
THE BOOK of 2nd CORINTHIANS

This second Epistle stands in very close relation to the first, and the issues that caused Paul to write the one are still in his mind in the other. It does not seem possible, with certainty, to decide the exact details of the Apostle's dealings with the Corinthians about the time he wrote these letters, and scholars are divided as to how often he wrote to them and how often he visited them. Some think he paid three visits and wrote three letters, others think he paid three visits and wrote four letters. It seems clear, however, that he wrote, if not four letters, certainly three, and that 1 and 2 Corinthians were in fact the second and third letters he wrote to them, the first, referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9, having not been preserved and being now lost to us. Some think another letter, also lost to us, was written between what we now know as 1 and 2 Corinthians, and is referred to in 2 Corinthians 2:3 and 7:8, but these verses could refer to our 1 Corinthians, and it is perhaps wiser to accept the view that there were three letters written, the first of which is lost.

1) 1:1-2

Paul is an Apostle by the will of God information that is doubtless almost commonplace to us, but a very necessary and significant announcement at the beginning of an epistle to a church which contained dissident elements, men who were challenging both his Apostolic office and his authority in the things of the Spirit. This was a recurrent problem for the Apostle, and one can imagine something of the distress it must have caused him. But painful though it was, he did not hesitate to assert his authority, and this is the explanation of the sometimes severe strictures that he passed upon those who undermined his work. He was too true a man to avoid the unpleasantness and embarrassment of open conflict when fundamental issues were at stake. In this he differed from the attitude we are often tempted to take, of compromising for the sake of peace or to avoid clashing with a standpoint we know to be wrong, lest it cost us loss of favour or even friendship. But truth and the gospel meant more to Paul than dearest human relationships. There were some prices he was not prepared to pay for peace and harmony, and condoning the sins of the Corinthians was one of them. It is this that makes his kind of friendship such a precious and coveted thing. A man who refuses to stoop is one whose friendship can be trusted implicitly.

Grace and peace are the familiar words of greeting in nearly all his epistles. Denney says here: "Grace is the first and last word of the gospel; and peace - perfect spiritual soundness - is the finished work of grace in the soul". As a comment on these words, that could scarcely be bettered, could it?

2) 1:3-7

There would seem to be an orderly sequence in the epistles of the New Testament by the providence of the Holy Spirit, and this is seen as we pass from one to the other in our studies. If Romans expounds the doctrine of the Cross, and 1 Corinthians applies it to the practical life of the Church, 2 Corinthians shows us how it worked out in the lives of the Apostles, and particularly in Paul's. Not only in these verses but throughout the epistles we are allowed to see his inner experiences as the Cross touches him in the deepest places, bringing forth fruit to the glory of God and the blessing of others. This explains the Apostle's departure here from his usual custom of giving thanks to God at the outset of his epistles for what He had done for his readers, and instead thanks God for what He has done for his own experience. Commentators think it has to do with the fact that there were those at Corinth who had become disaffected from him and were therefore quick to criticise him and think the worst about him. He had intended to visit them, but had changed his plans, and his enemies had jumped on this as an evidence of fickleness (see 1:15-17) and instability. How could a man who changed his mind so be a true Apostle or in the will of God? The fact is, however, that Paul had changed his plans because he was so sick at heart at the thought of the disaffection in Corinth that, rather than face a certain explosion if he had gone there in the power of the Spirit, he withheld himself from them until such time as the Spirit himself would have brought them to a better frame of mind. There is great wisdom in this; not much can be done with critical people, for whatever a man does he will be faulted by them. They should be left severely alone, in the hope that they may see the error of their ways and repent. But more of this tomorrow.

3) 1:3-7

Paul's critics were also interpreting the afflictions they had heard he was then passing through as a divine chastisement upon him, and had drawn the inference that he must be out of the will of God. And so Paul makes it plain from the outset how he regards his sufferings. So far from being divine chastening, he says, they were divinely appointed and intended as a profit to the Corinthians. As Denney puts it, "Hence the opening of the letter is not a simple outpouring of his heart, but is delicately calculated to turn aside a reproach without naming it". From the spiritual point of view the most valuable lesson we can learn here is to see that Paul enumerates the values of his sufferings before he describes them to the Corinthians. Happy is the man who can sufficiently detach himself from his afflictions to be able to see what they are meant to accomplish in and through him. Paul was clear-sighted enough to realise that he was suffering because of what he was as an Apostle, and that therefore God must mean it for good and would make capital out of it for His Glory. (Not all suffering of course comes under this category. Sometimes we suffer, not because we are living close to Christ, but because we are not, and sin finds us out, to our cost.) Two things in particular these sufferings brought to Paul. He learned fresh things about God that he perhaps could not have learned otherwise. He had a new revelation of God as a fount of mercy and the God of all comfort, and also learned in his heartsore experience a new power to comfort others in their distresses. Nor is it difficult to see how this comes about, for suffering enlarges the heart (when we have a right attitude to it) and imparts a grace and compassion to the spirit that qualifies us to comfort others. How much better it is to learn this (however costly a lesson it may be) than to have God say of us, "That poor child of mine is too taken up with his sufferings to see what I am trying to teach him and impart to him in them for his good. Alas, that he is too blind to my purposes."

4) 1:8-11

Having indicated the point of his sufferings, Paul now describes them to the Corinthians. Perhaps he assumes that when they realise how much he has gone through for their sakes they will realise how petty and unfair their criticisms have been, and be reconciled to him. At all events, what he describes is some "dark night of the soul" experience, fraught with distress and agony. We may not know exactly what he was referring to - some think it may have been the incident recorded in Acts 19, when the terrible riot took place in Ephesus, others that it is some unrecorded experience of real peril when Paul thought it was all up with him. It may have been, on the other hand, "fightings within and fears without" which he refers to elsewhere, as some dark pressure from Satan, nameless in its dread, came upon his soul. Whatever it was, Paul came out of it stronger in faith than before. He saw that God's purpose in it was to bring him to an end of himself so that his faith and hope might be wholly in Him. He was, in fact, shut up unto faith, and this "sentence of death" inevitably leads to resurrection. The implication in 9 is that we die to live in the spiritual life, and there is a sense in which this is the theme which is expounded and elaborated throughout the entire epistle. The "death-life" paradox is one of Paul's most characteristic thoughts (see 4:7-12) and one of the most fruitful and far-reaching in significance for our spiritual lives. The man who learns the secret of this tremendous principle has learned the most important of all lessons. Paul certainly proved that this particular "death" in Asia was exceedingly fruitful in his ministry and in his own personal experience. "Death worketh in us", he says in 4:12, but this is not a dirge but a battle-cry and a victory song!

5) 1:12-14

The point of this stirring word of personal testimony is that the Apostle found it necessary to assert his sincerity and blamelessness towards the Corinthians in view of the criticisms and accusations that were being levelled against him by his detractors. It would seem from 13 that his correspondence was being fixed upon by his enemies as showing insincerity and fickleness, and so, having first challenged them, as it were, to point the finger at anything in his conduct while he had been among them, reminding them that they more than most people were in a position to know that he had truly walked worthy of his vocation, he speaks of the plain and unambiguous contents of his epistles. As Denney says, "He wrote like a plain man to plain men; he said what he meant, and meant what he said". The point at issue is of course the change of plans about his visit to Corinth - it was this that had made his accusers impute insincerity and fickleness to him (more of this in tomorrow's Note on 15ff) and Paul is simply maintaining here that any right estimate of his integrity would oblige them to seek for some other explanation of that change and make it impossible for them to impute unworthy motives to him. The fact is, however, those who have a critical spirit are incapable of making right estimates of any situation, for they see everything with a jaundiced eye, and put the worst construction on any situation because they want to think the worst of someone they dislike. This is how it was with the Corinthians, and this is sometimes what happens with us. Imputation of unworthy motives generally arises from a disaffected spirit.

6) 1:15-24

What Paul means in 15 by the words "in this confidence" is that it would have been on the basis that they acknowledged his authority and that there was a real bond of love and confidence between them that he would visit them. When this deteriorated, he was forced to change his mind. His original intention had been, as we can gather from 15 and 16 - i.e. going from Ephesus to Macedonia via Corinth. The RSV translates 16 thus: "I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia". This plan he changed, on hearing news of the trouble and disaffection among them, and instead he wrote to them informing them (see 1 Corinthians 16:5) that he would visit them after passing through Macedonia. Such a change of plans would surely in normal circumstances have done no more than evoke a natural disappointment among his friends, and be regarded as a change for which he would certainly have good reasons. But in the disaffected state of affairs at Corinth, his detractors had fastened upon it as evidence of fickleness. He goes on therefore to vindicate himself against this unjust and scurrilous charge. The precise significance of the words in 17b and 18 must be left for detailed consideration in tomorrow's reading. But in general he is disclaiming the charge of being a "yes-no" man, and asserts that his change of mind is quite explicable in the sense that it was the change of atmosphere in Corinth, and in their attitude towards him, that had caused it. This is the force of 23, where he points out that he forbore to visit them in order to spare them the pain of a severe chastising from him. But the whole passage has still deeper content, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note.

7) 1:15-24

Paul says that his word was not yea and nay (18), and proceeds to relate it to the message of the gospel which he proclaimed. His point is this (Denney gives this by far the most arresting and profound interpretation we have read and studied of this passage): Character is determined by a man's main interest in life. The work to which a man gives his soul will react upon his soul, changing it into its own likeness. Paul's whole being was subdued to the gospel, conformed to it, impregnated by it. There was no kind of dubiety about his gospel. It had a clear, plain, unequivocal message. There was no mixture of Yes and No in it; it was one mighty affirmation, a glorious Yes, for all the promises of God - which promises are His declarations of what He is willing to do for men - find their fulfilment in Christ. And Paul's argument is - and a very daring and arresting one it is! - that a man who gives himself as wholly to such a gospel as he had done ("This one thing I do" Philippians 3:13) could not possibly be a fickle and faithless man. As Denney puts it, "the work which claims him for its own with this absolute authority will seal him with its own greatness, its own simplicity and truth". It is incredible that he could be a Yes and No man. Such a dedication to such an ideal must necessarily create true men. This is a very impressive and striking argument, and the more one ponders it, the more arresting it becomes. What a challenge it lays upon our fickleness and fecklessness of spirit! God grant us to realise that faith, as the Bible understands it, means to be mastered by the mighty gospel of grace.

8) 1:15-24

Denney continues the theme of the great affirmations of the gospel and says, "If we have any gospel at all, it is because there are things which stand for us above all doubts, truths so sure that we cannot question them, so absolute that we cannot qualify them, so much our life that to tamper with them is to touch our very heart. Nobody has any right to preach who has not mighty affirmations to make concerning God's Son, Jesus Christ - affirmations in which there is no ambiguity, and which no questioning can reach". This is something that we would do well to remember in a day which has produced "Honest to God" with its desolating doubts and confusions, not to say its denial and betrayal of the basic apostolic gospel. It is something to be remembered also by those who, in their own secret reservations about the faith they are committed to proclaim, have eagerly clutched at the Bishop of Woolwich's deviations and hailed them as a major breakthrough in theology. It needs to be said, and said plainly, that traditional theology has failed for them not because it has been found wanting in the exigencies of our time, but because they themselves have had no clear and unequivocal message to proclaim, and no faith worth passing on to men. The problem today lies not in the theology of the Church but in the infidelity of some of its men.

9) 1:24

There is a point of some importance in this last verse of the chapter. Paul has been asserting his authority as an apostle, but he sees a possible danger in this, and he hastens to assure them that the kind of authority he claimed did not arrogate to him the right to lord it over God's heritage (see 1 Peter 5:3). The gospel makes men free - "by faith ye stand" - and in the fullest sense enables a man to become truly independent. But this does not mean that a Christian should not be amenable to spiritual guidance and counsel. There are in fact two extremes that must be avoided in this matter, authoritarianism on the one hand, and "inner light" anarchy and presumption on the other. The true Christian position lies between the two. Romanism and the authoritarianism of some exclusive Christian groups and of the false sects illustrate the one extreme - with the hierarchy legislating for the majority in matters of both belief and behaviour. The arrogant impatience of those who claim to receive infallible spiritual guidance from the Lord Himself and disdain human counsel, however wise and spiritual, illustrates the other. The danger in the latter is that man tends to become a law unto himself. Paul speaks of being helpers of their joy, but some in their arrogance refuse to be helped, even by an apostle, and this is the danger area. There are those who will not learn, and fail to see a proud self-will lurking behind their so-called spiritual desire to 'depend on God alone', forgetting that God often, to keep us humble, has to guide us through our wiser and spiritually saner friends. A true ministry is of course intent on ministering to God's people in such a way as to make them in the best and truest sense independent, and the greatest compliment to its fruitfulness is that they become spiritually mature in this way. It is quite another thing, however, when believers come to the point where ultimately they set aside all the accumulated wisdom of the Church and of God's servants and say in effect, "I am a law unto myself". The true Christian position is that we are set free to be "en-lawed" to Christ, and sometimes His will is made known to us by His servants and through them.

10) 2:1-4

These verses tell us that Paul had once visited Corinth in grief and heaviness and was resolved not to pay another such visit. It seems best to take this visit as having been paid before 1 Corinthians was written. The reminder of this previous occasion doubtless helped him to change his plans when he realised that to go would have meant to go "with a rod" (1 Corinthians 4:21). The reference in 3 is certainly to our first epistle, and the subject matter is the notorious offender mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul's attitude here is very revealing, in that it shows the kind of love and care and concern which alone can provide a true basis for the exercise of apostolic authority. To love as Paul loved, to have men continually on his heart, and to have their highest welfare as his supreme concern, confers a moral and spiritual right to be firm and even blunt with them. Nothing less than this, however, entitles a man to speak so plainly to another as Paul did to the Corinthians, and severe reprimands in the Christian fellowship should be left to those best fitted by a genuine spirit of love and concern to administer. Using the "rod" has a certain fleshly attraction for us, and we must be very sure that our motives are of the highest when we assume the responsibility of doing so. There would be less hurt and offence and more profiting in Christian fellowships if this were observed. Authority should be manifested spiritually, not in an official way.

11) 2:5-11

The vagueness and indefiniteness with which Paul speaks of the offender in these verses has made some commentators wonder whether in fact he can possibly be referring to the case of gross sin mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5, and interpret them as indicating some personal insult against the Apostle. But, aside from the fact that such an insult would scarcely have given rise to a major crisis of discipline, least of all so far as Paul was concerned, to suggest this is to miss the real significance of the passage, which is that how the discipline mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 has proved to be effective, the less said about it the better. When God forgives - and His forgiveness had assuredly been applied here - He forgets, and this should be the pattern for all who bear His Name. The fact is, however, that sins of this nature remain a talking point long after they have been put behind God's back. It is not to the credit of those who are called Christians that they often refuse to let a sinner forget what God has forgotten. They would be well advised to take the Apostle's words in the passage to heart, and recognise the possibility of doing permanent harm to the hapless victim of their heartless gossip by breaking his spirit (7). There is, in addition, an even greater danger, namely, the possibility of giving Satan an advantage by thus allowing him entrance into the fellowship. Nor is he easily or quickly driven out when once a wrong spirit in some believers has allowed him an entrance.

