

In Labours more Abundant

"Through infirmity of the flesh I preached the Gospel to you ...and my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected" (Gal. 4:13-14).

SECOND CORINTHIANS CHAPTERS ELEVEN AND TWELVE

In Paul's two epistles to the ecclesia at Corinth is revealed more intensely than anywhere else the great burden that he constantly bore --

"The care of all the ecclesias" (2 Cor. 11:28).

Paul's conflict in Corinth which caused these epistles to be written was largely similar to the conflict in Galatia which caused the Galatian epistle. In both cases it was false teachers who perverted the Gospel and belittled the apostle.

But the conflict in Corinth was much more personal, severe, and intense. To the influence of false teachers was added the great pressure of the corruption of the city of Corinth, and the brethren and sisters' own backgrounds as drawn from it.

Corinth was proverbially the vice capital of the Roman Empire. To "Corinthianize" was a word commonly used for lewdness and licentiousness. It was the central seaport and crossroads of the Empire. It was a hub of wealth and activity -- the centre of Greek commerce, industry, and finance. The population was about three-quarters of a million, the majority slaves.

Paul went to Corinth on his second missionary journey, after his disappointing confrontation with the self-satisfied, sterile philosophers of educated and cultured Athens.

Paul says he was in Corinth "in fear and trembling," but Christ appeared to him and told him not to be afraid but to speak out, for he had "much people in that city." Paul stayed there eighteen months, and built up an ecclesia. This was around 50 to 52 AD.

It was about five years later that the two epistles were written, a few months apart -- the first probably in the winter or early spring of 56 AD, and the second in summer or fall, same year.

The first was written from Ephesus, near the end of Paul's three-year stay there during his third missionary journey.

Conditions were bad in Corinth. There were divisions, serious moral corruptions, major doctrinal errors. The faithful among them were deeply concerned, but appeared to be a small minority.

Paul made it plain that there had to be correction or disfellowship (1 Cor. 4:21; 5:5, 9, 13; 2 Cor. 13:2).

We have two epistles and a record of two visits to Corinth by Paul -- the founding visit and a visit fairly soon after the second epistle. There may have been two other letters, one certainly before the two we have (1 Cor. 5:9), and one possibly between them (2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8), and possibly one other visit, between the two recorded (2 Cor. 2:1; 13:2).

It is clear from the first epistle that the two main problems were a glorification of worldly wisdom, and moral corruption. Corinth as a city was proud, clever, self-satisfied, rich in this world's goods, and utterly corrupt.

Herein we have a close parallel with our own day and problems, for these same two things are increasingly the main destructive influence pressing upon the Truth -- worldly wisdom and moral looseness.

The second epistle was written after Paul had received word through Titus that the Corinthians had finally responded to Paul's exhortations and entreaties with an intense reaction of sorrow, affection, self-purification. He expresses it in chapter 7 --

"Your earnest desire, your mourning, your fervent mind toward me" (v. 7).

"Ye sorrowed after a godly sort. What carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!" (v. 11)

People are strange creatures -- ourselves included. Enlightened believers are a combination of two powerful forces: the ugliness of the flesh from beneath, and the beauty of the Spirit from above. We can swing from one extreme to another, according to which is in the ascendancy.

Paul was able, by warning, entreaty, and loving persuasion, to bring the mind of the Spirit back on top in Corinth.

It is a matter of what our mind is focused on -- what it is tuned in to -- what it is giving heed to: the natural motions of the flesh within, or the facts, truths, promises, instructions, evidences in the Word --

"Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17)

-- and faith (trust, assurance, conviction) is the power-link between the mind of God and the well-springs of conduct and action within us.

In the last part of the epistle (chapters 10-13), now that the ecclesia as a whole is restored to the path of Truth and of allegiance to the apostle, he turns his attention to, and openly takes note of, those who had maliciously attempted to belittle and undermine him and turn the ecclesia against him.

He demonstrates his own divine authority, answers their slanders concerning him, and calls attention to the evidence of his long, faithful, consistent labors and sufferings for the ecclesias.

Paul's motive is not self-justification. He does not hesitate to call himself the "least of the apostles" and the "chief of sinners" because he persecuted the Ecclesia of Christ (1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:15).

