pattern of giving that leads to great satisfaction, but it is not a law. As soon as you make it a law you are on opposite ground from Paul and other New Testament authors. Voluntary giving is a New Testament principle. You can give less or more than a tithe, but the important thing is that you resolve it in your own mind. In verse 6 Paul makes it clear that the less you give the less you reap, and the more you give the greater your harvest. He does not lay down a law concerning a percentage, for if he did he would destroy the whole principle of being free to decide in their own minds what to invest. He makes it clear that the more they give the better, but he does not lead them into legalism. Failure to abide by Paul's principle of freedom in giving has been a curse on the church.

In the early church there was little problem with Christian giving. People responded and the poor were cared for and needs were met. There is no mention of the law of tithing. Then as the zeal of Christians began to cool, and as Christianity became the establishment, giving became a problem. Christians no longer responded to the grace of God freely, and so there began a movement back to law to compel Christians to give. It is a story repeated over and over again in history. Grace or law must guide men, and where grace departs law moves in. As the church became larger and more centrally organized around the Bishop of Rome, who became the pope, not only did the need become greater, but the greed became greater. Just as government becomes a vast bureaucracy demanding more and more taxes to survive, so the church became such as well, and it began bleeding the people for all it could get.

I had always thought tithing grew out of the zeal of the evangelical spirit, but in reality it grew out of a church that was losing this the spirit, and it had to revert back to law to survive. We cannot begin to cover the history of how tithing was enforced. The church began psychological warfare first, and it promoted tithing through the priests in the confessional. The priest would read a document that made Able a tither and Cain the non-tither, and so the first murder was committed by a non-tither. Pressure and deception of every kind

were used, and even forged documents proving tithes were paid to the Apostles. Legalism has to have teeth in it to really work, and so in 585 A.D. the council of Mascon made tithing the law of the church by this statement: "Wherefore we do appoint and decree, that the ancient custom be revived among the faithful and that all the people bring in their tithes to those who attend the divine offices of the church. If anyone shall be contumacious to these our most wholesome order, let them be forever separated from the communion of the church."

This is a long way from Paul's idea of every man as he purposes in his heart. Not of necessity said Paul, but the church said of necessity you tithe or be excommunicated. In other words, if you wanted to get to heaven you had to tithe. Salvation was by law and works. There was much abuse and corruption brought into the church because of the love of money. It was this corruption that was the primary cause of the Reformation. Luther's primary objection to the church was its whole economic program, which robbed from the poor to give to the rich. The tithe law was only one part of the corrupt system. None of the reformers wanted to identify with the money grabbing abuses, and so they opposed tithing. Luther opposed it and so there is opposition to it in the Lutheran church to this day. Lenski, the most famous Lutheran commentator, writes, "All legalism in giving or in securing gifts is Romanistic....tithing is Jewish. Applying a little Christian varnish changes nothing."

The Anabaptists spoke out strongly against all tithes. John Wesley also opposed it as a Jewish law and not a Christian principle. Strangest of all is the fact that the Jews themselves opposed tithing. The church of the middle ages forced Jews to pay tithes to them. You can see why they opposed it, but to this day there is no Jewish congregation that uses the tithing method of fund raising.

We haven't scratched the surface of either the negative or the positive of tithing. The point of this brief history is to demonstrate the value of Paul's principle of freedom and danger of departing from it. When giving is made legalistic you depart from the New Testament principle. The Reformation was a movement back to the New Testament where grace reigned and not law. The spirit of the Reformation was a spirit of freedom where the stress was on the individuals right to choose freely to respond to God. Only in this kind of atmosphere can one give in the manner that Paul urges, which is voluntarily and cheerfully. Glad generosity is a flower that blooms only in the soil of

personal freedom. Giving by law may lead to the same amount of money being collected, or even more, but the flower is artificial and not pleasing to God. God loves a flower that grows, and not one that is manufactured. He loves a cheerful giver, and that is one who knows he is investing in a great cause, and so gives with the same joy and excitement as one who buys stock that he knows is going to go up much higher. Such an investment will be made cheerfully. The Greek word for cheerfully is *hilaros*, from which we get our English word *hilarious*.

This is the only kind of giving that pleases God. Hilarious giving is giving that is a joy. It is a systematic, voluntary and cheerful giving. Glad generosity is to be our goal, and it is not hard to contain if we look at the generosity of God to us in the giving of His Son, and in the promise to be even more generous for all eternity. I conclude with these words of Wordsworth,

Whatever, Lord, we give to Thee,
Repaid a thousand fold will be;
Then gladly will we give to Thee,
Who givest all.

