

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

As so often in his letters, Paul began with a reminder that he was appointed as a messenger by God and not by a committee. As such he was answerable to and dependent on God alone, and if he had a complaint about his employment he should address it to the Lord and no-one else. His co-writer this time was Timothy who had been very involved with Paul in the ministry to Corinth both initially and in a more recent follow up visit. (I Cor.4:17; 16:10) He described the Corinthian Christians as 'saints', not because they were super Christians but simply ordinary believers who were making themselves available to God alone for His use. He used his normal two greetings, 'grace' the Greek salutation and 'peace' the Jewish one. Grace was always the key word in the gospel for Paul. We have a God who gives without price to those totally undeserving who are willing to receive. His first gift is peace, because the war with God is over through the cross of Christ. (1:1,2)

Before Paul explained his theme for the book, comfort through Christ in affliction, he reminded us that none of this would be possible without mercy first. Until we are forgiven, God cannot begin to put His strength into our hearts. On this occasion mercy is in the plural, 'mercies', just as a reassurance that even multiple sinners like the Corinthians would never exhaust the forgiveness of God. Once we are forgiven, God wants to be our comfort, strength under pressure, whether from external circumstances or internal anxiety. Once we have proved Him for ourselves we can begin to help someone else. We do not need to have faced the same pressure as the person we are seeking to help. Pressures are infinitely varied, comfort will always be the same. (1:3,4) There will be no shortage of suffering of one kind or another so do not be surprised, but there will always be an abundant source of comfort. The more we suffer and prove Christ, the more we can help. We can be wonderfully confident, as we recommend Jesus to others, that He will always be absolutely sufficient in their problems too, though different from ours. (1:5,7)

Paul had been through many terrible situations in his travels, some of which he described in chapter 11. He talked now of 'excessive burdens' while he was in Asia as a result of which he despaired even of life. According to Acts 19 while Paul was at Ephesus, the worst thing that happened was a riot in which his friends prevented him being involved. What therefore were the excessive burdens? It must certainly have been an affliction in which he needed the comfort of Christ. God did work to bring him through this affliction, and somehow the Corinthian Christians' prayers had a vital role in this outcome. The answer came in chapter 2 where Paul talked of the huge weight of affliction and sorrow he had experienced in hearing the bad news of the problems in the Corinthian church. (2:4) The prayers of the Corinthians had helped because they had responded in repentance and faith to the word of God. (7:5-13) So the very first example Paul used of comfort in affliction was not of any persecution he suffered but of inner anxiety (11:28) for this very group of Christians. (1:8-11)

The starting point for helping someone else to know Christ's comfort is to check that we have been faithful in our dealings with them. If not there may be things to put right first before our teaching will be

acceptable. Paul had checked his own heart before God and had a renewed confidence that his ministry to Corinth had been on the right track. It had sprung from grace, and been characterised by 'holiness and godly sincerity', two concepts which begin with a single-mindedness and therefore a purity of purpose. When this is the basis of a relationship then both parties can boast of what God has done, an idea Paul would have more to say about later.(1:12-14)

One difficulty had arisen in their relationship which Paul wanted to put right. His initial plan had been to travel from Ephesus to Corinth, up to Macedonia and then back to Corinth. His plan had changed slightly in that he was now making the trip the other way round, Macedonia to Corinth and then to Macedonia again. He was being criticised for not keeping his word. He did not defend his change of plan but took opportunity to teach a principle, that in Christ we will do what we say. God keeps His word and wants His followers to be known for doing the same. He had in fact kept his promise to come, although details of his itinerary had changed. This incident illustrates some practical issues about knowing the will of God. The Lord does reveal His will about some future plans if we listen to Him. As we move ahead to act accordingly we will sometimes run ahead in the detail of what God has shown us. We may have to acknowledge our mistakes and adjust the plan as it becomes clearer. If even Paul got the details wrong at times then we should not be surprised when we do. It does not mean that the whole plan should be abandoned just because some parts need fine tuning.(1:15-20)

Paul summed up four promises God has made towards us. We are established together in Christ - our relationship and salvation is settled and secure. He anointed us by putting the 'anointed One, Christ Himself, within our hearts, empowering us for everything He plans. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of God's promises to us. We have the Spirit within in as a pledge, a down payment on heaven one day. What amazing promises!(1:21,22)

Comforting others in affliction is not an excuse to dominate and control the lives of others. We are to work beside them towards their strength being the result of their own faith not ours.(1:23,24)

Paul now moved on to explain his own affliction about the Corinthians, to deal with one new problem which had arisen and to begin how sharing God's comfort in affliction was going to work.

2:1-4 Q.1 What had been the cause of Paul's sorrow? How had he dealt with it? What had motivated him to act in this way? How should we follow Paul's example when we see those we care about struggling spiritually?

2:5-11 Q.2 Assuming that Paul was talking about the problem of the relationship between a man and his mother in I Cor.5, what action had the church taken and with what result? What can we learn about the importance of facing rather than avoiding problems like this among us? What further problem had arisen as a result of their actions? What was now needed in their dealings with those who had offended? What would happen if they did not respond in this way? Give examples of similar problems in the church today where we have failed to provide a path to

reconciliation for those who have strayed? How does Satan gain advantage at these times? What else do we know about his schemes?

2:12,13 Q.3 What do you suppose Paul meant by 'a door was opened for me in the Lord? Does it simply mean, 'there was an opportunity'? Compare his comment this time with his previous visit to Troas.(Acts 16:8-10) How may a door be opened for us in heaven?(Rev.4:1)

2:14-17 Q.4 A 'triumph' in Rome was a public parade for a victorious general in which prisoners would be led and sacrifices offered. How did Paul use this to illustrate the process of comforting others in affliction? What did he say would reach out from us to the watching world? What on the other hand was his warning about how not to be a witness of Christ? How can both these ideas work in our lives today?