His concern is for the stability and welfare of the Corinthian ecclesia. For the Truth's sake in Corinth, he must establish his divinely-appointed authority, and he must expose the falseness of those who are endeavoring to undermine that authority and turn the ecclesias against him.

There is guidance for us in every detail of this record, and without this guidance clearly in our minds, we are lost.

Every time we -- however well-meaningly -- allow ourselves to be guided by natural thinking in dealing with problems, we shall get off the true, God-pleasing track. We shall be either too harsh, or too lenient -- both are very harmful.

There is only one safeguard: the Word of God. Generally, we must by consistent study fill our minds with a deep background of the instructions and examples of the Scriptures.

And specifically, in each particular instance and decision, consciously and prayerfully, each step of the way, seek a direct guide from Scripture as applying to each circumstance we face.

It is clear from what Paul writes, and from the whole history of the early ecclesias as we find it in the New Testament, that false apostles, false teachers, were a constant peril, and that indeed -- as soon as the apostles were gone, they corrupted and carried away the whole Body, except a remnant.

The Corinthians were for the moment purged, and re-established on a sound foundation, and reunited to Paul, but their continued stability was by no means assured. The flesh, though temporarily dethroned and restrained, is never dead. They had to be regrounded with strong evidence they would remember.

He is, therefore, in chapters 10 to 13, driven to an appearance of self-justification and self-glorification, in his seeking to impress them with the true state of affairs.

It was with great reluctance and embarrassment that Paul writes so intimately of himself, but in God's wisdom and providence, it was good for the Corinthians and for all succeeding generations that the circumstances should require this intimate self-manifestation that Paul gives us in these chapters.

In chapter 11 of this second epistle we have that wonderful, but terrible, outline of Paul's sufferings for the sake of the Truth. We should read it frequently and thoughtfully.

It is surely one of the most powerful antidotes to self-complacency, self-glorification and self-pity in all the Bible.

Who can read this without feeling utterly useless, and abased, and ashamed of the slightest manifestation of self satisfaction or self-pity?

"Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more --

"In labors more abundant. . ." (v. 23).

Constant, lifelong, day-and-night complete dedication to the Truth's work.

"In stripes above measure. . ."

Beaten more often than he could keep count of

"In prisons more frequent. . ."

Few of us have even ONCE been imprisoned for the Truth.

"In deaths oft. . ."

Always in peril of death.

Often he was on the verge of death. (The beatings he had were often enough to kill).

Once at least that we know of he was stoned and his body dragged out of the city, supposing he was dead (Acts 14:19).

"Of the Jews five times received I forty, stripes save one. . ." (v. 24).

Forty was all the Law allowed (Deut. 25:3). They gave him one stripe less each time, out of perverted carefulness lest they break the Law! What blind hypocrisy!

"Thrice beaten with rods. . ." (v. 25).

Roman punishment. These he could possibly have avoided by pleading his freeborn citizenship, but it may then have meant greater hardships for others with him. This may have been why he submitted to it at Philippi (Acts 16:22).

"Once was I stoned. . ."

That was at Lystra, just a short time after they had tried to worship him as a god for healing the sick. How brief and undependable is human gratitude!

"Thrice I suffered shipwreck; a night and a day have I been in the deep . . ."

We have no record of these three shipwrecks (Melita was later). It makes us realize how small a part of Paul's labors and trials we know of, and yet the little we do know is infinitely more than any of us ever experience.

"In journeyings often. . ."

Mostly on foot -- hundreds and hundreds of miles -- often in pain through abuse or sickness; often in hardship; always in danger.

"In perils of waters . . ."

The original is "rivers"; he would often have to find a way across floods and torrents.

"In perils of robbers. . ."

Travel from city to city was slow and hazardous. Robbers abounded who left their victims beaten and helpless.

"In perils by mine own countrymen. . ."

They continually plotted to kill him. He had to constantly be on guard; often had to change his plans (Acts 20:3).

"In perils by the heathen. . ."

"In perils in the city. . . "

"In perils in the wilderness . . . "

Wild beasts and wilder men.

Consider the hardships of travel in those days -- the problems of eating, and washing, and protection from the rain and cold. It wasn't always balmy weather and shining sun.

We are appalled even by the hardships brother Roberts encountered in his travels less than one hundred years ago -- hard, springless carts on hilly, rutty, rocky trails, where relaxation or comfort was out of the question, and even staying in the cart a constant struggle.