14. MOTIVES FOR GIVING Based on II Cor. 9

All of us would certainly agree that it was a good thing that Columbus was given the money he needed to sail to the discovery of America. What we do not realize, however, is the evil method by which the money was gotten. In 1492 Tomas de Torquemada, the chief architect of the Spanish Inquisition, expelled half a million Jews from Spain and Portugal. He then plundered their property. It was this confiscated Jewish wealth that Ferdinand and Isabella used to finance Columbus. The Jews actually financed the discovery of America, but it was by force and against their will. They were also robbed by the Christians to pay for the Crusades. It is no wonder that the Jews do not respond to the Gospel, for history reveals that those who preach the Gospel were their greatest enemies.

The folly of the church in raising money by robbing the Jews was multiplied when greed led them to rob other Christians as well. The ignoring

of Paul's principle of each man giving as he purposes in his heart led to great evil and violence within the church. Compulsory tithing led to some good being done, but that good can never justify the depriving of men of their freedom to respond to God as they chose. We saw in our previous message that all of the reformers opposed the tithing law of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the system of compulsory tithing continued in the Church of England. The Baptists and Quakers fought it, and they had to pay the price for opposing the establishment. Many were imprisoned, and some were even martyred for preaching that compulsory tithing was contrary to the will of God. One extreme case on record was of Ann and Robert Henderson who were imprisoned for 11 months for failure to pay one penny.

It is hard for us to imagine the violence, which the church introduced into society by its method of collecting money. Laymen resented the dictatorial power of the church, and they expressed it through violence. Dairymaids took their tithe of milk to the church and poured it on the floor in front of the altar. The tithe sheaves of farmers were badly bound so they would fall to pieces and rot in the rain. Collectors were beaten and crops were trampled down to prevent their being taken. One Hampshire farmer notified the pastor that he was about to pull turnips so he should come and get his tithe. When the men, carts and horses arrived he pulled up ten turnips, gave one to the men, and said he would let the parson know when he planned to draw some more. He was not a practical joker, but was expressing contempt for the church law, which was also the state law. The result of this contempt and opposition was the push for stronger and stricter laws to punish the non-tither. The clergy always won for they had the law on their side. Lay people came to despise the clergy and the law, for they worked together to oppress the people.

Tithe wars were declared in England, and the people decided they would rather die than obey the tithe law. Barricades were erected and trenches were dug, and no collector was safe. They even developed battle songs to whip up their fighting spirit against the church. One of them went like this:

We've cheated the parson; we'll cheat him again,
For why should a blockhead have one in ten
For prating so long like a book-learned sot,
Till putting an dumpling burn to pot?

Another sung to the famous hymn tune Old Hundred also voiced this bitter

protest:

**God save us from these raiding priests,
Who seize our crops and steal our beasts,
Who pray, "Give us our daily bread,"
And take it from our mouths instead.**

Conscientious clergyman, of course, left the church rather than be a part of forcing people by law to support the church. The police had to enforce the law, and so they broke into homes to take away enough furniture to pay the tithe. They hated it, but it was their duty to enforce the law, and they became the objects of much hatred. Remember, it was the Baptist and the Quakers who were leading the opposition of the establishment. They were minority groups, and they suffered terribly, but their cause was just, and they eventually won and the law was changed.

The battle had to be fought again by Baptist in America. That is another story, but it had the same ending. They won again against all compulsory methods of church support. One of the reasons you do not get a bill in the mail for church support, which would be payable under penalty of law, is because the Baptists fought for the liberty of every person to give heed to Paul's principle of giving, which was, as he purposes in his heart. Voluntary giving is the only acceptable program for those who honor the New Testament.

If everyone is left in complete freedom, however, they may choose to give very little or nothing. This is true, and that is where motivation comes in. Paul says each man must make up his own mind, but then he gives the mind some food for thought. He seeks to motivate the Corinthians to give liberally. By studying this passage by the point of view of motives that Paul appeals to we come to understand what the reasons are for being glad to invest liberally. We may choose in our freedom to give even more than what the law required. These motives can compel us to do what we would resent doing if compelled by law. Not all of Paul's motives for giving are on the level of the sublime. He begins on the natural level and works up. Paul is realistic, and he recognizes that Christians are motivated by many of the same things that motivate the natural man. There is a number of different values that Paul appeals to. We will deal with them in three categories.