12) 2:5-11

The sentence of excommunication passed on the offending brother in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 5) was based on our Lord's own teaching on Church discipline in Matthew 18:15ff. Paul's phrase about delivering him to Satan for the destruction of the flesh indicates that excommunication was no mere official enactment, but fraught with solemn and dread consequences, but the most important thing for us to note is that, harsh though sentimental modern minds may think it, it had a blessed issue in the offender, for he was brought to penitence. This is the point of discipline; it has complete restoration as its aim, and when this is accomplished there is no further need of severe attitudes against the offender, as Paul is quick to remind the Corinthians in these verses. In Galatians 6:1, the Apostle says, "If any man be overtaken in a fault, ye who are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness." Often the spirit of meekness must express itself in this severe way, when no other method succeeds, but when it does, it is the glory of the meek spirit to be as ready as Christ ever is to lift up the cast down and exalt those that are brought low. The Church, as well as the Saviour, must be waiting to be gracious to repenting believers, and quick to see signs of a change of heart and amendment of life. When one thinks of so much harsh and unfeeling discipline on the one hand, and so much sentimental condoning of sin on the other, one cannot but admire this Christ-like Apostle who combined in himself a severe spirit of discipline with a great and tender heart of love. Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God - in God as revealed in Christ, Who both drove the traders from the Temple with a scourge, and breathed forgiveness over the fallen and the outcast, and in man, partaking of the divine nature the closer he lives to God.

13) 2:12-17

Three points of importance stand out in this passage. In the first place, Paul tells us that when he came to Troas to preach the gospel, and a heaven-sent opportunity to do so came his way, he had no rest in his spirit. What does he mean? It can only be that his worry and anxiety about the Corinthians had so disturbed his spirit that he had no heart left to preach the gospel at Troas and enter the open door. This is a terrible thing to happen. We have known men of God whose spirit has been crushed and broken by trouble and dissension among their people, so that they no longer felt able to continue the work to which God had called them. This lays a solemn responsibility on trouble-makers for which they will have to answer.

We leave 14-16 until tomorrow's Note for a fuller treatment than is possible today, and consider the meaning of "corrupt" in 17. This is especially a word in which the idea of self-interest and especially of petty gain is prominent. In ancient times it occurred in relation to tavern-keeping, and was used to describe the devices by which wine-sellers deceived their customers by giving them short measure or by diluting the wine. As used here by the Apostle, it refers to watering down the gospel and soft-peddalling the forthright challenge of Christ, compromising on fundamental issues because of the fear of giving offence. This is a constant temptation to a preacher; there are always those he is likely to offend if he is faithful to the Word, but dare he risk offending God Himself by adulterating the gospel through fear of man? At all events, Paul would allow no personal interest or gain to tempt him to do as others were apparently doing in Corinth, diluting the searching message of grace and robbing it of its sharp cutting edge. "In the sight of God speak we in Christ" he cries, and this means utter faithfulness to His Word.

14) 2:12-17

The picture in Paul's mind in 14 and 15 is that of a Roman triumph, in which the conqueror rode into Rome with his captives chained to his chariot wheels, watched by cheering crowds, while incense was burned on every altar to celebrate the victory. The revised versions of 14 are certainly right when they render 14 as 'God Who always leadeth us in triumph'. Paul's thought is not that he wins the battle (although this is of course taught elsewhere in Scripture); he is the captive led in the Conqueror's power. And just as incense was burned on the altars during the procession, so his life is an incense, a sweet savour to God and man. Christ triumphed over him on the Damascus Road and bound him forever to His chariot wheels, and wherever he went his captivity to Christ (the bond-slave of Jesus Christ) made the knowledge of the Saviour available to everyone he met. This, then, is the challenge of his words for us. If our lives do not show forth the savour of Christ to those around us it is because somewhere in us there is resistance to His rule, somewhere we have refused to bow the knee and own Him Lord of all. As Denney finally puts it, "Wherever Christ is leading a single soul in triumph, the fragrance of the gospel should go forth; rather it does go forth, in proportion as His triumph is complete. There is sure to be that in the life which will reveal the graciousness as well as the omnipotence of the Saviour. And it is this virtue that God uses as His main witness, as His chief instrument, to evangelise the world; in every relation of life it should tell. Nothing is so insuppressible, nothing so pervasive as a fragrance. The lowliest life which Christ is really leading in triumph will speak infallibly and persuasively for Him."

15) 2:14-17

A preliminary glance through these chapters will show the general drift and trend of this section of the epistle:

- 3:6 "(God) hath made us able ministers of the New Testament"
- 4:1 "Seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not"
- 4:5 "We preach Christ Jesus the Lord"
- 4:7 "We have this treasure in earthen vessels"
- 5:11 "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men"
- 5:18, 19 "(God) hath given to us this ministry of reconciliation"
- 5:20 "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech men by us"
- 6:1 "Workers together with Him"
- 6:3 "In all things approving ourselves as ministers of God"

It will be readily seen that much of what is said in these chapters is applicable to the Christian testimony in general as well as to the actual ministry, and that there are lessons of value for us to learn, as well as giving important insights into the message of the gospel itself. First of all, however, it is necessary to give a setting to Paul's teaching here, so as to have some idea of the circumstances in which he wrote, and the context of what he says. This we shall do in tomorrow's Note.

16) 2:14-17

The church at Corinth was a problem church. There were some believers there whom Paul had begotten in Christ, and who owed their Christian lives to him, but who had become disaffected from him, and were therefore quick to criticize him and think the worst of him. He had intended to pay another visit to them and made this known to them. But then he had changed his plans, and postponed the visit. This his critics had jumped upon as an evidence of fickleness and instability. How, they said, could a man who changed his mind in such a way be an apostle, or in the will of God? He was branded as a turncoat, and they were using this change of purpose to assail his character, speaking of him as a man who said now one thing, and now another, one whose word could not be depended upon. The fact is, however, that Paul had changed his plans because their attitude to him had changed, and he was so sick at heart at the thought of the disaffection at Corinth that, rather than face a certain explosion if he had gone there in the power of the Spirit, he withheld himself from them till such time as the Spirit would bring them to a better frame of mind. (There is wisdom in this: not much can be done with critical people, for whatever a man does he will be faulted by them. Better leave them alone in the hope that they might see the error of their ways and repent).

That is the first bit of background from which we will see that a good deal of the teaching arises.

17) 2:14-17

Another piece of 'background', also important for our understanding of what follows, is this: it is possible to discern an orderly sequence in the epistles of the New Testament, by the providence of the Holy Spirit. If, for example, the Epistle to the Romans expounds the doctrine of the Cross, and 1 Corinthians applies that doctrine to the practical life of the Church, then we may say that 2 Corinthians shows us how this worked out in the lives of the apostles and particularly in Paul's. Throughout the epistle we are allowed to see his inner experiences as the Cross touched him in the deepest places, bringing forth fruit to the glory of God and the blessing of others. It may be that his critics in Corinth were interpreting the afflictions they had heard he was passing through as a divine chastisement upon him and were drawing the inference that he must be out of the will of God. But Paul makes it plain from the outset how he regards his sufferings. Far from being divine chastening, he means, they were divinely appointed and intended as a profit to the Corinthians. Thus, in 1:8ff, he describes his sufferings to them, perhaps in the hope that they will realise how much he has gone through for their sakes and how petty and unfair their criticisms have been. We may not know exactly what he refers to in 1:8ff, but his reference to the 'sentence of death' which led inevitably to 'resurrection', unfolding a pattern that we die to live in the spiritual life, is certainly the characteristic 'keynote' of his teaching in these chapters and it is one of the most fruitful lessons and far reaching in significance for our spiritual lives. The man who learns the secret of this tremendous principle has learned the most important of all lessons for Christian testimony and for the Christian ministry.

18) 2:14-17

So much for background. But there is one other thing: Christian preaching and testimony are often to be maintained in the context of things that hinder. This is the point that lies behind what it said in 2:12. The apostle had been so upset by the trouble in Corinth that, even when a heaven-sent opportunity to preach in Troas came to him, he had no heart for it. This is a terrible thing to happen. We have known men of God whose spirit has been crushed and broken by trouble and dissension among their people so that they have no longer felt able to continue the work to which God has called them. Do you not think that this lays a solemn responsibility on troublemakers in a Christian fellowship for which they will have to answer. Well might the Psalmist say, "Touch not Mine anointed and do My prophets no harm" (Psalm 105:15). This is all the more serious when, as is so often the case, the servant of God is the object of such criticism not because of personal failure or defect but because he is being faithful to the gospel which has been committed to him. This was certainly true so far as the Apostle Paul was concerned. This brings us to a primary consideration in this whole section of the epistle before us. The Christian minister must be one who has a gospel to preach, and a message about which he has no doubts and no reservations. Earlier in the epistle Paul has already addressed himself to this issue (1:19, 20), in answer to the criticisms referred to in Note 5 for Sat. 20 March, accusing him of being a man who said now one thing, and now another, and whose word could not be depended upon. Paul's words in 1:19 have a nobility as well as a certainty about them, for in the Son of God Whom he preached all the promises of God were Yea and Amen. There are some things a man needs to be sure about, things which are beyond question or peradventure. This is how it was with Paul, and this is how it needs to be with us. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

19) 2:14-17

James Denney has a striking passage on this theme in his commentary on 2 Corinthians. It is worthy of close and serious attention:

"The Gospel - which is identified with God's Son - Jesus Christ - is here described as a mighty affirmation. It is not Yes and No, a message full of inconsistencies, or ambiguities, a proclamation the sense of which no one can ever be sure he has grasped. In it the everlasting Yea has found place. The perfect tense means that this grand affirmation has come to us, and is with us, for good and all. What it was and continued to be in Paul's time, it is to this day. It is in this positive, definite, unmistakable character that the strength of the Gospel lies. What a man cannot know, cannot seize, cannot tell, he cannot preach. The refutation of popular errors, even in theology, is not gospel; the criticism of traditional theories, even about Scripture, is not gospel; the intellectual 'economy', with which a clever man in a dubious position uses language about the Bible or its doctrines which to the simple means Yes, and to the subtle qualifies the Yes enormously, is not gospel. There is no strength in any of these things. Dealing in them does not make characters simple, sincere, massive, Christian. When they stamp themselves on the soul, the result is not one to which we could make the appeal which Paul makes here. If we have any gospel at all, it is because there are things which stand for us above all doubts, truths so sure that we cannot question them, so absolute that we cannot qualify them, so much our life that to tamper with them is to touch our very heart. Nobody has any right to preach who has not mighty affirmations to make concerning God's Son, Jesus Christ - affirmations in which there is no ambiguity, and which no questioning can reach."

20) 2:14-17

'Affirmations in which there is no ambiguity, and which no questioning can reach'. This is the indispensable qualification for a Christian minister: a gospel about which he is absolutely sure and about which he is seen to be absolutely sure. And since this is so, he must at all costs preserve that word intact in his witness and testimony and not corrupt it. This is the point that Paul emphasises in 2:17; the word 'corrupt' here referring to the idea of self-interest and especially of petty gain. In ancient times it occurred in relation to tavern-keeping, and was used to describe the devices by which wine-sellers deceived their customers in giving them short measure or in diluting the wine. As used here by the apostle it refers to watering down the gospel and soft-peddalling the forthright challenge of Christ, compromising on fundamental issues because of fear of giving offence. This is a constant temptation for a preacher. There are always those he is likely to offend if he is faithful to the Word, but dare he risk offending God Himself by adulterating the gospel through fear of men? At all events, Paul would allow no personal interest or gain to tempt him to do as others were apparently doing in Corinth - diluting the certain message of grace, and robbing it of its sharp cutting edge. "In the sight of God speak we in Christ", he cries. And this means utter faithfulness to His Word. This is the standard set us, and we may often be tempted, for various reasons, to take lower ground. In tomorrow's Note we shall consider some of the ways in which this temptation presents itself to the servants of God.

21) 2:14-17

One form this temptation can take can be seen when we consider what our reaction would be if we knew that making an unequivocal stand would jeopardise our acceptance in the circles in which we may think that acceptance is very important to us. No one naturally cares to be 'out on a limb', especially if being 'out on a limb' is going to mean either ostracism or amused contempt on the part of any 'establishment', ecclesiastical, social or other. Nor let anyone aver too swiftly that this is an improbable scenario, for sadly enough this has proved only too real even in evangelical life. Paul's words here are searching and challenging indeed. It is also possible to preach the truth of God in such a way, and by using 'diplomatic', even ingratiating language in expressing it that will take the edge off the truth and make it relatively harmless and entirely bearable to those whose need is to be cut with the sword of the Spirit (this is, to use Paul's phrase in 4:2, to 'handle the Word of God deceitfully'). Then, again, it is possible to use the great words in the Christian revelation in such a way as to give the impression that men are preaching biblically, but what they mean by them is not what Paul means by them, and not what the New Testament means by them. This is corrupting the Word of God: no one has any right to evacuate these great words of their apostolic meaning and then call the result 'Christian'. There is a duty upon us in this to call things by their proper name. If there are some things we have to be sure about, and if we are sure about them, then our integrity itself is at stake in preserving their purity without corruption.

22) 2:14-17

Thus far our concern has been with the message that is to be preached. But now, we must consider the man who bears that message and proclaims it. What must the servant of God be like? The answer to this question is given in 14-16: he must be one who, to use Paul's words, is led in triumph by Christ. The modern translations render the phrase in 14, which the AV reads as 'always causeth us to triumph in Christ', differently from this, rendering it 'always leadeth us in triumph in Christ'. The picture in the Apostle's mind is that of a Roman triumphal procession, in which the victorious general rode into Rome with his captives chained to his chariot wheels, watched by cheering crowds, while incense was burned on every altar along the way to celebrate his victory. Paul's thought is not that he wins the battle (although this is of course taught elsewhere in Scripture); he, Paul, is the captive led in the Conqueror's train, and men see in him a trophy of the Conqueror's power. He is the captive at Christ's chariot wheels: Christ triumphed over him on the Damascus Road, and bound him forever to Himself; and wherever he went, his captivity to Christ made the knowledge of the Saviour available to everyone he met. And just as incense was burned on the altars during the procession, so his life, as Christ's captive, was an incense, a sweet savour to God and man. This is the message here, and what a tremendous word it is! As Denney very pertinently points out, "The only triumphs we can ever have are those that begin with God's triumph over us in Christ". It is not for nothing that Paul begins many of his epistles with the words, "Paul, a bondsman of Jesus Christ". In Ephesians 3:1 he uses the words "I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles." This is a remarkable expression, for it means that Paul related his prison experiences, his captivity, all that he passed through, to the over-riding purpose of reaching the Gentiles. Can we say this of our lives - the way we live, the experiences through which we pass - that they are 'for' the Gentiles, for their blessing and redemption? What a way to live!

23) 2:14-17

There is more in these verses. Paul speaks not only of God triumphing over him in Christ but also making manifest through him the savour of this knowledge in every place (14). Why 'savour'? The figure, as already indicated, is suggested by the idea of the Roman triumph, with incense smoking on every altar, and its fragrance floating over the whole procession. What Paul means is that the knowledge of Christ communicated through the lives of believers is a fragrant thing. As he went from place to place, men saw in him not only the power, but also the sweetness of God's redeeming love. As Denney puts it, "The mighty Victor made manifest through Him not only His might, but His charm, not only His greatness but His grace". Denney goes on,

"It is not to preachers only that the word 'savour' speaks; it is of the widest possible application. Wherever Christ is leading a single soul in triumph, the fragrance of the Gospel should go forth; rather, it does go forth, in proportion as His triumph is complete. There is sure to be that in the life which will reveal the graciousness as well as the omnipotence of the Saviour. And it is this virtue which God uses as His main witness, as His chief instrument, to evangelise the world. In every relation of life it should tell. Nothing is so insuppressible, nothing so pervasive, as a fragrance. The lowliest life which Christ is really leading in triumph will speak infallibly and persuasively for Him ... And if we are conscious that we fail in this matter, and that the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ is something to which our life gives no testimony, let us be sure that the explanation of it is to be found in self-will. There is something in us which has not yet made complete surrender to Him, and not till He leads us unresistingly in triumph will the sweet savour go forth."

