

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

From his illustration of the treasure in the pot, which can resist every attack, representing all the riches of Christ's grace in us which enables us to withstand pressure, Paul moved on to two new pictures. Our earthly experiences now are like living through a hurricane in an old tent which is not going to survive much longer. Part of Christ's comfort is to know that God has provided a strong, permanent house in heaven which will be so much better. Whenever life seems too hard because of threats to our present circumstances, just remember that what we are guaranteed is perfect and for ever. His second picture is of changing clothes, an illustration Paul used elsewhere.(Eph.4:22-24; Col.3:8-10) Currently we are wearing the dirty old rags,(Isa.64:6) of our own efforts which Christ wants to replace with the beautiful new clothes of His righteous life. This is an exchange He wants to carry out right now. Letting go of our present attitudes does not need to be something we fear as if we are going to be left stark naked! He promises immediate replacement of my life with His.(5:1-4)

In providing our 'new house' in heaven, God has provided a down payment, the Holy Spirit, to assure us of His faithfulness to the contract. He convinces us how foolish we would be to prefer the 'old tent' to the 'new house'. Faith therefore focuses on what God has promised not what is visible now, and is the secret of a Christian life lived with courage and wholeheartedness. Faith makes the choice to please God not ourselves and the world around us. When God is pleased with us we are free to live in His plan.(Matt.3:17; 17:5) The question we will have to answer one day before God is 'Whom have we wanted to please, Jesus or someone/something else?' This alone will be the basis of reward as His faithful servants,(Matt.25:14-30) or condemnation as those who rejected Him.(5:5-10)

Real Christians have always been recognisable by their passion to persuade others of the love of God, but it is our relationship with God which motivates us to do so. Fear of God sounds strange because we normally think of fear as terror of someone or something who is bigger than us and threatens us. But because of the infinitely wise, caring God that He is, bigger than all our problems, fearing Him is a wonderful relief which means that we have nothing else to fear. God sees this attitude in our hearts, and others will see Him in not just our words of persuasion but our lives. Pride, and being a Christian, do not sound as if they should go together but it is absolutely fine to be proud of what He has done in us and others. People may think that our passion to share the gospel is crazy but it is the true mark of divine sanity.(I Cor.4:10; Acts 26:24,25) God's love moves us to have priorities which most think ridiculous, like caring for the needy,(Matt.25:31-46) whether orphans in Africa, prisoners in a Muslim country, or hurting people in New Zealand. Jesus demonstrated true love by seeing us as so much more important than His own comfort and liberty, and being prepared to die for our sin. Letting Him love through us makes us part of Him in death and resurrection.(5:11-15)

When our lives are turned upside down by the love of God we take on a new identity. No longer are we people predictable in our pre-occupation with ourselves. It is as if we have

been created all over again. We have a new house, new clothes and a new passport! We even have a new job in God's government as Minister of Reconciliation. Our exciting mission is to bring men and women who have been rebels back into a relationship with their Creator, utterly forgiven and free to be part of His kingdom again.(5:16-19)

We have been sent out into a hostile world as ambassadors of heaven, the mouthpieces of Christ, with the good news for all men that He took the blame for their rebellion. They can be counted not guilty of their crimes, and instead credited with His perfection. What a huge privilege!(5:20,21)

Chapter six asks would-be ambassadors to consider very seriously the post which is being offered them.

6:1,2 Q.1 If we do not take up our role as an ambassador of Christ, what resource are we wasting? When should we begin our work, when we have grown up, been trained and given an important position in the church, or right now? In the context of the quote from Isa.49:8 who was God talking to? When did Jesus Christ begin to serve His Father in heaven?

6:3-5 Q.2 In what ways might an ambassador bring disgrace upon his home country? How might we do the same as ambassadors of Christ? List all the challenges described here. What does God expect of us, faced with such circumstances? Compare this list of hardships with Paul's own experiences in chapter 11. Did he know what he was talking about?

6:6,7 Q.3 What qualities will the Lord's comfort and grace in us produce as we live under pressure? How do they equip us to handle the worst the world can throw us? Have you found this to be true in your own tough times?

6:8-10 Q.4 Again, make a list of the ways in which each pressure will bring an opportunity to prove Christ in action. How will the watching world respond when they see these contrasts in our lives?

6:11-13 Q.5 What has to happen in us if we are effectively to share our message as ambassadors of Christ with those He sends us to? What equally is needed of the hearers for the message to benefit them? How does the attitude of one encourage the other?

6:14-18 Q.6 What second barrier to grace being shared did Paul warn about in this section? What examples did he give of why this renders us ineffective? Give examples in your own life of being 'bound together with unbelievers' and how they have hindered your work as an ambassador of Christ? What according to Lev.26:12 is the alternative? How will it work in practice? Does it mean cutting ourselves off from the world in which others live?