And brother Thomas' many and long journeyings for the Truth were similarly rigorous and uncomfortable.

"In perils in the sea. . . "

"In perils among false brethren..."

Surely saddest and worst of all!

"Weariness and painfulness..."

He was under the constant pressure of time and labor. He worked night and day to support not only himself but others, too, besides all the labor for the Truth. Tent-making was a menial task: long hours, little pay.

"In watchings often. . . "

What were these "watchings?" Literally it means "sleeplessness," which would be from many causes and circumstances in his incessant travels and labors. It is a great burden to have to carry on intense mental and physical activity without sufficient sleep, and this would be Paul's usual experience.

"In hunger and thirst. . . "

We do not even KNOW what real hunger and thirst are, but they were Paul's frequent companions. Our idea of thirst is when we play too hard in the sun, and just can't wait till we go across the street to buy a cold drink. And "hunger" just means going an hour or two past dinner.

"In fastings often. . . "

Here is voluntary abstention from food. Why? Because of the intensity of his zeal for God and concern for man. Fasting is the natural reaction of great spiritual absorption and devotion. Working and ministering and teaching would often take precedence over care for self.

"In cold and nakedness . . . "

We take comfort so much for granted that the slightest discomfort of cold or heat is seized upon as a justification for cancelling or postponing the work of the Truth. We just couldn't have a meeting if the room was above or below a certain temperature!

Let us remember Paul.

And in considering all these sufferings and hardships and humiliations of Paul, consider the type of man he was when we first meet him: consider his ambitions, his education, his pre-eminent position in his own nation, and his dazzling prospects of ever-increasing power and prestige.

He had every possible advantage that a proud and ambitious Jew could desire (and freeborn Roman citizenship on top of all that).

How the Pharisees to whom he belonged loved the pre-eminence, and the fawning of the awed and worshipful multitude of the common people, and to be called, "Rabbi, Rabbi!"

But Paul gave all this up -- yea, considered it all but dung -- DUNG -- that he might win Christ and be found of him.

"Besides those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily -- the care of all the ecclesias:

"Who is weak -- and I am not weak? Who is offended -- and I burn not" (vs. 28-29)?

To what extent do we enter into the spirit of Paul -- the spirit of constant, intimate concern for, and identification with, the problems and burdens of the least and the remotest of Christ's brethren and sisters?

"If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities" (11:30).

This is what he goes into in chapter 12, where he reveals two of the most striking and marvelous aspects of his personal experiences in the Truth: his visions, and his "thorn in the flesh" -- which are intimately related together as --

"The things which concern mine infirmities."

The "thorn in the flesh," which was an object of scorn and ridicule and disgust to Paul's enemies, really was the very opposite of what they took it to be, for it was actually the result and evidence of Christ's special favor toward him. It was given him because of his special and unique exaltation in God's use and purpose, to protect him from the temptations of pride --

"I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago" (v. 2).

He is, of course, speaking of himself. His form of words indicate that he is not speaking as an independent person, or of personal accomplishments, but as a chosen instrument of Christ. When he wrote this, it was fourteen years since the beginning of his ministry in the ecclesias, when Barnabas brought him from Tarsus to Antioch. The vision to which he refers was before that.

"Whether in the body, or whether out of the body, I cannot tell."

Paul did not know what form the vision took, or how it was presented to him -- whether he saw with his eyes or just with his understanding. It was not important. God's ways of operation are beyond our capacity of comprehending.

"Caught up to the third heaven."

Peter clearly tells us what the third heaven is. Speaking of the great world dispensations, separated by the universal judgments of God, he refers to the --

"Heavens and earth of old" (2 Pet. 3:5)

-- before the Flood -- perishing in an overflowing of water: the first heavens. Then (2 Pet. 3:7) --

"The heaven and earth which are now, reserved unto fire of the day of judgment"

-- the second heavens. And finally the --

"New Heaven and New Earth wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13),

-- for which we look: the third heaven -- the Millennium and Beyond.

Especially the Beyond, as far as the visions of Paul are concerned. The Millennium itself is but the brief stepping-stone to the eternal order of things wherein God will be "all in all."

These visions Paul was not permitted to discuss with anyone -- not even his closest and most intimate associates in the work. They were for him alone, of all mankind. What a burden of glory and responsibility for a mortal man to bear!