Well! What a challenge! Is our communication of the gospel a sweet savour, a fragrant thing? The charm, the winsomeness, the attractiveness of it - is this what comes over in our preaching, in our testimony?

24) 2:14-17

Something still requires to be said about these verses before we go on. What are we to make of the apostle's words in 15? Ministries and lives which proclaim Christ are always a joy to God, and are like a sweet-smelling incense which ascends to His throne, and this is so whatever men think of, and whether or not they respond to, the message they proclaim. Paul does not mean - cannot mean - that God has pleasure in the fact that there should be those who refuse His gospel, for this would be to contradict all the testimony of Scripture. All the same, he is drawing our attention to something very solemn: some men believe the gospel testimony, and enter into life; but some men do not believe, refuse to believe, and for them the gospel proves to be a savour of death unto death. There is something essentially mysterious and irrational about the fact that some who hear the gospel harden their hearts against Christ and refuse His grace, stiffening their wills rigidly against the will of God. It is not that the preaching of the gospel is the cause of this hardening, though it is the occasion of it. And in this mystery of iniquity, when men harden themselves against the gospel, the gospel itself will be said to have ministered to their ruin. It was ordained to life, but it has become a sentence of death, in those that have refused it. There is something awfully final about these words, but they are an emphasis that is invariably found in the New Testament: hell and eternal loss are realities and possibilities. It is not all the same in the end whether a man believes in Christ or not: there is a parting of the ways, and there will be a final separation of the wheat from the tares, the sheep from the goats.

25) 2:14-17

It is the burden of the apostle and of the gospel itself that men should see clearly these stark alternatives referred to in yesterday's Note; and no one has underlined them more graphically than James Denney, in the words that follow:

"If the gospel, as conceived in the New Testament, has any character at all, it has the character of finality. It is God's last word to men. And the consequences of accepting or rejecting it are final; it opens no prospect beyond the life on the one hand, and the death on the other, which are the results of obedience and disobedience. Obey, and you enter into a light in which there is no darkness at all: disobey, and you pass eventually into a darkness in which there is no light at all. What God says to us in all Scripture, from beginning to end, is not, sooner or later? but, Life or death? These are the alternatives before us; they are absolutely separate; they do not run into one another at any time, the most remote. It is necessary to speak the more earnestly of this matter, because there is a disposition, on the plea that it is impossible for us to divide men into two classes, to blur or even to obliterate the distinction between Christian and non-Christian. Many things prompt us to make the difference merely one of quality - a more or less of conformity to some ideal standard - in which case, of course, a little more, or a little less, is of no great account. But that only means that we never take the distinction between being right with God, and being wrong with God, as seriously as God takes it; with Him it is simply infinite. The difference between those who obey, and those who do not obey, the gospel, is not the difference of a little better and a little worse; it is the difference of life and death. If there is any truth in Scripture at all, this is true - that those who stubbornly refuse to submit to the gospel, and to love and obey Jesus Christ, incur at the Last Advent an infinite and irreparable loss. They pass into a night on which no morning dawns."

26) 3:1-3

The reference in these verses is to the practice in the Early Church of giving introductory letters to believers who went from one fellowship to another (cf Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1) in order to safeguard the integrity of the church and prevent unauthorised strangers from prying, as was sometimes done, into the inner affairs of a Christian fellowship (the modern Disjunction certificate is a pale, though real, reflection of this idea). The question of Paul's bona fide claim to apostolic authority was being challenged in Corinth, and he asks rather scornfully whether he who had begotten them in the faith needed a letter of commendation from them or to them. "You", he says, "are the commendatory letter which I show if I am asked for my credentials". In fact, the Corinthians themselves were the best evidence of the reality of Paul's apostleship, the very thing they were casting doubt upon. As he says in the first epistle (9:1, 2) "The seal of mine apostleship are ye in the Lord". Denney remarks, in this connection, "Only those who can appeal to what they have done in the gospel can be known to have the qualification of gospel ministers". This is very challenging. We once heard an eminent churchman say that he did not know of any single life he could say he had decisively influenced. This may to some be evidence of a becoming modesty and humility, but it is not Paul's attitude, and it is difficult to see how he could ever have been satisfied without the evidence that his ministry was owned of God in blessing to men. There should be signs following the work of a man whom God has called to serve Him; it is a reflection on God Himself to suggest that they might easily be lacking.

27) 3:1-3

Paul then - to use the earlier metaphor - had been a sweet savour of Christ to the Corinthians, and they had come to a knowledge of Him through his labours. And what he is doing in these verses is to appeal to what he has done in the gospel, relating to them, as proof of his apostleship. The true commendation of a preacher (or Christian witness) is that he is a pen in the hand of Christ for writing and drawing something on the lives of others. Everyone knew what the Corinthians had been, and everyone knew what they had become (cf 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Whoever looked on them knew, and saw plainly, that they were an 'epistle of Christ' - and Paul's was the hand that Christ had used to write it. This is a wonderfully graphic metaphor that the apostle uses here. As Denney puts it, "The life of the Christian is an epistle; it is not only a meaning, but an address; it is a message from Christ to the world". Christ dictates the letter: the apostle writes it through his preaching; and that message should be clear and plain. It should be legible for all the world to read. This is always the true pattern. Christ wishes so to write on our lives that men may see, in looking upon us, what He can do for mankind. The life of every Christian should bear certain unmistakable characteristics which will proclaim clearly to men, "I have a message from the Lord for thee". As Denney asks, "Did you ever, startled by the unusual brightness of a true Christian's life, ask as it were involuntarily 'Whose image and superscription is this?' and feel as you asked it that these features, these characters, could only have been traced by one hand, and that they proclaimed to all the grace and power of Jesus Christ?"

28) 3:1-3

The question that all this that we have been discussing raises for us is this: What do our lives say? Is Christ's writing on our lives legible or blurred? Are we readable, or are we so mixed up and confused that when people read us they cannot make a thing of us? Can men read in our lives that Christ is mighty to save? Is there anything in our experience that would remotely suggest that? Here are some words that make the point very well:

"We are the only Bible this careless world will read;
We are the sinner's gospel, we are the scoffer's creed;
We are the Lord's last message, given in deed and word;
What if the type is crooked, what if the print be blurred?"

John McNeill, the Scottish evangelist of a former day, tells of a would-be suicide, who was walking along the Forth and Clyde canal, despairing of life. She found herself following two middle-aged people, whose faces arrested her. Contact and conversation followed, and the woman was as a result converted to Christ. Having told this story, McNeill asked his audience, "Is there anything in your face that would keep a man or a woman from committing suicide?" One thinks of what Paul says in Galatians 3:1, "Before whose face Christ has been placarded among you as the crucified One". It is easy to see his meaning: the message of Christ crucified had been displayed before them in the lives of the apostle and his companions when they visited Galatia. But for this something specific was needed: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Galatians 6:17) and "I have been crucified with Christ ... Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2:20). But for Christ to be seen to live in him, 'he' had to die. Christ crucified can be proclaimed and displayed only by a crucified man. Only thus do we make good reading for the eyes of men!

29) 3:1-3

To change the metaphor a little, this is what it means to 'magnify the Saviour' (Philippians 1:20). But how can one 'magnify' the Saviour? Well, how does the telescope magnify the distant star? It brings it nearer, and gives men better sight of it. This our lives can do for Christ. Magnifying the Saviour: living epistles, a sweet savour of Christ. If in all honesty we are conscious that we fail here and that this fragrance is something of which our lives give little or no evidence, should we not believe that the explanation lies in this, that there is something in us which has not yet made the complete surrender to Him, and that not until He leads us unresistingly in triumph will the sweet savour go forth? And, believing this, should we not be prepared, as children of God, humbly to bow before Him, and make a new surrender to Him, in order that this might become true of us, and that the sweet savour of Christ may begin to go forth from our lives, that men will 'get the message' because they will see Christ placarded in our lives, crucified and glorified for their salvation. We must never forget that we are a savour of life to some and of death to others. The eternal issues are always the background of our witness and testimony. We dare not, for the sake of the souls of men, be less than our best for Him.

30) 3:4-11

In this remarkable passage, not without its difficulties for interpretation, the apostle speaks of his calling as a minister of the new covenant, and in so doing presents a series of contrasts between the old and the new. The old covenant is of the letter, the new is of the spirit; the old is outward, the new inward; the old is a ministration of death, the new of life; the old of condemnation, the new of righteousness; the old is transient and the new is permanent. What the apostle says here is in some ways a continuation of the contrast which he underlines in 3 where he speaks of the living epistles and the work of grace done in the Corinthians as a writing on their lives not done 'with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not in tables of stone but in fleshy tables of the heart' - that is to say an inward work, not an outward work. The Christian imprint is not something that is left on the surface of a man's life, and no Christian experience that merely skims the surface of life will ever be read clearly by men and women as a message from God. This contrast between outward and inward is developed throughout the passage with Paul making a series of contrasts, between letter and spirit, death and life, condemnation and righteousness, transient and permanent. In this Paul is describing his ministry and testimony as a preacher of the gospel, and this is the value of the passage for us, and we need to examine his teaching with some care.

31) 3:4-11

God's covenant with Israel was the constitution under which He was their God and they were His people. It was a national covenant embodied in legal forms, with a legal constitution under which the people lived. It is of this old covenant that Paul speaks, and speaks so disparagingly, in this passage. It is this that he calls 'letter', as opposed to the new, which he calls 'spirit'. And the contrast he makes between them is absolute. There is no 'spirit' at all in the old; there is no 'letter' at all in the new. But this is not the whole truth about the two covenants. What Paul says here is true for his present argument. And in order to avoid misunderstanding, we must, before expounding his teaching here, look at his general teaching on the relation between old and new covenants, between law and grace, so as to be able to put this particular aspect of his teaching in context. Let us try to do so. The deepest truth about the relation of old and new covenants is that they stand in the relation of promise to fulfilment. The deepest reality is the priority of grace over law. That this is true is seen in Exodus 20, which begins with a statement about God's action in grace, followed by a statement of God's requirements of His 'en-graced' and redeemed people.

32) 3:4-11

What was said at the end of yesterday's Note can be put in another way: Paul in Romans 5 speaks of two orders of existence: in Adam, and in Christ. And into this pattern the law came, and was added, because of transgressions. Furthermore, Paul teaches that the New Testament gospel was witnessed to by the law and the prophets, that is the Old Testament itself. Furthermore, Paul teaches in Romans 7 that 'the law is spiritual'. Since this is so, it cannot be maintained in any absolute sense, that there is no grace, no 'spirit' in the old covenant. Of course there was. The religion of the old covenant was not mere legalism: as Paul makes clear in Romans 4 the secret of justifying grace was made known to David and to Abraham, and the good news of salvation was preached in old time as it has been in the new. What does Hebrews 11, with its constant reiteration of the words 'By faith ...' mean if not just this? Paul deals with this problem in Galatians when he asks the question: "Wherefore, then, serveth the law?" It was added, he says, because of transgressions, it is our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. This is the function of the law - not a way of salvation, but a handmaid of the gospel, to lead us to the One who is the way of salvation. That is the context in which we need to place and understand the special contrast that Paul makes in this passage.

33) 3:4-11

There is, however, one very real sense in which Paul can say what he says in these verses, in making the special contrast between the old covenant and the new: the nature of the old covenant was not always rightly understood by the Jews. Indeed, it was very substantially misunderstood by them, and misconstrued as a way of salvation. And it is to this that Paul is particularly referring. And he speaks with some feeling, and from personal experience. For the old covenant understood like this, and as he first understood it, is a dead-letter; it is a ministry of death and of condemnation, and of transient nature. And there is no 'spirit' in it at all. It was in this kind of tradition that Paul himself was reared and nurtured. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees (cf Philippians 3:4ff and his impressive religious record). But his religion did not save him; it could not save him. It could not put him in the right with God or give his guilty conscience peace. Now, this same misunderstanding of the old covenant is something that exists in relation to the new also. It is possible to misconstrue the new covenant, the Christian covenant, in a legalistic, dead-letter way, and misinterpret it as a way of salvation by works. Indeed, down the history of the Church this has often happened, and it has certainly happened in our own day and generation. The true message of the gospel has been obscured and all but eclipsed in so many of our Church folk, who because of this misunderstanding are trying with might and main, and with great dedication to 'work their passage' to heaven by the way of good works. They have no assurance of salvation, and it is because they have had no real experience of salvation by grace, through faith. And it is solemnly true that in this sense, for them, 'the letter killeth', for it is a dead and deadening thing, with no real hope, and no real good news in it. And this will become clear when we look at the threefold contrast Paul makes in these verses, in tomorrow's Note.

34) 3:4-11

The first contrast Paul makes is between death and life. We have touched on this already. The function of the law is 'to kill', and the law has a 'killing' work. This is echoed in Paul's words in Romans 3:20, 'By the law is the knowledge of sin', and in Galatians 3:19, 'The law was added because of transgressions.' This refers to the power of the law to create a consciousness of sin, and to intensify it, to stimulate transgression and to make sin exceeding sinful, and shut up men to despair, to pass the sentence of death on the guilty. The second contrast is between condemnation and righteousness. There is a parallelism here with the first contrast. It is through condemnation men become the prey of death. Here there is an indication of how central for Paul's gospel is the idea of acquittal and acceptance with God. The fact of the guilty conscience, the sense of condemnation that is true for all men apart from the grace of God is incontrovertible in Paul's thinking. The old way could never give him peace with God; he could not get rid of his uneasy conscience whatever he did. And this was highlighted for him by the teaching of the apostles, with their glorious assurance and hope and confidence. This is what he lacked: he was under sentence. It was the new that gave him what he needed so desperately. The third contrast is between the transient and the permanent. The true glory of the law is that it shuts men up to faith in Christ; then its work is done. It passes away as a significant factor, and the new comes into its own, and stays there forever.

35) 3:4-11

We spoke at the end of yesterday's Note about the true glory of the law, even though transient. But there is something more glorious, 'that which remaineth', namely the gospel. This indeed is 'the glory that excelleth' (10), and its glory consists in this: firstly, that by it men pass from death to life. The spirit gives life, bringing about a reversal of all the law has done in bringing death to men; the sentence of death is reversed; and the impetus to do good is overcome. Secondly, by it we pass from condemnation to righteousness. There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. Pardon for sin and justification in the sight of God have become realities. Here is good news for the sinful who know condemnation and despair. This is glory indeed! In the third place, it is forever and it proclaims that nothing shall ever separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Denney sums it all up finely in stirring words: "The true greatness of God is revealed, and with it His true glory, once for all, in the Gospel. There is nothing beyond the righteousness of God, manifested in Christ Jesus, for the acceptance of faith. That is God's last word to the world: it has absorbed in it even the glory of the law; and it is bright for ever with a glory above all other. It is God's chief end to reveal this glory in the Gospel, and to make men partakers of it; it has been so always, is so still, and ever shall be; and in the consciousness that he has seen and been saved by the eternal love of God, and is now a minister of it, the Apostle claims this finality of the new covenant as its crowning glory."