I. THE MOTIVE OF REASONABLENESS.

If something is a reasonable obligation and recognize it to be an obvious duty, then we are motivated to do it. Paul says that Christian giving is on the level of obvious duty. He begins this chapter by writing, "There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints." He is saying it is unnecessary to remind you of what you already know is an obvious obligation. But Paul does write about it, and he stresses this obvious duty. This is like starting a sentence with "needless to say," but they you go on and say it anyway. Why say what is needless to say, and why write about what it is really unnecessary to write about? We have here a case of the paradox of the necessity of non-essential. Nothing is more necessary than to remind people of what is most reasonable and obvious.

No one, for example, is so dense that they need to be told it is dangerous to go to sleep while driving. It is such a reasonable and obvious fact that no capable of driving can be unaware of it. And yet, this superfluous advice is constantly being printed on the turnpike. The signs everywhere say, "Stay awake and stay alive." It is necessary to keep reminding people of what is so obvious that it should be unnecessary. We tend to neglect and ignore that which is most obvious.

Giving to the church is such an obvious obligation that it should be completely unnecessary to have to remind anyone. Everyone knows that the church has to have money to operate and meet its obligations to missionaries as well as to its local ministry. It should be unnecessary to say anything about what is such an obvious obligation, and yet it is necessary to keep reminding people that they need to fulfill this obvious obligation. Next we look at-

II. THE MOTIVE OF REPUTATION.

We are motivated to do many things on the basis of what other people will think of us. We care about our image in the eyes of others, and so we can easily moved by appeals dealing with our reputation. Reputation is a matter of competition. We want to be equal or superior to others because of the competitive nature we possess. Paul boasted to the Macedonians about the Corinthians, and now he boasts to the Corinthians about the Macedonians. He is using the positive responses of both to challenge each other to compete. Paul says in verse 2 that the Macedonians were stirred up by his boasting of the Corinthians. We see Paul exploiting the competitive spirit of man for the glory of God. Churches do this all the time. Churches compete in sports events

against each other on the physical level, but they also compete for spiritual fruit and success. That is the purpose for contests between churches. This is one of the reasons behind the publishing of annual reports on the growth and giving of all churches. It may not be the highest motive for giving, but it happens to be a fact of life that God made man with this competitive spirit, and it is a valid motivation, which Paul appeals to.

Every Christian should be as proud of his local church as he is of the school he loves, or the ball team he loves. People are interested in how their team is doing. They follow them, keep up on information, and support them financially. They want to be identified with a winner, and so they do their best to encourage excellence. It should be the same with the church. We should be deeply concerned about our reputation. We should be embarrassed to let our giving get behind so that our missionaries do not get their needed support. We should be challenged by smaller churches, which give sacrificially because they are proud of their church and eager to get a reputation as a mission minded church.

Paul is saying to the Corinthians that their reputation is at stake if they do not live up to the commitment they made. He is saying, look at what others have done, for you can do it too, and you can be a challenge to them in this gain of giving, contest in contributing, and race in responding with riches in the stadium of stewardship. It may not be the highest motivation for giving, but it is valid. We give to everything else out of the motive of reputation, and so why not to the church and the cause of Christ? The third motive that Paul stresses is the strongest. Our reason demands that we give liberally, and our reputation requires it as well, but Christians have been known to be unreasonable and unconcerned about the reputation. The third motive, however, appeals to everyone, for it is-

III. THE MOTIVE OF REWARD.

This appeal to man's desire to get rich and to receive great reward runs all through the Bible. Paul is just spelling out a principle that Jesus clearly taught, and that is that all we give now will be repaid with great interest. Everything we give out of love for Christ is an investment in eternity. It is actually to our advantage if we give to good causes that bring no return in this life. Jesus put it as plain as possible in Luke 14:12-14. He said, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsman or rich

neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Jesus says generosity toward the poor will be rewarded in eternity. This means that everything we give for the needs of others is like putting money in the bank of heaven. Paul in verse 6 says giving follows the natural law of sowing. What works for the farmer works for the giver. If you so sparingly, you reap sparingly. If you sow bountifully, you reap bountifully. Every man at the judgment will reap what he has sown. This is the law of God for both the natural and the spiritual world. It is a powerful motivating factor, for it appeals to self-interest, and it makes generosity fun and exciting. We read of this law of life in Prov. 11:24, "One man gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another with holds what he should give, and only suffers want." It pays to give for both time and eternity. This is no theory, for it is a law of life.