"How that he was caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (v. 4).

Paul clearly here speaks of Paradise interchangeably with the third heaven, and we find this confirmed both in Jesus' words to the thief on the cross, and also in the reference to "Paradise" in Revelation 2, compared to the "New Heaven" of chapters 21 and 22.

"And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure" (v. 7).

What was Paul's "thorn in the flesh"? It is impossible to say. There are many theories. We can, however, determine certain things about it, from this passage and others. The two most widely held theories as to what it was are epilepsy and ophthalmia -- a painful, handicapping, offensive-appearing eye disease.

It is to the Galatians and Corinthians, the two places where his authority is challenged and his person derided, that he speaks of this affliction. What we do know about it is that it was first of all humiliating and humbling -- this present passage says that was its divine purpose.

It was a burden and a handicap in the work of the Truth. He speaks of it as a "thorn" -- or more properly a "stake in the flesh." He speaks of it as a "temptation" and an "infirmity" that is a trial and a weakness.

The big lesson is that Paul had to be handicapped, humbled, mortified, humiliated, for his own safety and good. Pride is the great danger. We can all see it so clearly in all its silliness in everyone else.

All are constantly on guard to justify themselves, to wriggle out of embarrassing mistakes, to cover up humiliating evidence of ignorance or wrong judgment, to relate little self glorifying experiences illustrating how clever they are and how foolish others are in comparison. Most arguments are just two prides making a foolish spectacle of themselves.

It is hard to see all this in ourselves, though strangely everyone else seems to have it.

Perhaps Paul's most enlightening reference to his affliction is what he says to the Galatians who, like the Corinthians, had once shown him great affection as the bearer of the Gospel of life to them, and then had despised him at the instigation of his enemies. In Galatians 4:13-15 he says --

"Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the Gospel unto you at the first: and my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected."

The word for "rejected" literally means to "spit out," and is used about things that are repulsive and disgusting.

This gives us more light on the nature of Paul's humiliating affliction. In their earlier thankful affection for him they had not despised him nor been repelled by the offensive-appearing nature of his infirmity. He continues (v. 15) --

"Where is then the blessedness ye spoke of?"

"For I bear you record that if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes and have given them to me."

It is principally this statement that has convinced many that Paul's "thorn" was an affliction of his sight by a disease which gave him repulsive appearance. This, as a counter-balance to his visions, is considered all the more fitting as a reminder, for it was his eyes that were affected by his first vision of Christ on the road to Damascus.

But it is not conclusive and it is better not to speculate. What he says concerning the Galatians giving him their very eyes, if possible, is not an unusual way of expressing extreme affection, and may have no direct reference to the nature of his affliction.

We do know it was a great burden, humiliation, and handicap. Beyond this we cannot go.

"For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me" (v. 8).

He apparently knew its purpose, but still he found it such a grievous burden that three times he implored that it be removed. The first two times he appears to have been refused, without being given an explanation, but on the third occasion he was given an answer by Christ that was all-sufficient for him.

The affliction was given, he says at first, "lest he be exalted" by his special privileges, and position in God's purpose. This is negative -- to prevent something undesirable happening, and Paul would feel it had served its purpose and he was doubtless confident -- perhaps rightly so -- that the danger of that had passed.

But Jesus' final answer gives the positive, constructive side; and Paul understood, and was content --

"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9).

One of the greatest dangers the Truth of God faces in every age is when it attracts clever, capable, self-confident people who take it over and drive it forward to a self-destructive success, like Laodicea -- outwardly rich, and successful, and increased with goods, and in need of nothing.

"MY strength is made perfect in WEAKNESS."

Paul strongly emphasizes this vital truth at the beginning of the first epistle --

"Ye see your calling, brethren -- not the wise, the mighty, the noble; but God hath chosen the weak things of the world, the base things, and things which are despised, and things which are not -- which are nothing -- to bring to nought things that are" (1 Cor. 1:26-28).

As soon as the Truth starts to get socially respectable in the world, as soon as it begins to attract the "intellectuals," it is on its way out, and a complete new beginning has to be made if anything is to endure.

The painful, distressing, humiliating thorn in the flesh was not just a negative leash to keep Paul from going wrong. Rather, in the love and wisdom of God, it was a positive force to make him a more fitting, suitable, and useful vessel for the grace poured upon him and the work set before him.