36) 3:12-18

Paul now proceeds with his argument in 12, with the words "Seeing then that we have such hope we use great plainness of speech", but breaks off in 13ff to introduce a parenthesis, before resuming his theme in 4:1 with the words "Seeing we have this ministry". The link between his main theme and the parenthesis is interesting and significant. Some scholars think the reason why Paul refers to 'plainness of speech' is that there were those in Corinth who were critical of his preaching on the grounds that they could not understand it. It is of course always possible that a man's preaching might go over his hearers' heads, and that it might be his fault; but this was not Paul's problem, and if there were those who did not understand his gospel, the fault lay neither with Paul nor his gospel but with them. As he says in 4:3ff it is possible for men's minds to be blinded to the truth by the evil one. This is the link with the parenthesis in these verses for Paul speaks of a blindness that was upon the minds and spirits of the Jews in their reading of Moses. The Jews were blind to the truth of God in Moses' day, as also in Paul's; but this is also a factor in men's experience in general. The theological implications of this phenomenon trace back to the beginning of man's history, and to the story of the Fall. One of the effects that sin had upon man was to bring blindness upon him so that he could no longer perceive the things of the Spirit. This is why the great gospel commission is spoken of in terms of opening blind eyes and turning men from darkness to light (Acts 26:18).

37) 3:12-18

The reference in 13 to Moses veiling his face is to Exodus 34:29-35. There are problems here that make interpretation difficult. In AV, Exodus 34:33 reads 'till Moses had done speaking with them he put a veil on his face', but this should read 'when Moses had finished speaking ...' The situation is that Moses spoke with unveiled face, and the glory was visible, whenever he spoke for God, and also when he went into the tabernacle, whenever he spoke with God. At all other times he wore the veil. The question is, can Paul really be charging Moses with concealment, putting a veil on his face to keep the children of Israel from seeing the fading glory, not wishing them to see clearly that it was destined to disappear? One can scarcely think so, although this is what he seems to say in 13, and different attempts have been made to explain this problem. One suggestion is that the words should be rendered 'considering that the children of Israel did not look on the fading glory', the meaning then being that Moses veiled in view of the fact that they did not see that it was a fading glory; the veil would therefore be the symbol of the judicial blindness which was henceforth to fall on them.

38) 3:12-18

Another suggested interpretation is that Moses veiled his face lest the Israelites should be too taken up with what was after all only a fading glory instead of realising that it pointed forward to something infinitely greater. At all events their minds were hardened (14), and became insensible to the nature of the old covenant, a hardening which has characterised the Jews down their whole history, from Moses until Christ and from Christ to the present day. Now, Paul's point is that their blindness is a willing blindness. As we sometimes say, there are none so blind as those who will not see. This moral issue is seen very clearly in 14 and 16; if only they would turn to Christ, the veil would be taken away, and their blinded hearts would be enlightened. Moses' veil is still in the Apostle's mind. The veil on his face symbolised the nation's blindness; he uncovered his face when he turned from the people to speak to God, and even so, when they turn to the Lord, their veil will be taken away and they will see clearly. This is something which cannot of course be confined to the Jews; it is true of all unbelievers; their minds are blinded, as Paul goes on to say in 4:3, 4, by the God of this world, and the truths of the gospel are hid from their eyes. This is why it is not possible to win men to the Christian Faith by force of argument; it is not an intellectual matter but moral and spiritual, and only spiritual forces can accomplish it.

39) 3:12-18

'The Lord' in 17 is of course Christ, to Whom the Apostle is so anxious that the Jews should turn, and He is the Spirit of Whom he has already spoken in 6, the Spirit Who gives life and liberty. His meaning is that when men turn to Christ, the scales fall from their eyes by the operation of the Spirit, and the chains that keep them in bondage are broken; their hearts are set free and they are brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God. This, Paul means, is the decisive characteristic of the new covenant: 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty'.

In 18, Paul still seems to have in mind the experience of Moses, whose face shone with the reflected glory of God as he communed with Him face to face on the Mount. But, while then, one man only saw the glory, now all believers may gaze upon it. The 'glass' here referred to is the mirror of the gospel (we do not as yet see Him face to face, but only in the Word), and it is while we contemplate Him, the risen, exalted Saviour, that we are transformed more and more into His image. This, in the thought of the passage, is the outcome of 'turning to the Lord' (16) and this completes, so to speak, Paul's contrast between the old covenant and the new. In the old, it was Moses' face alone that shone, while all Israel was blind to the meaning and possibility even of the old dispensation; but in the new, we all may shine, and reflect the glory of Him into Whose likeness we are changed by that Spirit Who comes to indwell us when we turn to Christ and believe on Him.

40) 4:1-6

In the previous chapter Paul has spoken of being 'able ministers of the New Testament' (3:6), and of using 'great plainness of speech' (3:12), insisting on the plain and unequivocal nature of his ministry, against all charges that his message was unclear or confusing. This is the twofold theme he takes up once again in this chapter. It is very striking to see how the various terms and expressions Paul uses in these verses are all linked together: 'this ministry' (1), 'the word of God' and 'the truth' (2), 'our gospel' (3), 'We preach ... Christ Jesus the Lord' (5), 'God ... hath shined in our hearts' (6), 'this treasure' (7). Let us begin with the words in 3:6, 'able ministers', and see what this passage has to say on this subject. What is it that makes us able, effectual ministers or witnesses? The first thing that stands out in this passage as an answer to that question is what is said in 1: "As we have received mercy, we faint not" or, as a modern translation puts it, 'we do not lose heart'. An able minister, then, is one who does not lose heart or faint, and it is because he has a sense of the mercy of God that he continues in steadfastness. A sense of what we owe to Christ should be the inspiration of all our endeavour, and the driving force that keeps us going on and on. It was so with Paul: it needs to be so with us. It does not take much thought on our part to realise that this takes us to the very heart of what is of final importance in Christian ministry and service, and we shall do well to ponder this a little further in tomorrow's Note.

41) 4:1-6

James Denney's comment on 1 is very fine: he says: "Those to whom little is forgiven, Jesus Himself tells us, love little; it is not in them for Jesus' sake to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. They faint easily, and are overborne by petty trials, because they have not in them that fountain of brave patience - a deep, abiding sense of what they owe to Christ, and can never, by any length or ardour of service, repay. It accuses us, not so much of human weakness, as of ingratitude, and insensibility to the mercy of God, when we faint in the exercise of our ministry". We sometimes sing Toplady's great hymn, 'A debtor to mercy alone ...' and Wesley's 'And can it be ...': if these words, and the sentiments expressed in them, have gripped and laid hold of our hearts, then we have one of the ingredients that make for an able ministry. The mercy of God! What a great, triumphant and overwhelming reality it was with Paul! The sense of what God in Christ had done for him, and had done in him, in bringing him back to Himself, the wonder of reconciling love -

I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me,
Confused at the grace that so freely He proffers me,
I marvel that He should descend from His throne on high
To rescue a soul so rebellious, so proud as I
O it is wonderful, that He should care for me enough to die for me!
O it is wonderful; wonderful to me

- Ah, when this is what grips our hearts, this is the inspiration for all faithful living and service, for the Cross tells us that as sinners we have no right to be alive at all, let alone happy and comfortable. To realise this is to find strength and resolution enough for any situation!

42) 4:1-6

The second thing that makes us able ministers is that we should have 'renounced the hidden things of dishonesty ...' We see here, by implication, where weakening and discouragement can lead a man, and rob him of his effectiveness in the work of God. To lose heart can sometimes mean losing one's testimony, by having been led into those things that Paul mentions in 2 - the hidden things of dishonesty, the handling of the Word of God deceitfully, the walking in craftiness. 'Handling the word of God deceitfully' we have already commented on in the reference in 2:17 to 'corrupting the word of God' (see Note 9 for Wed 24 March). The reference to 'the hidden things of dishonesty (or shame)' and 'walking in craftiness' is to the very real temptation to 'accommodate' or 'adapt' the message of the gospel to suit the spirit of the time: it is the manipulation of the gospel, to apply diplomacy in the preaching of it, to be ingenious in the presentation of it, so as to avoid the reproach of the Cross, to trim the message so as to minimise the offence. What we need to recognize again and again is that there is no way of being faithful to Christ and His gospel without causing offence (although we must be careful to remember that the offence of the Cross is not the same as the offensiveness of Christians) and we must accept, as Denney says, that 'evil is strong enough to cause great trouble and suffering to those who refuse to transact with it'.

43) 4:1-6

In contrast to the 'negatives' in yesterday's Note, we now turn to a very positive statement, in words that tell us that an able minister of the gospel 'manifests the truth'. Two things may be said about this. The first is that the work of the ministry is to unveil, and show forth, what the Word of God says, to lay bare the truth, and allow it to come out and speak for itself. The preacher's task - as indeed every true witness for Christ - is not to interest, entertain or please his hearers, but to proclaim the Word in such a way that its message comes home to them. A graphic illustration of this is given in what took place among the returned exiles from Babylon in Nehemiah 8:8, when Ezra and his fellow scribes "read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading". This necessarily involves careful exposition of the passage, and legitimate interpretation in the light of the text of Scripture, of what is there, rather than reading into it what is not there, and calling this biblical preaching. The summons to preach biblically is not fulfilled by taking a text and making it a starting off point for a discourse that bears little relation to what it says, or to its general context in the passage where it is found. In a text or passage, the preacher's duty is to unfold what is said in it, and reveal the truth enshrined in it. The truth must be made evident and manifest, it must be seen. Now, underlying all this there is one basic, central presupposition, and it is that the truth itself contains the virtue and dynamic of God. It has converting, regenerating power within itself. This is why it is necessary to 'make the message clear and plain'. We must give the truth the chance to do its own work, and never mind looking for something 'more irresistible than truth' - to use Denney's graphic phrase - to plead truth's cause. The question that Paul's words pose for us here is: Do we really believe in the sovereign, regenerating power of the Word? Believe it enough to want to set it loose among men?

44) 4:1-6

The second thing about 'manifesting the truth' is contained, by implication, in what we said earlier about renouncing the hidden things of dishonesty'. For, one great hindrance to the manifestation of the truth may lie in the preacher or witness himself. If he is not right, the manifestation will not take place. The truth will be hidden - not merely in the sense that the hearers will be 'put off' by the speaking of someone whose life they know is all wrong, but also even when the 'wrongness' is hidden and unknown to any but God. Only when the channel is clean does the living water flow, only when the vessel is transparent does the light shine through. "Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord", says Isaiah (52:11). And there is assuredly a quality of rightness and straightness which is an indispensable requisite if the grace of God in the gospel is going to be mediated to others.

And when it is thus mediated, it will appeal to a man's conscience, 'commending' is the word Paul uses here - not commending in the sense that the message creates a pleasing impression on the hearers - it was anything but this in Acts 2 at Pentecost, for example, for Peter's hearers were pricked in their hearts as they listened to his 'manifestation of the truth', and were made to say "What shall we do?". Conscience is God's monitor in the soul of a man. It is his moral nature, or the moral element in his nature. And it is this that the Christian message has to address. Denney maintains that this is why the preacher's task is not to prove, but to proclaim the gospel: not to set out an unanswerable argument (although the gospel has a truly reasoned and reasonable case) but to make an irresistible impression, and to make that impression on the conscience, the moral nature of man, in such a way that it will be futile for him to protest against it - 'an impression that subdues and holds the soul forever'.

45) 4:1-6

But now something else. It might be thought that providing the channel is clean and clear, the manifestation of the truth will be made and men will be saved. Well, the manifestation of the truth will be made all right, but it does not follow that all who hear it will be saved. And it is certainly not the fault of the preacher or the channel that this should be so. Paul faces this problem fairly and squarely in 3ff (and this amplifies what he has already said in 2:15, 16 (see Note 13 for Sunday, 28 March) where he again speaks of spiritual blindness, as in 3:14ff. In that earlier instance we said that the blindness was a willing blindness, caused by obstinacy and refusal to bow the knee to God in Christ. Here, the Apostle says that it is the 'god of this world' that has blinded the minds of them that believe not. We should note well the nice apportionment of responsibility here between the influence of Satan and the fact of unbelief. Both are true, and the one never cancels out responsibility for the other. This is the tragic, incontrovertible reality. The gospel is a great light; it shines to men. Yet, men do not see it, there is an ultimate irrationality here, therefore, for which there is no real answer. But, over against this, we have to look at the glorious statement in 6, which proclaims that light is greater than darkness and it will conquer! And in preaching the gospel, we must preach, as Denney says, 'with hope that light is stronger than darkness and able to drive it away'. Paul uses the analogy of creation here to illustrate the work of the gospel in regeneration - with this decisive difference: the first creation was by the word of God's power, but the new creation is by the Word made flesh and made sin. And the Cross is the place where God broods on the darkness, to bring forth the light. And it is in the preaching of the Cross, and the witness borne to it that the miracle of new birth takes place.

46) 4:6-11

We press on in this marvellously profound chapter. It will hardly be thought that we exhausted the meaning of Paul's words in 6 in yesterday's Reading, and we take them with us into today's, since they belong to the thought which Paul proceeds to unfold in 7ff. For the treasure that we have in earthen vessels (7) is none other than 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. Denney has a fine passage on this: "In the light which God flashed into his heart Paul saw the face of Jesus Christ, and knew that the glory which shone there was the glory of God.... In the face of Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, he saw God's redeeming love upon the throne of the universe: it had descended deeper than sin and death: it was exalted now above all heavens: it filled all things." The face of Jesus Christ, telling out God's heart of love and His wonderful redemption to mankind - His reconciled face turned towards men, to redeem, to restore, to renew - that is the wonder of the gospel we are called upon to proclaim!

We should note the association of ideas here: this light has shined in our hearts - then it is our responsibility, first to be enlightened, and then to shine, as Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men ..." and "Ye are the light of the world ..." But how to let the light shine? Through preaching, through witness (if in 5, 'we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord')? Yes - but, there is another prerequisite. What we mean is this: Look at the link between 'earthen vessels' in 7 and 'troubled on every side ...' in 8, 9. The light that is in us, by His grace, has to be let out, if others are to be illumined by it. But how can the light shine out of an earthen vessel? Well, if the earthen vessel is broken, the light will be exposed for all to see. And this is what Paul is speaking about, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note.

47) 4:6-11

Paul's concept of the 'earthen vessels' gives, in his thinking, an illustration of a great spiritual principle which he has already expressed to the Corinthians "God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty" (1 Corinthians 1:27). This is the key to a proper understanding of this whole passage, and it is not really possible rightly to grasp the Apostle's conception of the Christian ministry and its fruitful spiritual harvest without seeing what he means here. Matthew Henry, the Puritan commentator, commenting on this passage, gives a thought-provoking interpretation, suggesting that Paul may have in mind the well-known story in Judges 7:13-21 of Gideon and his 300 men. When at Gideon's pre-arranged signal the 300 men, who had at their leader's command taken earthen pitchers and set light within them, smashed the pitchers containing the lamps, allowing the light to shine out, there was such a display of light that the Midianites thought they must be surrounded by a vast army, and fled the field, terror-stricken and in disarray. This is how the victory was won.

Whether or not Paul had this story in mind, it is an excellent illustration of the principle here, and very much to the point. There is only one way for a light to shine out of an earthen vessel, and that is for it to be shattered. And so Paul goes on to say: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed, always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the Life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body". The shattering of the earthen vessels, to let the light shine forth - how wonderful!