Professor Douglas Steer of Harvard College tells of a potato grower in Northern Michigan who planted only the peelings of the potato for seed, and he fed the inside to his livestock. When moisture was abundant he got an average crop, but when a dry season came after planting, only those who planted the whole potato got a harvest. Christian giving is like sowing. Every Christian is a farmer in the spiritual realm, and they are either sowing sparingly or bountifully. The Christian who gives little because he cannot afford it does not realize he is like a foolish farmer who does not sow his field because he cannot spare the seed. Only as he sows the seed can he reap a harvest. If he hoards the seed, he will go broke. This is a law of life in the natural and spiritual realm. Calvin said, "Whenever fleshly reason calls us back from doing good through fear of loss we should immediately oppose it with this shield; but the Lord declares that we are sowing."

Many are the testimonies that sowing in abundance pays off in time as well as in eternity. Paul goes on to tell the Corinthians that as they give God will provide them with resources to go on giving to every good work. When God sees that we will be free flowing channels through which riches are going to be invested in great causes, he blesses us with greater riches. Dozens of rich Christians claim that they began their climb to heights of wealth by tithing. We dare not become superstitious about this as if tithing was a form of economic magic. The fact is, there are more rich people who never tithe than

those who do, and there are masses of tithers who never become very wealthy. The point is, the person who gives abundantly because he is motivated by the love of Christ, and wants in on the eternal rewards Christ promises, is always adequately provided for. Christians who tithe give more, but they almost always have more as well. The discipline of tithing teaches them to be systematic and wise in their use of money, and so they can do more with 90% than others who keep it all.

One of the greatest present rewards is the reward of the joy of generosity. It is a paradox, but the fact is, generous people are the most blest. Prov. 11:25 says a generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. Helen Steiner Rice wrote,

The more you give, the more you get
The more you laugh, the less you fret-
The more you do unselfishly,
The more you live abundantly.
The more of everything you share,
The more you'll always have to spare.
The more you love, the more you'll find
That life is good and friends are kind.
For only what we give away,
Enriches us from day to day.

Jesus said, "Give and it will be given to you." We are to give, not because we have to, but because it is good for others and good for ourselves. We are to give systematically because it is the best method. We are to give voluntarily because it is the best manner, and we are to give gladly because it is the best motivation for pleasing God, blessing others and enriching our own lives.

I use the tithe as a standard measure of generosity, but in reality it is too much for some and far too little for others. Each must be persuaded in his own mind what represents a generous part of his income to be invested in the kingdom of God. No one can set this standard for you. We are to make up our own mind motivated by reason, reputation and reward. If we take these motives seriously, it will lead to the highest form of giving, which is thanksgiving, or giving which grows out of an expression of gratitude to God for all He has given to us in Christ.

15. HEAVEN CAN BE HARMFUL TO YOUR HEALTH II Cor. 12:1-10

For 40 years Rev. William Tennent served as pastor of the historic Presbyterian Church at Freehold, New Jersey. As a young man this pastor experienced a remarkable trance. He was in bad health, and one day while talking with his brother he fainted away and appeared to have died. The doctor pronounced him dead and the funeral service was arranged. Friends assembled for it, and then to the amazement of everyone young Tennent spoiled everything by opening his eyes. The funeral was canceled, and for weeks he lingered near death, but finally recovered. It took a long time, but one day his memory was restored, and he told of what he had experienced.

He said he was in another world being escorted along by a heavenly being. They approached a new environment dazzling with glory and resounding with the most beautiful music. There were innumerable happy beings there, and he longed to stay with them, but he was told he must return to earth. This came as such a shock that it was too much for him, and it took him a long time to recover and face life on earth again. Such a story would be worthless if it had not come from a man of God with such a solid reputation. If some crackpot or fanatic told such a story, who would take it seriously? But this man of strong repute cannot be dismissed, for his experience is similar to that of the Apostle Paul.

Paul did not see, but he heard, and he too was left with a physical problem after the experience. Going to heaven before you actually die can be harmful to your health. It is not the trip there, but the return trip that does the damage. If you stay, you never know suffering again, but to return to earth is a chock to the human system. If man could actually organize tours to the heavenly Holy City, as he does to the earthly Holy Land, he would have to advertise that this trip may be harmful to your health.

