

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

After listing just some of the nightmarish situations, the afflictions, he had survived in his ministry, beginning on the night he had to be let down the wall of Damascus in a basket, Paul moved on to hint at the amazing comfort he had known from his relationship with the Lord. He was very careful not to give detail of his revelation because he did not want people building their faith on his experience. He would later warn the Colossians against anyone 'taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated with cause by his fleshly mind.' (Col.1:18) He even separated Paul, the apostle, from his description of heaven, putting his account into the third person. He wanted to play it down as Jesus encouraged when He talked of our prayer times being secret. (Matt.6:6) He wanted each one of his readers to have his or her own very private experience of the Lord, fitted to their individual needs, personalities and circumstances not modeled on his. At the same time he had no trouble boasting about how overwhelmingly good God is when we trust Him to be our complete comfort in the toughest afflictions. The expression 'the third heaven' is equivalent to the phrase 'the highest heaven' or 'the heaven of heavens' in Deut.10:14; Ps.148:4, and is another term for Paradise. The Jews talked of the first heaven, the atmosphere around us, the second heaven, outer space, and the third heaven, the presence of God. (12:1-5)

In addition to all the afflictions described in the previous chapter Paul had some other disability or recurring problem which made his life difficult. We have no idea what it was, despite many attempts by experts to guess. This helps rather than hinders us because we can equate it with any 'thorn in the flesh' we may also have to endure. The word for 'thorn' means 'pointed', anything sharp, physically or psychologically, which digs into us. Paul made it quite plain that this was 'a messenger of Satan', not something from God. He confirmed the clear explanation in Job 1 and 2 that natural and man made disasters, and bodily sickness are from the Devil not from God. They are not, as Job's friends incorrectly supposed, God's ways of punishing us for doing wrong. This widespread misunderstanding of the source of suffering comes from pagan beliefs not from the Bible. As Almighty God, the Lord could have taken Paul's problem away but despite Paul's frequent request He chose not to. God does not guarantee healing however great or persistent our faith. True faith begins with discovering God's will and asking for that alone. (I Jn.5:14,15) He does guarantee His all sufficient grace as adequate for every situation. His 'thorn in the flesh' kept Paul dependent on God in a way he was all too well aware he would not be without it. He was therefore content in all the troubles of the previous chapter because he knew how much he learned at such times. As always when Paul used a list of words each one was carefully chosen, 'weaknesses' include sickness, 'insults' mean someone being insolent, 'distresses' describe being compressed into a tight space, 'persecutions' refer to being chased, and 'difficulties' also speak of being in a tight spot. Notice that they were all in the plural. (Phil.4:11) God's blessing is not a trouble free life but the wonderful certainty that He is in us, in the deepest trouble. (12:6-10)

As on several previous occasions, Paul spoke again of the history of his relationship with the Corinthian Christians because he was very much aware that, particularly for young struggling Christians, the quality of his standing with them affected their reception of his message. He was not defending his performance among them but his God-appointed role as the twelfth apostle which demanded their careful attention. God had confirmed his apostleship by miracles and by the daily provision of his needs.(12:11-13)

When Paul referred to his anticipated third visit to Corinth it was no slip of the pen because he repeated this in 13:1. We know of his first visit in Acts 18 and of his return in Acts 20:2,3, but where was the third visit? The assumption must be that somewhere in the nearly three years he spent at Ephesus in Acts 19 he made a quick trip across to Corinth which is not recorded. In case they had still not got the point, Paul reminded them that his purpose in coming was not to extract something from them for himself but as a loving parent to make further provision for his children in the faith by feeding them more of the truth. He pushed them again to acknowledge that in not exploiting them he was being consistent with the message of grace he had taught them. He included Titus and his helper in his claim. He knew how easily the businessmen of Corinth could slip back into thinking of God as someone else with whom they had to bargain.(12:14-18)

To make quite sure they understood his purpose, he repeated once more that he was not defending himself against their criticism but that he had only one objective, to build them up in Christ.(10:8) He wondered aloud how he would find the church when he came. Much of I Corinthians, chapters 1-4, 6, 9-14 had been about competition and conflict among the Christians. He hoped that all that would have changed with their fresh appreciation of the 'comfort' of God, but he gave them a check list to review before he arrived. He was concerned with heart attitude and its expression through the misuse of the tongue. Much more of I Corinthians, chapters 5-8, had been taken up with problems of sexual immorality and the idolatry which encouraged it. His great hope was that their rediscovery of God's grace would have swept all that out of their thinking and behaviour.(12:19-21)

In the final chapter, Paul gave a simple test to his students, and said good bye.

13:1-4 Q.1 Was Paul planning to put all the offenders in Corinth on trial? What was his purpose in quoting Deut.17:6; 19:15? When Paul talked about 'not sparing anyone' what do you suppose the scene would look like when he dealt with remaining problems in the church? How does Christ's strength in our weakness show when we deal with such problems?

13:5-10 Q.2 What was the one question in the post-course test? Who marks the test? How do we know if we have passed? How do we know if someone else has passed? What is the purpose of sitting this examination? How would Paul have dealt with those who seemed to have failed?

13:11-14 Q.3 What did Paul see as God's intended outcome of his message being received? How did he sum up the heart of that message?