48) 4:6-11

This idea of the 'shattering of the earthen vessels' is something very deeply imbedded in Paul's theology. We could well call it 'the theology of Christian experience'. It is evidenced very clearly in the well-known words in 1 Corinthians 2:3ff, "I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling (i.e. I had this message of Christ crucified in an earthen vessel) and my speech was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God". The earthen vessel was shattered, and the light streamed out all over Corinth! When this principle is read into some of the Apostle's autobiographical statements elsewhere, such as 1 Corinthians 4:9ff, 2 Corinthians 6:4ff and 2 Corinthians 11:23ff, the picture becomes very impressive and moving indeed! Calvin points out that there is both an inward and an outward conformity to Christ's death involved for the servant of God - a dying to self, on the one hand, and the outward experience of suffering for Christ's sake, exemplified in the above quotations from the Corinthian epistles. What Paul means is that the 'dying of Jesus' is borne about by the minister of the Word, and those who receive his message partake of Jesus' risen life and power. Our lives, he means, are to reflect the death of Christ in such a way that men are somehow reminded of Calvary. We are to be sign-posts to Calvary, and our lives must say to men, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world". They must say, and say positively and convincingly, "I know a fount where sins are washed away."

49) 4:12-18

There are two wonderful consequences of this tremendous truth - this 'door' by which God 'gets through' to the world He longs to bless and save. As to the first of these, here is the 'law of spiritual harvest', and is the secret we need to learn, and must learn, for effectual service. Nothing will act as a substitute for this: it is only by accepting this, with the daily dying it demands, that our testimony will be availing. The 'quote' Paul makes from Psalm 116:10 serves to bear this out. It is as if Paul were saying - using the words of the Psalm - "I believe this to be the pattern of effective service for God. I believe this is what He promises to bless, and I am going forward on that assumption, that my sacrificial living, my bearing in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, the shattering of the earthen vessel, will be owned of God in revealing the risen and omnipotent Saviour to dying men and women". It is the reproduction of this principle of self-emptying and self-giving in the believer that is called 'bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus'. In 16-18 - this is the second consequence of the truth expressed in 6-11 - the Apostle speaks of something else that suffering accomplishes. "Bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus" lays up for us a 'weight of glory' (17). The earthen vessel may be visibly crumbling (16), but the inward man cannot; indeed this is being renewed day by day, and in the unseen world it is 'taking shape', so to speak, and even now beginning to show the lineaments of glory as the 'life' that works in us who die daily for Jesus' sake. Death works, not only in others, in bringing many sons and daughters into glory: it works also in us, to bring us into glory - and more, a glory into us that will be the fruit of faithful service for Christ. "We have", says Paul in 7, "this treasure"!

50) 4:17-18

It is worth pausing for a little at these tremendous words to consider the practical value of 'the forward look' and how effective the life a man may lead and the good he may do when his heart is really fixed on the things that are unseen and eternal. This needs to be affirmed today when two opposing views, neither fully biblical, contend with one another, the one stressing 'the social gospel' to the exclusion of the gospel of grace altogether, and referring the real message of Christianity to social questions in this world, and the other exclusively stressing the 'other worldliness' of the gospel, and refusing to have anything to do with its social implications at all. The real truth is, we are citizens of two worlds and have duties and responsibilities in both. And the ages that have been truest to this biblical emphasis, it has been those who have been most 'thirled' to the other world who have done most for the good of this. It is a matter of history that the great social movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were inspired by evangelical testimony, and sprang from the evangelical faith. Paul's whole standpoint was far removed from the attitude that refuses to take any concern for society, as his 'down-to-earth' instructions in his epistles as to Christian behaviour towards rulers and governments clearly show. It was simply that he held things in proper perspective, and it was the realities of the eternal world that conditioned his life in this, not vice versa.

51) 5:1-4

Having introduced the thought of the future at the end of the previous chapter, the Apostle proceeds to speak of it here in greater detail. The 'earthly house' corresponds to the 'outward man' in 4:16. He has been speaking of the cost to his mortal body of the life of 'always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus' and the 'if' in 1 recognises that the dying will certainly end in death, but for the possibility of the coming of the Lord in glory. This was always a hope for Paul, as he indicates in 4, and one can fully appreciate the prospect of being alive and remaining when that coming should take place, and thus be clothed upon with immortality apart from death. What we must not miss here, however, is the distinct emphasis Paul makes on the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. The 'earthly house' is this mortal body, and the building of God cannot be conceived as something less; it is in fact the spiritual body of which he speaks in 1 Corinthians 15:44. The contrast here is not between life in the body here and life in the spirit hereafter, but between the transitoriness of life here, and the unchanging eternity of the new life to come. This is certainly one of the most important ideas in the Christian doctrine of the last things, and it is the loss of it from modern theology that has robbed the Christian hope of so much of its substance and glory and made heaven seem very much like a third-rate consolation prize by comparison with the 'solid joys' of this mortal life. This is the exact antithesis of the biblical view as expressed by Paul here. The theological issues underlying this issue are very considerable, and we must enter into them more fully in tomorrow's Note.

52) 5:1-4

A companion passage to these verses is Romans 8:18-23, where Paul, echoing the same thoughts as here, makes explicit mention of the hope of the Christian as being the redemption of the body. The Christian faith does not lay particular stress on the idea of immortality as such, still less immortality of the soul, although of course this is included in its doctrine of the last things. The distinctive Christian doctrine is that of resurrection, and this means the body as well as the soul. Death is called in the New Testament 'the last enemy', and it is this because it sunders body from soul, thus frustrating the divine purpose in man, who was created a unity of body and soul, and creating a fatal dichotomy, a duality, a division, in man's essential existence. Now, if redemption is to be in any way real, if it is in fact to answer the problem made by sin (death is the ultimate issue and evidence of the reality of sin) it must mean that the breaking up process in man, whereby body and soul are sundered from one another, will be reversed, and body and soul brought together again after death. This is what the biblical doctrine teaches; body and soul will be reunited and reconstituted as man. When philosophers or members of other religions speak of life after death they may be thinking of a 'spirit' existence, but when the Christian speaks of it he should be thinking of a life out of which death has been plucked by the roots, and in which there will be real people, recreated in the image of God, new men and women, with spiritual bodies which will be the perfect vehicle for redeemed souls. This may be something for our fallen minds to boggle at, but our hearts must receive it and recognise that this is the only thing worth calling a blessed hope, the only thing worthy of the name of redemption in its fullest sense. No one could really doubt that this is what Paul longed for.

53) 5:5-10

There are two important points in 5. Paul maintains that it is the Spirit of God Who is pledge and earnest of the reality of the blessed hope. That is to say, the assurance of life eternal is nothing inherent in human nature as such, but the possession of the Holy Spirit. There is no such thing as assurance of eternal life for anyone who has not received Christ. As Peter makes very plain in his first epistle, we are begotten again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Apart from the gospel, and a personal, saving interest in it, a man has no cause to hope at all concerning the life to come. The second point is that God has 'wrought us for the selfsame thing' - that is, we are made for God and for the enjoyment of eternal life. This does not contradict what has just been said. As C.S. Lewis finely puts it, "Though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will." That is the point. God hath set eternity within our hearts (see Ecclesiastes 3:11 RSV) and when we are born again by His Spirit the longings within us for Himself are quickened in such a way that the reality of the unseen world becomes greater than the seen and temporal around us. This, says the Apostle, is what we have been wrought for. But this has one very striking implication, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note.

54) 5:5-10

We are 'wrought' for the enjoyment of eternal life, says Paul. But if this means, as was suggested yesterday, that great longings are awakened in our hearts that only eternity can meet and fulfil, then the paradoxical truth is that a deep consciousness of dissatisfaction is a surer mark of Christian grace than anything else. This goes against the traditionally superficial view so often peddled today that when a man comes to Christ his heart will find satisfaction. It is true, of course - and let it be said as emphatically as possible - that a knowledge of Christ can bring a peace and joy to the human heart that nothing else can. But it is extremely misleading to give the impression that full satisfaction is the portion of the believer in this life. Not so. There is such a thing as divine dissatisfaction, and it is this that Paul expresses in 8 when he says that he is 'willing rather to be absent from the body and present with the Lord'. It is precisely because he was not fully satisfied, and knew he could never be while in the body, that he wanted to be with Christ, which is far better. The 'homesickness of the soul' for the Father's House is one of the most distinctive characteristics of true spiritual experience, and the believer must learn to live with it, and above all not make the tragic mistake of not recognising it for what it is, and therefore trying to satisfy it with things - or relationships - which in their very nature were never meant to satisfy it, and never can. Fullness and joy and satisfaction is not yet. "I shall be satisfied, when I awake", said the Psalmist, "with Thy likeness" (Psalm 17:15).

55) 5:9-10

The thought expressed in these verses follows naturally and inevitably from the emphasis Paul has been making in this section of the Epistle. To be as conscious as he was of the eternal world must have conditioned all his work and labour in the gospel. He preached and witnessed constantly as one who knew he would be called to give an account of his stewardship, and this undoubtedly is the key to the understanding of these words. The acceptance of which he speaks is not judicial, and he does not mean that his standing with God as to justification can be conditioned by anything he does or does not do. Paul's teaching on justification is clear beyond any possibility of misunderstanding - it is by faith alone, and good works are its necessary and inevitable expression and fruit, and the only proof that it has really taken place. But here he is just as clearly speaking of acceptance in the sense in which he speaks of it in 1 Corinthians 9:27, where he speaks of the possibility of becoming 'a castaway'. This word means 'disqualified', and the possibility he has in mind is that of losing, not his salvation, which is impossible, but his reward (see also 1 Corinthians 3:12-15). Nor does the idea of reward conflict with the notion of free, unmerited grace (how could it, when Paul teaches both?). Justification by faith alone demands a moral response of the very highest order, and it is when this response is truly and unreservedly made that we become all that God means us to be. The fact is, we are making our future now, in the sense that our capacity for future glory is being enlarged (or not) by the obedience with which we respond to the summons of the gospel. To live unto God increases our stature not only here but hereafter, whereas to live unto self makes us shrink, and will in the end render us incapable of 'receiving' glory. This is the 'loss' which Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3 some will suffer, and it is in this sense that he speaks of 'receiving the things done in the body' (10).

56) 5:11-12

In our past few readings, we have considered what Paul has said about the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body, in the opening verses of the chapter. To believe a doctrine like this does something to a man, and makes him live in a certain way. And this is what the Apostle now goes on to express. The words 'we persuade men' in 11 refer not to the desire to convince them of the truth of the gospel, as might be thought from the context of the passage, for from what follows it seems clear that what Paul means is: "we persuade men of the sincerity of our motives in all the work we do". The words might well be paraphrased thus: "What we are is plain to God: He knows that we have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, and are sincere and true in our work; and we hope you also know, and that what we are commends itself to your consciences". The point he is making is that he lives his life in the light of the coming judgment, and it is this that makes him see to it that he is absolutely straight and true. There are eternal obligations on him to bind him to sincerity and speech. This is a salutary word for all who seek to minister the gospel: it is only when men are persuaded of our integrity that they will be prepared to listen to us, and be persuaded about the gospel. Hence his words in 12: it is as if he said, "What I have written thus far, from 3:1 to 5:12 has been written in terms of explaining the nature of our ministry, to show you what we are about". His concern has not been to advertise or commend himself, as others might do - for this reason, he did not worry whether his appearance, voice, manners, appealed to people or not. His concern was to be able to appeal to their consciences as being a true man, in whom the gospel had done a true work. He wanted to be accepted for what he was as a Christian, not as one with this gift or that, this frailty or that. "Judge me", he cries, "in the light of your consciences, not by your prejudices and disaffection". There is an enormous challenge in this appeal, as we must surely see.

57) 5:13-15

What we read in 13 gives us an example or two of the kind of criticism levelled against Paul. The verse is not without its problems, both in translation and in interpretation. Perhaps of all the translations, Moffatt's is nearest the mark: "I am beside myself, am I? Well, that is between myself and God. I am sane, am I? Well, that is in your interests." To render it thus makes it clear that Paul is instancing the criticisms levelled against him. The interpretations possible are two: either, that Paul's general life was characterised by 'enthusiasm', a 'being beside himself' which his critics called extremism and madness; or, that it is a reference to a particular occasion or occasions when he went to this sort of 'extreme', and was branded for it as a 'hot-gospeller' (to use a contemporary slur on evangelicals today). It does seem more likely that the first of these interpretations is right, and that the being 'beside himself' was an inevitable characteristic of his ministry. We should remember what Festus said of him in Acts 26:24: "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad", and that Paul, disavowing the charge, claimed that he was speaking forth the words of truth and soberness. We should also not forget that this was a charge brought against our Lord Himself, in Mark 3:21: "He is beside Himself". We are in good company, then, when such a charge is contemptuously laid against us!

58) 5:13-15

"How great and rare", as Denney finely puts it, "is the self-conquest of the man who can say that in his enthusiasm and his sobriety alike - when he is beside himself, and when his spirit is wholly subject to him - the one thing that never intrudes, or troubles his singleness of mind, is the thought of his own private ends". It is all in the interests of the gospel - for God and for man, never for himself. That is a great way to live! The reason this is so is given in 14 - the love of Christ had laid a constraint upon him. This verse, and those that follow it, undoubtedly constitute one of the high points of biblical revelation, as they bring us to the central mystery and heart of the gospel of Christ. But what does Paul mean by 'the love of Christ' (and the love of God)? It is not the general benevolence of God that is in view - the bountiful goodness of God meets us at the very threshold of our lives, and follows us all the way through, and we all have abundant cause to thank God and be grateful to Him for all the evidences of His love in a hundred different ways. But when Paul and the apostles speak of the love of God they are not thinking in general terms like these. Their thoughts are on the one unique and decisive manifestation of that love in the redeeming work of Christ. It is there, in His atoning death, that we know fully the meaning of divine love.

Inscribed upon the Cross we see
In shining letters 'God is love'.

As one of the old saints once said, 'The Cross of Jesus is the noontide of everlasting love, the meridian splendour of eternal mercy'. We sing, 'What a Friend we have in Jesus' - not so much in His innumerable kindnesses to us day by day, but supremely in this: 'All our sins and griefs to bear'. We do not understand God's love until we know and experience it in the Cross. This is borne out by the way in which the whole New Testament speaks of that love in the past tense - 'God so Loved ...', 'Christ Loved the Church ...', 'Herein is love, not that we love God, but that He loved us ...', 'He loved me and gave Himself for me'. This does not mean that He does not love us now, day by day - of course He does! But the New Testament gives the focus of the love in the death Jesus died. It was there that He loved us, and it is what was done there, on the Cross, that proved His love.

59) 5:13-15

'Constraineth' is the word Paul uses here about the divine love. This does not so much mean that the divine love impelled him, drove him on, so much as that that love held him in, in the sense of concentrating all his energies, in much the way a horse's bit and bridle constrains the animal, and thereby gives it direction, and enables it to be all it can be. And look at the direction that the love of Christ gave to Paul in this passage - it directed him unerringly to the Cross! It was to this that the constraint of Christ's love led him. And always, when the love of Christ grips and masters a man, this is where it will bring him in his thinking and in his theology. And in no real biblical sense can a man be said to be gripped by the love of Christ when he does not have central in his thinking the Cross where Jesus died, and His great reconciling work. This is what it always meant to the Apostle, and this is what it should always mean for us. And this may be taken as a fair index of how we stand in relation to the love of Christ - if our hearts are being enlarged by worthy and right thoughts about his death. A true biblical experience of grace is the best thing known for creating a true theology and giving a true message and testimony!