Paul's experience of being caught up to heaven must have been a marvelous one, but he does not tell us a single thing about what he saw or heard, except that it was so out of this world that he was not allowed to tell of it. All his emphasis is on what the trip cost him in terms of his health. Paul had to pay a heavy price for his peak at heaven's glory. Examining his testimony might convince us that it is better to wait until we die and enter

heaven permanently rather than to long for a special preview while we are yet in the flesh.

Someone once asked G. Campbell Morgan if he thought people still had such experiences, and he responded, "Undoubtedly. I am certain that experiences like that have been granted under certain conditions to certain persons, and always with a certain definite purpose." He went to say that a real and authentic vision would be a very personal experience and one not likely to be shared by the person experiencing it.

Had there not been a special need for revealing it we never would have known that the Apostle Paul had such an experience. He had been laboring for Christ all over the world, and he had spent much time with the Corinthians, and yet never once did he mention his trip to heaven, but now he feels a need to share it. It happened 14 years ago he says in verse 2. For 14 years Paul had concealed this unique experience, for it was private, and he was fearful of boasting about it. the experience led him to have to suffer with the thorn in the flesh. Any boasting in pride about it to exalt himself could only lead to greater problems, and so he was very cautious. Heaven had already been harmful to his health, and he was not anxious to make it fatal.

The Corinthians, however, were having so many problems, and there was so much pride among them because of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that Paul felt it was necessary to share his experience with them. He was so careful to avoid boasting that he refers to his experience as if it was another man who had it. He was hoping that his humility about such a blessing would give the Corinthians a pattern to follow to guide them away from pride and boasting over their lesser spiritual experiences. The paradox we see here is that Paul is bringing forth his hidden basis for boasting in order to build up his own authority, but to do it in such a way that they will see the folly of boasting.

Some of them are strutting all over the place boasting of their ability to speak in tongues. Paul seeks to take the wind out of their sails by revealing his supreme spiritual blessing, which was his trip to heaven. This is far superior to anything God has done for them, but Paul does not boast of it. He goes on to explain how it humbled him and caused him to glory in his weakness. What Paul clearly implies in this passage is not only that heaven can be harmful to your health, but that any heavenly experience can be harmful. If any gift from heaven leads you to pride and a show of arrogance over your brother's in

Christ, you are allowing a good thing to be used for evil. The only way for God to offset this folly is to use an evil thing for good. That is what God did for Paul. He used the messenger of Satan to keep Paul humble lest he become proud due to his heavenly vision.

Man can use everything that is good and heavenly in low and negative ways, and that is why heaven can be harmful to your health. As long as we are in the flesh and subject to the temptation to pervert heavenly gifts to earth centered goals, God has to hold back the flesh by means of some thorn in the flesh. The greater your spiritual gifts the greater your danger. Some in Corinth apparently became so proud about their spirituality that God had to bring about their death and remove them from this life. They could not handle heaven on earth, and so God took them to heaven where they would receive a nature capable of handling it. Only this desperate need made Paul reveal his own unique experience, and how it humbled him.

Opinions vary as to just when this vision took place. The two times most commonly held are at the time of his conversion when he was blinded, of the time when he was stoned at Lystra and left for dead. No one is very dogmatic about it, for it is very uncertain, and really doesn't matter. Paul didn't know whether he was taken up in his body or in spirit only. It could have been either way, and if he didn't know, there is no point in speculating about it.

The third heaven where Paul was caught up to is the heaven of the presence of God. The clouds of heaven represent the lowest and first heaven. The stars of heaven are in the second heaven, and our Father in heaven is in the third heaven. In verse 4 Paul calls it Paradise, and so the two are equated. When Jesus promised the thief he would be with Him in Paradise He could have said, "This day you shall be with me in the third heaven." Heaven has the idea of glory and the presence of God as its main image. Paradise carries the idea of the place of pleasure and delight. We can only wish Paul would have said a few things about it, but in verse 4 he says he heard things that cannot be retold. We want to ask why that is, but there is no answer.

It is possible that man cannot tell what he experiences of heaven because there is no human vocabulary to describe it, and also because any attempt would only vulgarize it. There are some experiences even in this life that are too personal and precious to describe. Paul could no more share what God revealed to him in heaven than a man can share with others what has been

revealed to him on his honeymoon. Paul didn't want to share the experience in the first place, and now that he does, he makes it clear that any request for details will be offensive. He can share no more than what he has.

