

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

Only a short time, a few months or possibly a year, separated Paul's first letter to the Corinthians from this second one, yet the tone of his letter could hardly have been more different. Why the change? What had happened since his first letter which began on a note of grace in the first few verses of chapter one, (I Cor.1:1-9) but then outlined at least one if not two major problems in every remaining chapter? The answer to this question will emerge as we go through this second letter and has immensely important implications for anyone involved in Christian ministry. The city of Corinth presumably remained the same as when Paul had visited, a combination of New York type business and Las Vegas type immorality. It was a place for big business and big temptation. There were 700,000 people of whom two-thirds were slaves. Paul had spent a comparatively long time there, as described in Acts 18, but within a very short time they were struggling badly, sucked in to a large extent by the attitudes and behaviour of their city.

The first letter had been written from Ephesus, (I Cor.16:19) where Paul conducted a Bible School to infiltrate a city dominated by false religion. It was in response to bad news he had received through Corinthian Christians who came to share their sorrow with Paul. (I Cor.1:11) The second letter was a response to very different news of Corinth and must have been written either shortly before Paul left Ephesus for Macedonia or in Macedonia itself. (Acts 20:1) Paul was planning to visit Corinth next and wanted his letter to arrive before he did. (II Cor.1:15,16)

Having seen God use His word in a remarkable way to transform a shaky church, pre-occupied with its internal problems, into one which really wanted to make a difference, the challenge now was to help them grow into a fellowship which would stand firm and reach out.

The first chapter outlines the theme which will run through the whole book, how to know God's comfort in any affliction and to help others to do the same. A clear understanding of the meaning of these two words is vital to an appreciation of the message of the book. 'Comfort' in modern English has come to picture ease and luxury, relaxing with a drink and our feet up in front of a fire while we watch our favourite TV programme. The English word 'comfort' comes from two Latin words, 'cum', 'with', and 'forte', 'strength' and is much closer to the New Testament Greek word, 'paraklesis' which means 'called alongside to strengthen'. The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the 'parakletos', the 'comforter'. The word 'comfort' as a noun or verb is used 29 times in II Corinthians, more than any other book in the New Testament.

'Affliction' is another interesting word, 'thlipsis', literally meaning 'under pressure'. It is not limited to physical persecution but includes pressure of all kinds including the inner pressure of anxiety. Paul used this word as a noun or verb 12 times in this book to describe all kinds of difficult situation.

Putting the two ideas together gives us a picture like the tyre of a car which is under pressure from the atmosphere and the road on the outside, and the weight of the car through the axle on the inside. What is needed is air inside the tyre to prevent it deflating under

pressure. Interestingly 'pneuma' in Greek, 'air', is the word for the Spirit of God. So the secret of this book is of how to keep filled by the Holy Spirit whatever the pressure we are under and how to help others to discover the same secret.

Let us see therefore how Paul introduced this vital mystery to a recently seriously deflated, defeated group of Christians who were now ready to listen.

1:1,2 Q.1 How did Paul describe himself in opening the letter? Who joined him, on this occasion in writing the letter? Why would he have been a specially good choice as co-author?(I Cor.4:17; 16:10; II Cor.1:19) How did Paul describe the Corinthian Christians? Can we be described in the same way? What were his two greetings? How do they sum up the gospel?

1:3,4 Q.2 What two blessings come to us from God? Why do mercies have to come before comfort? What has to happen for us before we will be much help to anyone else who is struggling? Must we have endured the same problem as someone else before we can help?

1:5-7 Q.3 Whose sufferings are we sharing in hard times? And Who proved the comfort of God as an example to us? How does this help us to understand how, through suffering, we can help others who suffer?

1:8-11 Q.4 What almost unbearable affliction did Paul suffer while he was in Asia, the main city of which was Ephesus?(Acts 19) If it was not some physical persecution, what else could it have been?(2:4; 11:28) What means had God used to comfort Paul at that time? How might the prayers of the Corinthian Christians have helped? What 'favour' did Paul eventually experience that eased his pain?

1:12-14 Q.5 Isn't pride bad? How could Paul be proud and hope that the Corinthian Christians would be proud also? How did Paul look back on his ministry in Corinth? What had been the characteristics of his ministry there? Why are these characteristics so important if our ministry is to leave a lasting impact? What did Paul hope his ministry had accomplished more than anything else?

1:15-20 Q.6 For what does it seem like the Corinthians had criticised Paul? Might this have been one of the afflictions he was suffering? What does this story teach us about where God fits into our making plans and then changing them somewhat? Why is it so important that we as Christians keep our word? Had Paul kept his? Does God keep His promises?

1:21,22 Q.7 What is the most important promise God has made to us? What four things has God done for the Christian according to these verses? How does knowing these four things help to comfort us when we are under pressure?

1:23,24 Q.8 How did Paul see the purpose of his coming visit to Corinth? What mistake do we easily make as leaders in dealing with Christians who have messed up their lives? How on the other hand can we help struggling Christians to grow?