60) 5:13-15

What follows the reference to the constraint of Christ's love explains to us what it was about Christ's love that gave his life such a direction as was referred to in yesterday's Reading and left him no option but to go that way. It was the realisation that the death that Jesus died - and this, as was said, was the focal point of Christ's love - was in some decisive sense our death also, in that it cancelled out in him the life of sin and self and made it impossible for him to live in any other way than 'unto Him'. Difference of opinion has sometimes been expressed as to whether the 'for' in 'one died for all' in 14 means 'on behalf of' or 'instead of', but the latter is unquestionably what Paul has in mind here. The conclusion he draws requires it to mean 'instead of rather than 'on behalf of'. If we all died, as Paul says here, in the death that Jesus died for us, there must be a sense in which that death of His is our death, and we must be identified with Him in it, as He is with us. In the deepest sense, Christ is both our Substitute and our Representative on the Cross. He took our place, and He died our death, and we therefore die to sin in Him, as He died to sin in the death that He died (cf Romans 6:10, 'in that He died, He died unto sin once'). This is how the reign of self and sin was shattered once for all in the experience of the Apostle. And this is how it is with every believer.

61) 5:16-17

The implication of this union with Christ in His death is the miracle of the new life, and Paul now proceeds to speak of it. There is a very important lesson for us in the phrase 'to know Christ after the flesh'. When we speak of 'knowing Christ' in Christian experience, what precisely do we mean? There are different kinds of knowing Christ, as Paul indicates here. Those men and women who listened to His teaching when He was on earth, who conversed and mixed with Him 'knew' Him, but their knowledge was not saving knowledge, and knowing Him in that way did not make them Christians. On one occasion they said, 'Is not this the carpenter's son?', thereby showing that although they recognised Him, they did not know Him as Saviour. He was the Son of God, but they did not 'know' Him in that way. They knew Him after the flesh but not after the spirit. This distinction is just as relevant today as it was then. It is possible today to 'know' Christ only after the flesh, as a great historical Figure, or a wonderful Teacher, and even to know about His Cross and Resurrection as historical facts, and still not to 'know' Him savingly. As Denney says, "It is of great importance and of real value to learn all that can be learned about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, but it is the present life of Christ that is of crucial importance - His risen life. Experience of this is the decisive fact that makes a man a new creature". It is knowledge of the living Christ, the Christ Who can be met and Who confronts men in the gospel Word, that brings us into a new world in which old things pass away.

62) 5:16-17

We ought not to pass from these verses without thinking particularly of what is said in 17. The 'therefore' at the beginning of the verse links it with what has gone before it, and particularly with 15, and the words 'henceforth ... unto Him'. The clear implication of that phrase is surely that they imply and indicate an entirely new order of life, and this is what is spoken of in 17. 'In Christ' there is an entirely new order of things; and the AV 'creature' is much better translated 'creation' as in the modern versions. And the reference is not an individual one, applying to the believer only, but to a whole order of being. It would not be off the mark to render it 'there is a new creation'. All who are in Christ are born into a new order, in which old things, and the old order, have passed away. It is a new world altogether, with new values, new lifestyle, new everything. To be sure, as Denney says, "In a sense the new creation is in process as long as we live; it is ideally that faith in Christ means death in His death; ideally that with faith the old passes and the new is there"; the actual putting away of the old, the actual production of the new, are the daily task of faith as it unites the soul to Christ. We are in Him the moment faith touches Him, but we have to grow up into Him in all things. Only as we do so does the world change all around us, till the promise is fulfilled of new heavens and a new earth."

63) 5:17

Here is a further comment by Denney on 17, which is worth some thought: "Those who are in Christ have died to the whole order of life in which men are judged 'after the flesh'. Perhaps the Christian Church has almost as much need as any other society to lay this to heart. We are still too ready to put stress upon distinctions which are quite in place in the world, but are without ground in Christ. Even in a Christian congregation there is a recognition of wealth, of learning, of social position, in some countries of race, which is not Christian. I do not say these distinctions are not real, but they are meaningless in relation to Christ, and ought not to be made. To make them narrow and impoverishes the soul. If we associate only with people of a certain station, and because of their station, all our thoughts and feelings are limited to a very small area of human life; but if distinctions of station, of intelligence, or manners, are lost in the common relation to Christ, then life is open to us in all its length and breadth; all things are ours, because we are His. To be guided by worldly distinctions is to know only a few people, and to know them by what is superficial in their nature; but to see that such distinctions died in Christ's death, and to look at men in relation to Him who is Redeemer and Lord of all, is to know all our brethren, and to know them not on the surface, but to the heart."

64) 5:18-21

The Christian doctrine of reconciliation is presented in these verses in all its grandeur and glory, and it would be impossible to exaggerate its importance. The whole passage heads up into a climax here, but each separate statement is dependent on the others. Thus, the love of Christ (14) is expressed, focused and manifested in the death that He died (14,15); what was wrought in that death was a reconciling work (19); and its effect on men is that a new creation is brought into being (17), when the great reconciliation (20) based upon and issuing from that reconciling work is heard, heeded and received; and the divine commission is given to those made new in Christ to preach the great reconciliation. Furthermore, in the final verse (21) it is made clear that reconciliation is founded on the great substitutionary atonement made on Calvary. There is thus a circle of grace in operation, for the preaching of the reconciling word brings men to the love of Christ revealed in the Cross, and to an understanding of its mystery and a knowledge of its power, and thus into the new creation, in which the inescapable commission is ever to preach and proclaim it to others. This is such a rich vein of truth, with so much contained in it, that we will need to spend a little time on it, to extract the essence of its profound teaching, and this will be our task in the next few Notes.

65) 5:18-21

The first thing we must recognize is that the word 'reconciliation' presupposes estrangement, and it cannot really be understood apart from this. This fact has enormous implications, and it is well that we should grasp these as fully as possible. For there has been widespread and serious misunderstanding of what the New Testament means by the estrangement and alienation that has taken place in man's experience, and which the divine reconciliation removes and cancels. For in Paul's teaching reconciliation is not merely the removal of a misunderstanding; it is not that man thought that God was angry with him, and that the gospel assures him otherwise. It is true that, as Denney says, "man is alienated from God by sin, fear and unbelief" and that man considers that "God reconciles him when He prevails with him to lay aside these evil dispositions, and trust Him as his Father and his Friend". In other words, all that is involved is that we have misunderstood the reality of the divine love, and that God urges us in the gospel to lay aside our misunderstanding of Him and accept His friendship - that, in fact, the estrangement is all on our side, not God's.

But this is not what the New Testament teaches. The estrangement is not one-sided. There is something in God as well as something in man that has to be dealt with before there can be peace. Indeed, as Denney insists, "the something on God's side is so incomparably more serious that in comparison with it the something on man's side simply passes out of view". The doctrine of reconciliation, as the New Testament proclaims it, means that God was at work in Christ, dealing with the obstacles on His side, and putting away everything that on His side meant estrangement, that is, the putting away of His condemnation of sin, the turning away of His wrath against sin. Denney puts it unmistakably when he says, "Reconciliation in the New Testament sense is not something which we accomplish when we lay aside our enmity to God; it is something which God accomplished when in the death of Christ He put away everything that on His side meant estrangement, so that He might come and preach peace. To deny this is to take St Paul's Gospel away root and branch."

66) 5:18-21

Denney's exposition of these verses is so superlatively good that it is abundantly worthwhile quoting extensively from it in the interests of clarifying our understanding beyond any doubt as to what the New Testament doctrine of reconciliation really means. He continues: "What is it that the wisdom and love of God undertake to deal with, and do deal with, in that marvellous way which constitutes the Gospel? Is it man's distrust of God? Is it man's dislike, fear, antipathy, spiritual alienation? Not if we accept the Apostle's teaching. The serious thing which makes the Gospel necessary, and the putting away of which constitutes the Gospel, is God's condemnation of the world and its sin; it is God's wrath, 'revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men' (Romans 1:16-18). The putting away of this is 'reconciliation': the preaching of this reconciliation is the preaching of the Gospel.... The wrath of God, the condemnation of God resting on the sinful world, are not, whatever speculative theologians may think, unreal things: neither do they belong only to ancient times. They are the most real things of which human nature has any knowledge till it receives the reconciliation. They are as real as a bad conscience, as real as misery, impotence, and despair. And it is the glory of the Gospel, as St Paul understood it, that it deals with them as real. It does not tell men that they are illusions, and that only their own groundless fear and distrust have ever stood between them and God. It tells them that God has dealt seriously with these serious things for their removal, that awful as they are He has put them away by an awful demonstration of His love; it tells them that God has made peace at an infinite cost, and that the priceless peace is now freely offered to them."

67) 5:18-21

Later in his exposition, Denney goes on to say, in dealing with the modern reaction against the very thought of divine wrath being involved in the atonement and reconciliation wrought by Christ, "The objection I refer to discredits propitiation in the alleged interest of the love of God. 'We do not need', the objectors say, 'to propitiate an angry God. This is a piece of heathenism, of which a Christian ought to be ashamed. It is a libel on the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose name is love, and who waits to be gracious'. What are we to say to such words, which are uttered as boldly as if there were no possible reply, or rather as if the Apostles had never written, or had been narrow-minded unreceptive souls, who had not only failed to understand their Master, but had taught with amazing perversity the very opposite of what He taught on the most essential of all points - the nature of God and His relation to sinful men? We must say this. It is quite true that we have not to propitiate an offended God: the very fact upon which the Gospel proceeds is that we cannot do any such thing. But it is not true that no propitiation is needed. As truly as guilt is a real thing, as truly as God's condemnation of sin is a real thing, a propitiation is needed. And it is here, I think, that those who make the objection referred to part company, not only with St Paul, but with all the Apostles. God is love, they say, and therefore He does not require a propitiation. God is love, say the Apostles, and therefore He provides a propitiation. Which of these doctrines appeals best to the conscience? Which of them gives reality, and contents, and substance, to the love of God? Is it not the apostolic doctrine? Does not the other cut out and cast away that very thing which made the soul of God's love to Paul and John? 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins'. That is how they spoke in the beginning of the Gospel, and so let us speak."

68) 5:18-21

The preacher of the gospel is an ambassador of Christ (20). This means that he delivers a message he has received, and as he has received it; he is not at liberty to alter it or modify it in any way - this would be to handle the Word of God deceitfully (4:2). The integrity of his calling demands that he be faithful to what is committed to him. When he is, be he never so unknown, he is invested with an unquestionable authority and dignity. Gospel work is royal service, and the service imparts the authority. A man gripped and mastered by the gospel is one who partakes of its divine character and influence. All the more striking, therefore, is the contrast presented in the words, 'we beseech you' (20). As Calvin says, the idea of the ambassador descending to entreaty is an incomparable commendation of the grace of God. We may gather from this that an authoritative proclamation of the gospel is not inconsistent with a tender appeal and invitation. Ambassadors must combine both in themselves, and not err to extreme in either direction. It is possible to be too grim and austere in the authoritative declaration of the truth, on the one hand, but it is also possible to descend to the hopelessly sentimental in tender entreaty, in such a way that all sense of authority, and respect for the gospel, goes. We cannot sufficiently admire the balance in Paul's ministry, combining strength and authority with tremulous passion and tenderness. This also is the heritage of those that are given over to the gospel.

69) 5:18-21

Following on yesterday's thought here is a further comment from Denney: "The fire that burned in Christ's heart has caught hold in his; his soul is tremulous with passion; he is conscious of the grandeur of his calling, yet there is nothing that he would not do to win men for his message. It would go to his heart like a sword if he had to take up the old lament, 'Who hath believed our report?' In his dignity as Christ's ambassador and as the mouthpiece of God, in his humility, in his passionate earnestness, in the urgency and directness of his appeal, St Paul is the supreme type and example of the Christian minister. In the passage before us he presents the appeal of the Gospel in its simplest form: wherever he stands before men on Christ's behalf his prayer is, 'Be ye reconciled unto God'. And once more we must insist on the apostolic import of these words. It is the misleading nuance of 'reconcile' in English that makes so many take them as if they meant, 'Lay aside your enmity to God; cease to regard Him with distrust, hatred, and fear'; in other words, 'Show yourselves His friends'. In St Paul's lips they cannot possibly mean anything but, 'Accept His offered friendship; enter into that peace which He has made for the world through the death of His Son; believe that He has at infinite cost put away all that on His part stood between you and peace; receive the reconciliation.'"

70) 5:18-21

One further word remains to be said before we leave this tremendous passage. Each succeeding verse seems to excel the previous in sublime grandeur, and in 21 we have one of the profoundest utterances ever made by mortal man. This word is in fact the basis and foundation of reconciliation, in the sense that no reconciliation can be possible without atonement, for atonement is that act by which the divine wrath against sin is propitiated and turned away and the condemnation of man's sin annulled. Now it was God Who made Christ to be sin for us, that is, atonement was made from God's side in the man Christ Jesus. Propitiation was offered, and justification secured, by Christ, in His standing in for us as our substitute and sin-bearer. Furthermore, Paul's language indicates that a great divine 'exchange' took place in the death that Jesus died, an exchange which has been described by one of the early fathers thus: "Christ took upon Himself what was ours, in order that He might bestow upon us what was His". This is the force of the phrase 'Not imputing their trespasses unto them' in 19; the world's trespasses were imputed to Christ, and He bore them in His body on the tree. On the other hand, His righteousness is imputed to us, and in this blessed reality we are accepted of God in Him and for His sake. We are dressed in the righteousness of Christ, as He was in our sins. He died, that we might live. Blessed exchange indeed!

71) 6:1-4

What Paul says at the opening of this chapter clearly follows on from the last few verses of chapter 5: in 5:20 he has said "We pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" - a phrase which, as we have already seen, can only mean 'receive the reconciliation wrought for us in Christ's atoning work'; while here, in 6:1 he says, "We beseech you also that you receive not the grace of God in vain". This, then, is the full flowering of the whole general theme that we have been following in these readings, from chapter 2:14 onwards, on Christian witness and testimony and being 'workers together with God'. It may be useful at this point to look back on the themes that these chapters have dealt with, and the various emphases that have been underlined (see Note for Friday, 19 March for an annotation of the various themes unfolded by the apostle). Among these, we have underlined a) the need for a gospel to preach, and to preserve and to be faithful to that gospel; b) God leading us in triumph - 'the only triumphs we can ever have are those that begin with God's triumph over us'; c) Epistles of Christ - every Christian life should bear a message from Christ to the world; d) The Living ministry - spirit, not letter; e) The transfiguring Spirit; f) The Ministry of the gospel; g) Treasure in earthen vessels; h) The Law of spiritual harvest; i) The constraint of divine love; j) Reconciliation and atonement; k) Ambassadors for Christ. We are workers together with God, then, in this sense! We are used of Him as vehicles of His grace ('as though God did beseech you by us', 5:20). One thinks in this connection of our Lord's words in John 15:26, 27, "The Spirit of truth ... shall testify of Me, and ye also shall bear witness". Blessed partnership indeed!

