

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

Paul's series of illustrations of what it means to have Christ's comfort because of His strength within while under pressure, first for ourselves and then to teach to those around us, ended with an invitation to join God's government as Minister of Reconciliation, sent out as an ambassador into a hostile world. At the beginning of chapter six he started urging acceptance of our new role. Our one resource is the grace of God, all that the Lord has given us through Christ, first mercy because of the cross, then strength for life and service because of the resurrection. What a tragedy it would be to waste the resource and the opportunity! To encourage us as we hesitate, he reminded us of the Father's assurance to the Son in Isa.49:8 that He is always listening and will always help and save. We only have to trust Him day by day.(6:1-3)

Ambassadors are a very public face of the country they represent. The smallest mistake will be quickly picked up and broadcast, today worldwide through the news media. Our errors are used to attack the Christian gospel. So the challenge is to serve faithfully despite all the pressures which the 'treasure pot' will come under.(4:7-9) Paul went on to detail some of the ways in which that pressure will be exerted. Each of the words he used is descriptive and worth exploring. 'Endurance' means literally to 'stay behind' when the rest have quit, and is also used in Heb.12:1 of the runner who continues the marathon when the others have dropped out. 'Affliction' is the word 'under pressure' which has been used repeatedly since chapter one. 'Hardship' is the idea of being 'squashed into a tight space'. 'Distress' is similar and pictures 'squeezing through a small gap'. 'Beatings' are 'blows' and speak for themselves. 'Imprisonment' describes being 'under guard' and therefore the idea of being in custody. 'Tumult' is 'instability', when order breaks down. 'Labour' is 'hard work to weariness'. 'Sleeplessness' is 'watching' as in a parent being awake for a sick child. 'Hunger' is also the word for 'fasting', not just because there is no food, but because there are more urgent priorities as an ambassador than feeding ourselves. Notice that most of these words are in the plural because as Paul well knew they happen over and over again.(6:4,5)

God's grace will make available all the qualities which are necessary to meet all the pressures ambassadors will face. He began with purity, who we are, which will be based on knowledge, Whom we know, and will show towards others in patience, kindness and genuine love. Our weapons will be the Holy Spirit and the word of truth which let loose the power of God to love and persuade.(6:6,7)

In the real world, the resources of grace need to match the pressures in detail and at the right moment. We need for example to show 'glory' when we are facing 'dishonour' from men, that we have a 'good report' in heaven though men may give us an 'evil report'. We will be criticised for deceiving when we tell the truth, unknown on earth but well known in heaven. It will look like death to the world when we live to God. We will survive punishment, sorrow and poverty because in reality we have life, joy and spiritual riches.(6:8-10)

For the communication of the gospel to produce life changing effect there are two conditions. The speaker, in this case Paul, must have an open mouth based on an open heart. The hearers also need open ears resulting from open hearts.(6:11-13)

The biggest obstacle to being an effective, faithful ambassador is compromise, trying to be on both sides at once. Partnership with unbelievers can be many things. It might be in marriage which undermines the Christian family. It could be in business which weakens Christian honesty. It could be religious when people try to blend Christianity and other beliefs, and so deny the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to God. God's promise is to live in and among us, but not to share us with other people, beliefs, values or practices. He wants us to belong to Him alone as His children. 'Separate' does not mean 'isolated' however. God's plan is for us to be deeply involved in our world while clearly, startlingly different because of the 'treasure in the pot'.(6:14-18)

In chapter seven Paul explored the role of the word of God in preparing ambassadors.

7:1 Q.1 What response is needed from us in the light of all God has promised about a pot containing treasure, or an ambassador being commissioned for service?

7:2-4 Q.2 What personal checks did Paul make about his relationship with the Corinthians before teaching them further? Why are these checks important for all of us in Christian ministry? What was the outcome of Paul's heart searching? How would this help what he was about to say?

7:5-7 Q.3 Why was Paul struggling as he prepared to write this book? How did God meet him in his struggles? What was Titus' role in helping Paul? How did what he reported comfort both him and Paul? How do such things happen for us?

7:8-11 Q.4 How does the reading or teaching of the word of God affect the recipient whose heart is open to God? What is the process by which the word brings us to repentance? What is the difference between regret and repentance? How is our repentance obvious to those around us? How therefore should we approach what we see as sin in the lives of others?

7:12-16 Q.5 How did the problem of the immoral behaviour of the man mentioned in I Cor.5 and II Cor.2 illustrate beautifully the difference in effectiveness between our criticism and judgement, and God's word in dealing with a problem? How had the whole difficult episode of addressing this situation eventually caused both Titus and Paul to grow in maturity? What difference had it made in their relationship with the Corinthians and each other? Why did the outcome give Paul such confidence for the future? How can we also learn so much from this story about pastoral care?