God's ways are not man's ways. They are usually the very OPPOSITE of man's ways. To the eyes of man's wisdom they are incomprehensible foolishness. The mind of the flesh cannot understand them.

Do we have the mind of the flesh, or the mind of the Spirit?

Do we think naturally and animally according to "common sense," as all the world does, or do we perceive the utter falseness of all natural thoughts? Paul says (1 Cor. 2:15-16) --

"He that is spiritual discerneth all things ... we have the mind of Christ."

After the third entreaty for relief from the thorn, Paul understood and was content.

It was not just a matter of resigning himself to the inevitable, and patiently accepting something he could not help. That is not enough. That will never do. That won't accomplish anything.

That again is just negative. That's no glory to God. If it is glory to anyone, it is glory to the one who suffers meaninglessly in patience. Paul goes much further (v. 10) --

"Therefore I TAKE PLEASURE -- I rejoice -- in infirmities, in contempt, in hardship, in persecution, in distress for Christ's sake, for when I am weak then am I strong."

When I am most helpless physically, socially, financially -- most helpless from every natural, worldly point of view -- then am I closest to the infinite strength and power and might and care of Christ who strengtheneth me.

We can see -- and Paul could see -- that his thorn in the flesh was not just an external added burden to counteract the effect of his visions and revelations.

Rather it was an integral, essential part of the whole pattern of Christ's infinite grace upon him. It was part of the special, unique revelation that was personally given to him of the marvelous working of the wisdom of God.

What is the lesson for us? We are not Paul. The more we learn and realize and meditate upon concerning this man, the more we realize our utter comparative uselessness and insignificance and unprofitableness.

Here was a man who, second only to Christ himself, was completely enrapt and enveloped in the purpose of God -- who stood at its very heart and vortex.

But the lesson IS for us. In our little, secondary, inconsequential way, the lesson is for us.

It means a complete reversal of all mental values, so as to be able to truly, sincerely find peace and rejoicing in tribulation and deprivation: a complete change of life-interest, of life treasure, of life-meaning.

Everything that seems important to the natural mind must become completely unimportant. Everything that seems unimportant to the natural mind must become infinitely important. All the meaningless little round of daily care -- what shall we eat, what shall we drink, wherewithal shall we be clothed, where shall we live -- must become utterly unimportant to us, if we are to learn the lesson of life.

These things truly must be taken care of in an orderly way, as quickly and simply as possible, but they CANNOT become objects of interest or absorption or continual conversation. The mind must be filled with better things.

"I will glory in mine infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me -- for when I am weak then am I strong!" (vs. 9-10)

Paul's whole life and joy and interest and treasure was CHRIST IN HIM, the hope of glory. Whatever was related to that was important to Paul; and nothing else was. To him this was the great reality and pleasure and satisfaction of life, and the more everything else was taken away from him, the greater this enjoyment became. He said, simply and all-inclusively --

"To me, to live is Christ."

And so it must come to be with us, if we are to live at all, in any true, and spiritual, and joyful sense.

The love of Christ was Paul's greatest possession -- the fellowship of Christ his greatest pleasure. We need not pity Paul for the burden of his suffering, nor commiserate him for the loss of all the rubbish the stupid world holds dear.

Rather we should envy him for the unassailable joy of his single-minded devotion, and emulate him in his casting aside of all things that he might win Christ.

He told the Corinthians earlier in this second letter that he was sorrowful, yet always rejoicing: that he had nothing, yet possessed all things. Paul is so intensely absorbed in the infinite grace and glory of his divine calling that to him all the troubles and cares and losses and sufferings and burdens of the present are but a light and passing thing of little moment.

He sums up his glorious philosophy of life beautifully and movingly in the latter part of chapter 4 of this epistle --

"God has shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us."

"We are troubled on every side, but not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair. . ." (2 Cor. 4:6-8).

How often are we too "perplexed!" But, like Paul, we must never despair.

"Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down but not destroyed."

"Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day."

"For our light affliction which is but for a moment. . ."

This is how Paul sums up the intense, lifelong burden of suffering and sorrow that he endured for Christ --

"... our LIGHT affliction which is BUT FOR A MOMENT worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

"We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen,"

"For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:9, 16-18).

(Taken from "Be Ye Transformed" Volume 1, pages 338-350 by Bro. G. Growcott)