72) 6:1-4

This is a word of great encouragement to all who labour in the gospel in offering God's reconciliation to men. We do not go to this warfare on our own charges. He Himself is with us, and as we work we are working with Him and He with us. We are caught up in the great enterprise of redemption, and it is this that should redeem our lives from all that is unworthy and ignoble - a constant necessity, in view of the tendency many have to make the conduct of ministers and Christians an excuse for not listening to the gospel (3). We must be careful, however, not to misinterpret what Paul says in 3. From one point of view it is impossible not to give offence in the ministry of the Word; indeed, it is a distinguishing mark of the faithful ministry that it does so. Jesus Himself said, "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you", and "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake". The offence, however, that Paul is referring to here is that which comes when a man's life does not match his profession. This, indicates the Apostle, is a charge that could not be levelled against him. The phrase in 1, 'receive not the grace of God in vain' refers to the refusal of the word of reconciliation in general, or the resistance of the Corinthians in particular to the message Paul preached to them (see 11:4). Commentators make special emphasis on the circumstances at Corinth, and doubtless this is the primary reference of the words, but they surely apply also to any resistance of God's grace in the gospel, whether by the unbeliever or the believer. What we should note most of all is that the appeal is based on the tremendous statement in 5:21. It is the fact of Christ being made sin for us that makes resistance to His grace so unthinkable!

73) 6:1-4

The reference at the end of yesterday's Note to the particular circumstances obtaining in Corinth at that time, while not limiting Paul's words only to Corinth, nevertheless needs some examination. For one thing, as may be seen from what is said later in the epistle, in 11:4 for example, the danger in Corinth seems to have been that believers were abandoning the doctrines of grace through which they had been saved, and were turning to other, non-apostolic, non-biblical doctrines. This means that they were abandoning the teaching of 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, for example in favour of something else. But the gospel was power unto salvation just because of Paul's particular interpretation in that passage, and when it is departed from, power departs. One has seen this happen in men's lives, men who used to be evangelical in thought and practice, and used and owned of God, but are now no longer so. Having departed from the truth they have lost their testimony: a spiritual blockage has occurred, and often 'Ichabod' has had to be written over their lives. This thought must stand alongside the more general understanding of receiving the grace of God in vain in the sense of not allowing that grace to do all its appointed work in our lives - our refusing to follow on to know the Lord, and allowing the Spirit to build up the new life in purity and power. In this regard we may well speak of the idea of a 'progressive' reconciliation, in terms of what Paul has already said in 2 Corinthians 3:18 about being changed progressively into the image of God, with an ongoing rehabilitation of the whole man.

74) 6:1-4

The parenthesis in 2 is a significant and challenging one. Paul bases his appeal to the Corinthians in 1 not to receive the grace of God in vain on this Old Testament reference from Isaiah 49:8. As it stands in the prophecy, it applies to the chosen servant of Jehovah, but Paul takes it up and applies it to the day of grace. The point he is making is not merely that now is the accepted time of salvation - there is a sense in which every time is now as far as the gospel is concerned - but rather that now - in such a reign of grace, foretold for so long in olden time and now come - is the time to let grace do its work. It is a most signally acceptable time (this is the force of the Greek word which bears a double emphasis in it). In the coming of Christ, in the accomplishment of the work of reconciliation and atonement, now is the time of favour. Also - now, when a) a full gospel proclaimed of reconciliation and atonement, now, when b) ambassadors beseech men to receive the reconciliation, now, when c) the crucified and risen Christ is placarded before men in lives that share His sufferings, now is the supremely acceptable time, and now the day of salvation - now, when men see what the gospel does in others, is it not a testimony to them, to pay heed and to receive the reconciliation!

75) 6:4-10

There is another important thought in 4. Paul speaks of approving himself as a minister of God. This is done in a twofold way. As we have already seen it involves a right and a true message preached (as cf 5:14ff). But - and this is the second point - this message does something to the man who preaches it: it makes him a right and true man. An identification takes place when working together with God is a reality. And if two cannot walk together except they be agreed, the man who works with Christ walks with Him, and in walking with Him becomes identified with Him and His pattern of living rubs off on us. Adopting the real biblical message means bearing the mark of the Lord Jesus in our bodies. This is the meaning of the remarkable autobiographical passage in 4b-10, giving substance to the words in 4:10, 'Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus'. This is what apostolic doctrine, rightly understood, and grasped, and believed, does to a man's life. It incorporates him into the 'work of Christ', which 'reflects' itself in his life so that Calvary is reenacted day by day before men to give credence to the message of the love of God.

76) 6:4-10

In the cost of discipleship and fruitful service Paul deals, as Denney points out, with different aspects of his ministry. In 4b and 5 he dwells on its passive side, and speaks of the things he was called upon to endure in the service of the gospel - how truly Christ's word to him on the Damascus Road was fulfilled when he warned him of how great things he must suffer for His Name's sake (Acts 9:16)! The record of his missionary journeys in Acts bears out the literal accuracy of the descriptions these words give. Then in 6 and 7a he speaks of the positive and active side of his life and witness, reminding us afresh that the bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus is ever accompanied by a manifestation of His risen life, and that suffering for Christ's sake releases a spiritual power and grace in the life that tells always and everywhere in demonstration of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 2:3, 4). Then, in an amazing series of contrasts (7b-10) he describes the conditions in which his ministry was fulfilled. We have read nothing more finely discriminating or more acutely perceptive than Denney's comments on these verses. In these contrasts, he says, "through the esteem of his friends, the malignity of his enemies, the contempt of strangers, the same man comes out in the same character, devoted always in the same spirit to the same calling. It is indeed his very devotion which produces these opposite estimates, and hence, inconsistent as they are, they agree in recommending him as a servant of God. Some said 'He is beside himself', and others would have plucked out their eyes for his sake, yet both these extremely opposite attitudes were produced by the very same thing - the passionate earnestness with which he served Christ in the gospel".

77) 6:11-13

What Paul says in these verses is directly related to the appeal in 6:1 not to receive the grace of God in vain. He makes it very plain what it is that is causing the Corinthians to receive the grace of God in vain, and what it is therefore that is rendering the Corinthians' testimony a questionable thing. There can be no question of his desire that the Corinthians should be fellow workers with him in the gospel; but it was their disaffection concerning him that was hindering this. And it was something in them, not something in him that was the source of the problem. They were, in effect, saying that they got little from Paul's ministry - this is the point of the reference in 12 to their being straitened. This charge against him was undoubtedly meant to cast a reflection on the Apostle: they were imputing fault to him and to his ministry. But Paul does not allow this to pass unchallenged: indeed the logic of his testimony lays the responsibility fairly and squarely on them. A man who lived as Paul did, so transparently, so dedicated to Christ and His gospel, could not have an ineffective ministry. His heart and life were given over to the service of God, and the gospel so mastered him that his heart was enlarged into a wide and clear channel for the grace of God to flow through to men (11). Handley Moule paraphrases these verses thus: "You are not straitened in respect of us; your sense of something lacking, something that withstands your joy and power, has nothing to do with us, as if our commission was uncertain, our devotion to you lukewarm or our message a mistake. You are straitened in respect of your own hearts, which have been distorted, and as it were shrunken, by this miserable false gospel so that you are afraid to take us and our message in". And so, Paul appeals to them, "Open your hearts to me as I have opened mine to you. This is the way to find blessing in my ministry". Well, this is very searching, isn't it? If the ministry that helps others is barren to you, this reading explains why.

78) 6:14-18

What was said in yesterday's Note forms the background to what follows in these verses. For the force of these strong and challenging words is that here the real, basic explanation of why they were receiving the grace of God in vain and were finding little in Paul's ministry. They had compromised their testimony, they had entered a backslidden state through complicity with the world. And so, in words that are devastating in the directness of their challenge (14-17), he summons them to a life of separation from all complicity with evil. He had already spelt this out very plainly in his first epistle to them. There (1 Corinthians 10), he had roundly challenged and summoned them to a life of consecration - abstinence from heathen banquets in idol temples and all complicity with such forbidden things - this was what the idea of 'living sacrifices' (Romans 12:1) was to mean for them. And it is to this he returns once again in these blunt and forthright words. The challenge about the 'unequal yoke' is often and inevitably applied to the question of marriage, and taken as forbidding any union between a believer and an unbeliever. This is certainly a legitimate and inevitable application of the words, for such a union can stultify and ruin a Christian testimony; but it is only one application of a divine directive which has a very wide reference and in itself is too narrow. Paul's words prohibit every kind of union in which the separate character and interest of the Christian can lose anything of their distinctiveness and integrity. This is a word that the Church seems to have all but forgotten in our day, so much so that the distinguishing between the Church and the world is so blurred as to be almost indistinguishable. So serious an issue cannot but occupy our attention, and we shall continue to discuss it in tomorrow's Note.

79) 6:14-18

James Denney, in his fine commentary on 2 Corinthians has some very trenchant things to say on this subject, pointing out that the words in 17, "Come out from among them ..." were originally addressed to the priests who, on the redemption of Israel from Babylon, were to carry the sacred temple vessels back to Jerusalem, but Paul puts his own meaning into them. 'The unclean thing' which no Christian is to touch refers to the fact that "We are to have no compromising connection with anything in the world which is alien to God. Let us be as loving and conciliatory as we please, but as long as the world is what it is, the Christian life can only maintain itself in it in an attitude of protest. There always will be things and people to whom the Christian has to say No! ... The assumption on which the demand not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers is based is that there are two ethical or spiritual interests in the world, and that these are fundamentally inconsistent with each other. This implies that in choosing the one, the other has to be rejected. But it implies more: it implies that at bottom there are only two kinds of people in the world - those who identify themselves with the one of these interests, and those who identify themselves with the other... And there is an instinct in those who are perfecting holiness in the fear of God which tells them, without in the least making them Pharisaical, not only what things, but what persons - not only what ideas and practices, but what individual characters - are not to be made friends of. It is no pride, or scorn, or censoriousness, which speaks thus, but the voice of all Christian experience."

80) 6:14-18

Denney continues: "It is worth noticing in the passage before us how the Apostle, starting from abstract ideas, descends, as he becomes more urgent, into personal relations. What fellowship have righteousness and lawlessness? None. What communion has light with darkness? None. What concord has Christ with Belial? Here the persons come in who are the heads, or representatives, of the opposing moral interests, and it is only now that we feel the completeness of the antagonism. The interest of holiness is gathered up in Christ; the interest of evil in the great adversary, and they have nothing in common. And so with the believer and the unbeliever. Of course there is ground on which they can meet: the same sun shines on them, the same soil supports them, they breathe the same air. But in all that is indicated by those two names - believer and unbeliever - they stand quite apart; and the distinction thus indicated reaches deeper than any bond of union. It is not denied that the unbeliever may have much that is admirable about him; but for the believer the one supremely important thing in the world is that which the unbeliever denies, and therefore the more he is in earnest the less can he afford the unbeliever's friendship. We need all the help we can get to fight the good fight of faith, and to perfect holiness in the fear of God; and a friend whose silence numbs faith, or whose words trouble it, is a friend no earnest Christian dare keep."

81) 6:14-18

The Apostle's words about separation, however, are open to misunderstanding, and have sometimes been misunderstood and misinterpreted. There is a right, biblical puritanism, which is strong and healthy, and indeed essential for one's spiritual well-being - as C.S. Lewis indicates in his book 'Letters to Malcolm', where he says:

"I am inclined to think a Christian would be wise to avoid, where he decently can, any meeting with people who are bullies, lascivious, cruel, dishonest, spiteful and so forth. Not because we are 'too good' for them. In a sense because we are not good enough. We are not good enough to cope with all the temptations, nor clever enough to cope with all the problems, which an evening spent in such society produces. The temptation is to condone, to connive at; by our words, looks and laughter, to 'consent'."

But there is also a puritanism that is wrong, and tends to dehumanise people. The disclosures given in the Press from time to time about the activities of some 'way-out' sects show to what foolish and fanatical extremes some are prepared to go in their mistaken conception of the biblical doctrine of separation. It must be insisted that it is not contact with the world, but complicity, that Paul warns against. The difficulty of course is where to draw the line, and opinions may differ in this, but the attempt must be made to do so, especially since this is a problem of practical importance in common daily life. We work, for example, with unbelievers, how then does this word apply to such a situation? Well, if our work is such that spiritual sympathy and fellowship with our fellows is essential for its proper performance, and is nevertheless not possible, then the issue should be clear. Separation must come, but if work can be done effectively without fellowship, a Christian may not withdraw. This is an important distinction, and one that needs to be very clear in our minds. Working in a godless office does not of itself constitute a valid reason for leaving, and a believer has no legitimate ground for looking for another job simply because there are no other Christians working beside him. It is this wrong kind of separation that brings reproach on evangelical testimony. Pressed to its logical conclusion, such an attitude would mean that Christians could have no kind of contact with unbelievers at all. And how in that case could believers be won to Christ?

82) 6:14-18

The radical nature of Paul's injunctions in these verses should not, however, blind us to the positive note which rings out in such glorious assurances in 16b and 18. One is prompted to say that the incentives to live a separated life represented by these verses surely far outweigh the cost of taking such a stand. Consider what the words "I will dwell in them and walk in them" convey: the image they conjure up is that of walking in a garden, and one thinks of the home in Bethany where Jesus felt so much 'at home' with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The picture conveyed by these words is of God being 'at home' in the life of a believer, and 'taking His leisure' in a heart in which He can 'be Himself'. On the human level we all know the immense boon it is to have a home to which we can freely go and relax completely in the knowledge that we are unreservedly welcomed there. And the natural intimacy of fellowship which we can enjoy on such occasions is probably the nearest thing to heaven on this earth, and we could not prize it highly enough. It is this kind of intimacy that Paul is referring to on the spiritual level. It is true that God is a Father in a special way to all believers, but sometimes believers, by the quality of their lives do not allow Him to be much of a Father to them. There are too many things in the way for God ever to feel free enough to give Himself to them as unreservedly as He wants to. This manifest and conscious indwelling of God is conditional upon an attitude of separation in the believer's life, and Paul holds up before the Corinthians the blessed prospect of the divine indwelling in this sense as an incentive to them to have done with any complicity with the world.

83) 7:1

We come with this verse to the final study in the present series of readings on the nature of the Christian ministry and testimony, which began at 2:14. It gives us the Apostle's final, affectionate exhortation to the Corinthians, based on the promises he has just underlined in the last verses of the previous chapter. And there is a sense in which he comes full circle in the thought implied in the words 'perfecting holiness in the fear of God'. It will be remembered how the Apostle speaks in 2:15,16 of lives being a sweet savour of Christ, bearing an unmistakable fragrance that speaks persuasively of Him; and this is really the thought expressed in the root meaning of the word 'holiness'. The scholars tell us that the word has a twofold connotation: on the one hand it conveys the idea of separation - and this, of course, has been amply emphasised in 6:14-18, in the summons to what we have called 'New Testament puritanism' - and on the other it conveys the idea of brightness. The two ideas are integrally connected, for when a true New Testament separation takes place, it brings a radiance to a man's life. As Denney puts it, "the puritanism of the New Testament is no harsh, repellent thing which eradicates the affections and makes life bleak and barren; it is the condition under which the heart is opened to the love of God, and filled with all comfort and joy in obedience". And the message that comes over to us clear and plain is simply this: Make room for God, and allow Him to 'be Himself' in our hearts and lives. How could we doubt but that this will do something to our ministry and our testimony alike, and magnify the Saviour whose Name we bear.

