

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART THREE

To illustrate his theme throughout this book of Christ's comfort in our affliction, Paul had begun, in chapter one, to speak of a terrible affliction he himself had suffered in which he had found the Lord's comfort. Somehow, he told the Corinthians, their prayers had been instrumental in him finding comfort. He spoke of his ministry in Corinth and the assurance he felt from God that he had been faithful. He dealt with a minor misunderstanding about his travel plans and took the opportunity to teach an important principle about keeping promises, as God does. But as yet he had not told them just to what suffering he was referring.

Finally in chapter two he opened his heart to explain that his great burden of affliction was his sorrow concerning the bad news he had received of the spiritual condition of the Corinthian church! He wanted to come to Corinth again to enjoy time with the Christians there, not to have to rebuke them. His tough letter had been written out of love not anger. He only wanted the best for them.(2:1-4)

One of the difficult issues Paul had had to deal with in his first letter,(I Cor.5:1-4) was the problem of the man who was not only living in an immoral relationship with his mother but arrogantly claiming that this was alright with God, thus changing the very clear message about incest in Leviticus 18:7,8. The church had been tolerant not only of his behaviour but of his false teaching that justified it. Paul had urged them to deal with this situation as firmly as he would have done had he been physically present.(I Cor.5:5,6) To his great relief they had done as he asked with remarkable effect. The man concerned had repented of his teaching and actions. Now Paul wanted them to deal with a new situation. The offender had been forgiven by God but not by the church. Consequently he was hungry to grow again in his Christian life but isolated from the fellowship which would help this. Paul pleaded with them to show God's forgiveness and welcome the man back into their spiritual family. Again he wanted them to handle this as if he were present. Failure to do this would be a victory for Satan. We, today, make the same two mistakes they did by either being tolerant of wrong teaching and example or so fiercely disciplining those who stray that they are cut off from fellowship just when they need it most.(2:5-11)

Before going on to explain how comfort works in all our affliction, Paul paused to recall his visit to Troas, presumably his recent one in Acts 20 on his way back to Corinth, although his comment could be equally true of his first visit in Acts 16:8-10. On that first occasion God had opened a door, not of physical opportunity, but in his imagination, when in his dream the man of Macedonia invited him to come over and help. Somehow in his wandering around between Galatia and Troas seeking the will of God, the thought of Europe had not entered his head. On this occasion it was the lack of Titus which caused him to 'think outside the square' and move on to Macedonia.(2:12,13) We too need at times that creative spark to open our thinking to a new road as God gave in later years to John.(Rev.4:1)

Paul began a series of illustrations of what a Christ-comforted person looks like. He used first the setting of a 'triumph', a victory parade through Rome for a successful general which would include the leader being honoured together with his legions, the defeated enemy in chains being humiliated, destined for slavery or execution, and sacrifices being offered to whatever god they decided should be thanked for his/her help. The smell of the burnt offerings would waft out to the crowd, awakening not only their appetites for good roast meat but the desire to share in the next successful campaign, and so they might join the army. The general is Jesus Christ, the God being honoured is the only One who gives victory over sin, the enemy is Satan and those who follow him, and the sacrifice was made on the cross. We who are prepared to join Jesus on the cross, dead to our own will but alive to His, provide the delicious fragrance which awakens in others the desire to know His victory in their own lives. When we see others wonderfully lifted up by the Lord as they experience difficult times we receive a powerful but unspoken message of the victory which is available in Him.(2:14-16)

By contrast, Paul's second picture is of the door to door salesman who has learned off by heart his sales speech and can rattle it off without meaning a word he says. Today it would be the telemarketer who phones us at inconvenient moments, pretending to be interested in us but only being concerned to have our credit card details and make another sale. Christian witnessing can fall into this kind of pre-packaged habit when we learn someone else's message and mindlessly repeat it hoping to notch another convert.(2:17)

In chapter three Paul expanded his theme with several more striking pictures of what it means to have the Comforter living inside us.

3:1-3 Q.1 The first picture is of a letter. Who wrote the letter? On what was it written and to whom? Who was delivering the letter? What practical situation do you suppose Paul was referring to by way of example? How does this same principle operate in our lives? Should we therefore need letters of recommendation when we go from one Christian group to another?

3:4-6 Q.2 Who alone can write this letter on our lives? Why does boasting, recommending ourselves, not achieve the same purpose of causing people to trust us? With what Old Testament letter is this new letter being compared? Why did that old letter 'kill'? How by contrast does the new one give life?

3:7-11 Q.3 What Old Testament story was Paul referring to? How did it give a foretaste of what should happen when God speaks to us? Why is it that what is available to us is so much better even than how it would have been for Moses on Mt Sinai? Why does the glory of God's presence no longer need to fade away today?

3:12-16 Q.4 Why did Moses wear a veil over his face when he came down the mountain? Why was the veil needed? How does a veil still exist today when we seek to witness to the world by sharing God's word? How can the veil be removed?

3:17,18 Q.5 Who is the Holy Spirit? What does He do in the hearts of those who read God's letter these days? What further illustration did Paul use to explain the effect of looking to God for comfort when we are under pressure? Explain in practical terms how this works to transform our lives. What are the essential conditions for change in us and therefore comfort in affliction?