Paul did not hesitate to share his marvelous and miraculous conversion experience. He told of that every chance he got, and three times it is recorded in Acts. He gladly shared the details of this, for all the glory of it was Christ's. Personal testimony is powerful for good when the glory goes to Christ. Being caught up in heaven, however, is a spectacular experience, which would have a tendency to lead to self-exaltation. Paul knew this and that is why in verse 5 he says that he will boast for the man caught up, but not for himself, even though he was the one caught up.

This is Paul's clever way of saving that this was an experience worthy of boasting, but I refuse to exalt myself. It was the Lord's doing and no credit goes to me. I will boast of the butterfly, but not of the caterpillar is about what Paul is saying. They are the same, but in two different stages, and so the one caught up and Paul are the same man, but also in two different stages. Paul is the caterpillar-the un-glorified Apostle in the flesh. The one caught up was a glorified version of his future self. He has not yet reached that stage, even though God gave him a preview, so he does not boast as if he has attained that state.

Try explaining a marvelous thing that has happened to you without seeming to boast and you will see why Paul is so complex in his description of this experience. He already had one thorn in the flesh to keep him humble. He is not anxious to add another by boasting. But in verse 6 he admits that his experience is so worthy of boasting that he would not be a fool to do so, for he would only be speaking the truth. He refrains, however, because he wants no one to think of him on the basis of anything other than what they see or hear from him. Paul was a very wise and realistic man. He did not want to get a reputation as the man who went to heaven. He didn't want to be put on display like some unique character in a sideshow. People would look up and say, "I don't see that he is any different than anyone else." They would only be disappointed because they would expect to see someone divine, or at least super superior.

Men who do make great claims for themselves usually end up as a laughing stock because they cannot escape the flesh and their fallible human

mind. If they claim to be divine and infallible, they become a joke because they are so obviously human and fallible like the rest of us. Paul didn't let himself get suckered into anything like that. If he would have boasted of being in heaven, and of having heard the wisdom of God directly, he would then have to exalt himself to a level of infallibility. He clearly took no such position. He even told the Corinthians that some of his opinions on the questions they put to him were his own and not divinely inspired.

Paul wanted to be judged on his actions and his preaching, and not on the basis of his trip to heaven. But what a trip it was, and what revelations he received! They were so great he says in verse 7 that God had to do something to keep his head from swelling. It is possible to be too happy about heaven, and to be so elated, and so God had to allow Satan to afflict Paul in some way to keep him humble. Paul calls this messenger of Satan a thorn in the flesh. The Greek word for thorn can also mean stake. Many commentators point this out in order to make clear that whatever Paul's problem was, it was not a mere minor irritation like hangnails or chapped lips. It was a serious problem that plagued Paul and kept him in a state of constant remembrance. There have been many guesses as to what Paul's thorn was.

Calvin thought it was strong temptation to give up his duties as an Apostle, and the pangs of conscience he suffered when he was tempted. Luther felt it was the constant persecution he had to endure from those who opposed him and tried to undo his work. The Catholic view is that it was temptations of the flesh. Some are convinced it was his physical appearance, and they suggest that he had some disfigurement. Other popular guesses are epilepsy, migraine headaches, eye trouble, insomnia and malaria. No one can say for sure what his problem was, but whatever it was, he got it because of his trip to heaven. He didn't like it and prayed to get rid of it, but God would not pull out the thorn. His heavenly vision made it a necessity for his own good.

Heaven can be harmful to your health. Any blessing of God can bring with it some handicap or problem because human nature has a tendency to pride that is so strong that if the blessings of life are not balanced off with some kind of burden they can actually lead to evil rather than to good. Jacob wrestled with God and got a blessing, but he also got a limp. Uzziah was the king of Judah, and he was greatly blessed of God and became famous for his skills and inventions. It went to his head, however, and in II Chron. 26:16 we read, "But when he was strong he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was false to the

Lord his God, and entered the temple of his Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense." He was so blessed of God that he got proud and took the law of God into his own hands. If a godly king could do this, and if the great Apostle Paul was in danger of doing it, who are we to think we could handle heavenly vision and not end up worse off for it because of pride?

In our study of heaven we need to recognize the blessing of our ignorance. If God showed us more and even gave us a preview as He did Paul, we would need a serious problem to keep us from self-exaltation. Therefore, let us be thankful there is much we do not know, and be content to wait until we can see it all without it being harmful to our health.