84) 7:2-7

Paul reverts again to the appeal given in 6:11 "Make room for us in your hearts" he means. This is very telling, for in fact the Corinthians had shut their hearts against him and against the message he preached because of this disaffection. We might be shocked at this if we did not realise how common it is in the Christian Church today. There are times when men grit their teeth against the incoming of the Word until it almost seems as if (and in all probability it is the case) their whole being is gripped by an evil power. Paul's protestations that he had wronged no man nor harmed any may refer to the disturbance caused by the "demands" of his gospel. The truth is no one can preach as Paul did without upsetting people. But what must be realised is that the "upsets" come because men refuse the challenge of the gospel. As John puts it in his Epistle (1 John 5:3), Christ's commands are not grievous, except to those who are not prepared to obey them. One thinks of the reaction of the rich young ruler to the challenge of Jesus as a case in point. He was disturbed, appalled by the inexorable summons to the self-denial and cross-bearing, but that was his, not the gospel's fault. Christ did not wrong him; he wronged himself. And those who thus refuse the challenge of the Word are always their own worst enemies.

85) 7:2-7

What was said in yesterday's Note has an important bearing on the charge that is sometimes made by those who should know better against the influence of evangelical preaching. It is sometimes said by members of the medical profession, and particularly those practicing psychiatry, that too much religion tends to unbalance people mentally. The fact that this idea is gaining currency necessitates some plain speaking on the subject. One is very much afraid that this kind of dishonest thinking arises from the fact that some men want the gospel to be put in the wrong and are determined not to see anything good in it. It is not true that evangelical ministry disturbs unstable souls. Two things need to be remembered. Those who are constitutionally unstable and mentally unbalanced are liable to be adversely influenced by any emotional stress, religious or otherwise. Any type of stress or conflict can precipitate psychological disorder in those with inherent unstable characteristics. It is common knowledge, for example, that love affairs can cause serious mental disorder; but this does not condemn love or love affairs as such. Should the gospel be condemned on these grounds, then? The second thing is this: Paul's words, "We have harmed no man" express a profound truth. The gospel is essentially life-giving and health-giving. Its proclamation is, "Christ Jesus maketh thee whole". When therefore religion seems to affect people adversely, either it is not true religion or else they are not rightly adjusted to it. Some psychological disorders occur not because there has been too much religion but too little; it is not the gospel, but resistance to its claims, that has set up the tensions and stresses that lead to breakdown. Psychiatrists know this; this is why their strictures against evangelical preaching are so thoroughly contemptible.

86) 7:2-7

In 5 Paul returns to something he mentioned in 2:10ff, namely the unrest in his spirit which, as we saw, so knocked the heart out of him that he could not preach the gospel, even when a door of opportunity stood open for him. What is in his mind here is clearly the letter he wrote to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians) - this is borne out in 8. Having written so sternly to them, out of strong conviction, he had begun to wonder whether his letter would aggravate the situation rather than help it. Doubtless he found himself wishing he had not written it or wondering whether he should have done so. It is during the waiting time, before the issue is known, that such unrest assails the spirit. Nor is Satan inactive in this. (The association of ideas is significant in this connection in 2:11-13.) He is a past master in enlarging any situation and distorting it until our minds become almost obsessed with it. This is probably Paul's point in 5b. All the more important therefore that we should learn to recognise the devil's baleful influence and refuse to allow our minds to be bludgeoned by his irrationalities. In this case Paul was comforted and assured by the timely intervention of God (6, 7) and His loving-kindness broke through the midnight of the Apostle's soul. When we sit in the semi-darkness, lit only by the flickering embers of a dying fire, the shadows on the walls appear grotesque and lurid, not to say frightening; but when the light is switched on they disappear, or at least resume their proper shape. This is what the coming of God's light does to every situation; Satan's distortions are banished.

87) 7:8-11

Paul makes a distinction here between "sorrow" as such and "sorrow after a godly manner", and it is very essential for us to grasp it. To repent is something more than to be sorry for sin, although this is included in it. It is not so much an emotional as a moral and spiritual fact. As Denney says, "all sin sooner or later brings a sense of loss with it, but this is not repentance". To say "I have played the fool" as King Saul said, and to realise it, however painful and humiliating it may be, does not mean that a man is necessarily repenting. The bitterness of soul that can come in such an experience is often very far from the regenerative influences which real repentance always initiates in the heart. To know that one has fallen away from grace and from the friendship of God, and to want back - this is the beginning of true repentance. Anything less works death, not life. An excellent illustration may be found in the contrast afforded by the experience of Peter and Judas Iscariot. It is a mistake to think that it was because Peter's sin was less heinous than Judas's that he was forgiven and Judas was not. Both sins were black as hell; the difference lies in the fact that Peter sorrowed after a godly manner, and Judas did not. Judas went out in bitterness of soul, but Peter wanted back into the friendship of the Lord. There was - and is - an eternity of difference between the two attitudes.

88) 7:12-16

The Apostle's reconciliation with the Corinthians is now complete. The effect of his letter had been to clear up all misunderstanding, and indeed to end the distressing estrangement which had caused him so much grief. They now knew more fully than before how deeply he cared for their best interests, and the consciousness of such care had won them over. This was the news that Titus had brought back to Paul, and he was the better assured that all was well when he learned how they had received Titus - in fear and trembling (15). Denney, quoting Calvin here, has a choice passage which is too good to be omitted: "This" says Calvin, "is the true way to receive ministers of Christ: and it is this only which will gladden a true minister's heart. Sometimes, with the most innocent intention, the whole situation is changed, and the minister though received with the utmost courtesy and kindness, is not received with fear and trembling at all. Partly through his own fault, and partly through the fault of others, he ceases to be the representative of anything that inspires reverence, or excites to conscientious earnestness of conduct. If, under these circumstances, he continues to be kindly treated, he is apt to end in being, not the pastor but the pet lamb of his flock. In apostolic times there was no danger of this, but modern ministers and modern congregations have sometimes thrown away all possibilities of good in their mutual relations by disregarding it. The affection which they ought to have to each other is Christian, not merely natural, controlled by spiritual ideas and purposes, and not a matter of ordinary good feeling; and where this is forgotten, all is lost".

89) 8:1-7

Chapter 8 introduces a new subject which continues through to the end of chapter 9, the collection for the saints at Jerusalem. Paul has already mentioned this in the first epistle (1 Corinthians 16:1ff), and now turns to deal with it in detail. We should be grateful to him for such clear and decisive teaching about Christian giving. The principles underlined in these chapters are sorely in need of being applied and implemented in the life of the Church today. There are two points of the first importance in these verses which must be firmly grasped if any true understanding of Christian liberality is to be arrived at. First of all, Paul sets the whole matter of giving in its proper perspective in the grace of God. His opening words, "We want you to know of the grace of God bestowed on the Churches of Macedonia" make it plain that for Paul all Christian giving has a spiritual basis. Where grace abounds in the lives of men, liberality will be one unmistakable fruit of that grace. In Macedonia it was not the fact that the believers were affluent that explained the generosity of their givings. On the contrary, they were in deep poverty, and it was out of poverty that they gave so sacrificially (2). It is this example that Paul holds up to the Corinthians. "This is what I want you to be like", he means (7). "Only let the grace of God have the same free course in your lives as it has in the Churches of Macedonia, and there will be no fear of your generosity lacking in any way."

90) 8:1-7

The second point to notice, particularly in these verses is that the believers in Macedonia "first gave their own selves to the Lord" (5). This is the real crux, not only in the matter of liberality but in everything else in the Christian life. Whenever you get people giving themselves to Christ you have by that fact solved once for all the question of finance in the Church. And no programme of stewardship can hope to solve the problem of lack of funds until it comes to grips with the central need in the life of the Church. It is not lack of good sound schemes and plans for the raising of money, but lack of men and women who have given themselves to the Lord and who recognise that they are not their own, but bought with a price, that is the real problem facing the Church today. The schemes may be excellent in themselves, as schemes. They do not fail as schemes; they fail because they do not plumb the depths of the problem. What we need is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit bringing the grace of God as a reality into the life of our congregations. When this has happened in the past, it has solved automatically so many of the problems that seem to be vexing us, and whose answer seems to elude us today, try what we will. When men give themselves to the Lord, they do not count the cost; everything is the Lord's, and they are free and generous with their money, to the point of sacrifice.

91) 8:8-9

Having held up the example of the Macedonians to the Corinthians, Paul now goes further and cites the example of our Lord Himself. This crystallizes what was said in yesterday's Note and defines the true inspiration of everything in the Christian life. The man who has a living sense of what he owes to the self-giving and self-emptying of the Son of God is forever delivered from any meanness of spirit. Perhaps the best commentary on these tremendous words in 9 is the well-known passage in Philippians (2:5-11) which speaks of the downward movement of Christ from the glory to the Cross. Christ was rich in the sense that in His pre-incarnate existence He was in the form of God and equal with God as the second person of the Trinity, rich in that all the angels and archangels bowed in worship before His glory and majesty, rich in the fellowship He had with the Father. Perhaps the deepest thing that can be said in this connection is that riches are not "things" but personal relationships. The glory of Christ did not lie in all the accompaniments and accoutrements of regal splendour, but in the ineffable and unspeakable intimacy of His fellowship with the Father. It was this that He laid aside for us men and for our salvation. The measure of how poor He became is seen, not in the lowly manger of Bethlehem, but in the desolate cry from the Cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" This is the great example, says Paul, which should guide us in our liberality. As Isaac Watts puts it in his great hymn,

"Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

92) 8:10-15

Paul proceeds now to enunciate the laws by which God estimates liberality. First of all, there must be a "readiness of will" and "a willing mind". In 9:7 he says God loves a cheerful giver, and this is the point here. Grudging liberality is a contradiction in terms; it is also a grief to God, Who would rather not have our gifts at all than have them grudged. Grudged money, grudged time or grudged service, these are never acceptable to Him, and He would much rather do without them; not only does He not need them, but they are a hindrance to His work. They get in the way of the furtherance of His purposes. Secondly, giving is accepted according to what a man has, not what he has not. The story of the widow's mite underlines this, it is not what we give but the spirit in which we give it. A little from one who is poor may represent a far more realistic spirit of sacrifice than a great deal from someone who is rich enough never to miss it. Thirdly, there is the question of reciprocity, that is to say, there is a mutual, two-way traffic in Christian fellowship. Paul does not mean that we are to give sacrificially and become burdened in order to help those who are better off than ourselves, nor that the giving should always be one-sided, nor that when it necessarily is one-sided so far as financial aid is concerned it should also be one-sided as far as the expression of gratitude is concerned. It is possible to become so used to receiving that saying "thank you" is forgotten, and few things are so grieving to a generous heart as being taken for granted. It is a measure of Christian grace that we should not allow ourselves to forget this necessary expression of thankfulness, not only to God but also to our fellows. To fail to show that grace is the sign of something seriously - critically - wrong in the spiritual life.

93) 8:16-24

These verses describe the three messengers appointed to visit Corinth to complete the arrangements about the collection for the saints at Jerusalem. Titus was the obvious man to lead the deputation, he had already won the confidence of the saints there on his previous visit. Two others, not named were to go with him, men who had the complete confidence of the Apostle and warmly commended by him to the Corinthians as "messengers of the Churches and the glory of Christ" a phrase which in Paul's use of it must mean that they magnified the Saviour by the quality of their devotion to the gospel. Commentators point out that Paul is implicitly answering the hinted criticisms that had been made against him by some in Corinth that he was perhaps personally interested in the collection and was not above benefiting himself out of it (see 12:17, 18). Thus, in 20, 21, he is at pains to let it be seen that everything is above board; it is not sufficient that his own conscience be clear in the matter; he must persuade men also that all he does is above board. This is of course a wise and necessary principle in Christian work; we can never be too careful about money matters in the work of the Lord, whether it be the auditing of accounts in Churches or missions, or the more personal responsibilities we may have in various directions. No one can afford to assume that his own trustworthiness is above suspicion; rather he should welcome the opportunity to have it confirmed beyond doubt, and take steps to do so when it is called in question.

94) 9:1-5

The tone of Paul's argument now seems to change. He appears to be playing off the Corinthians and the Macedonians against one another. He had said to the Macedonians that Achaia (the Corinthians) had been ready a year previously to help with the collection, and this had provoked the Macedonians to give so liberally; now, in turn, he had held up the latter's response to the Corinthians as an incentive to their generous giving. Some have charged Paul with appealing to illegitimate motives here, but surely the best way to interpret his meaning is to realise that a gentle smile is playing on his face as he writes. It is almost as if he were teasing them playfully about something the outcome of which was no longer in doubt. He knew that they would be generous in their giving, and when he said, in effect, "Look what the Macedonians are doing; you must not let them beat you", he was not being terribly serious, but simply reminding them of a promise they had made. The force, then, of 6 would be: "seriously though ...", and he then returns to a more urgent tone. That this is a probable interpretation seems to be borne out by what is said in 5 about their giving being a "matter of bounty", as it could not have been if he had seriously intended to set them off against each other in such a way as to make them vie with one another. It would be difficult to see how any other view could be taken after the clear indication he had given them in chapter 8 about the true inspiration of Christian liberality lying in the grace of God.

95) 9:6-9

In serious tone, then Paul feels he must say this one thing to them: "He that soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly". Here again is a principle that is valid for all spiritual life, and one which is emphasised again and again in the Scriptures (cf Luke 7:36, 16:9). Charity, used either in the narrow meaning given to it today, or in its wider significance, is really an investment that earns interest and brings returns. If we do not invest much or wisely, the yield will be correspondingly low and poor. We are not of course to give with the hope of gain in view; indeed we are expressly warned by Christ to give, hoping for nothing again. But this does not alter the fact that when we do give in a right spirit, inspired by the grace of God and constrained by the love of Christ there is a harvest. In 7 Paul indicates how we are to give - not on impulse or as an after-thought, but purposively, thinking it all out and planning methodically, guided and actuated by the true motives and inspirations, so that there will be no question of grudging anything to the Lord's work on the one hand, or feeling it incumbent to give simply in order to keep up appearances or "keep up with the Joneses". The word "cheerful" is the Greek counterpart of our English word "hilarious" and surely indicates the exuberance and thrill which should fill us as we realise the privilege that is ours in being permitted in any way to share in the work of the gospel.

96) 9:6-9

When this right spirit is maintained in giving, certain things always follow. The NEB translates 8 thus: "It is in God's power to provide you richly with every good gift; thus you will have ample means in yourselves to meet each and every situation with enough and to spare for every good cause". This is always true; nor need it be thought miraculous that God should provide enough and to spare. The reason is clear; a believer saved by the grace of God is a man who lives a certain kind of life, and one of the things that happen to him is that his needs and his "wants" become simplified. There is a new discipline at work which qualifies his spending on himself and on certain pleasures and habits, and inevitably sets free a great deal of money for wiser stewardship. If we cannot afford to give to foreign missions or to the poor and needy or for Christian literature, it is time a careful examination was made of our personal income and expenditure account. It stands to reason that if a man when saved by grace stops smoking, drinking and gambling on the horses and the pools, there is bound to be a great deal more money available for all sorts of things there was no money for before. Think of the enormous sums of money that would become available in one year for the work of the Church and the gospel if all the ministers and elders in Scotland who smoked stopped!

97) 9:10-15

The NEB translation of 10 runs thus: "Now He who provides seed for sowing and bread for food will provide the seed for you to sow; He will multiply it and swell the harvest of your benevolence and you will always be rich enough to be generous". Paul means that if we really have a charitable spirit, God will always provide the means of expressing it more and more. It is the fruit of this generous spirit that occupies the Apostle's mind in the remaining verses of the chapter. For one thing, he says, it is a harvest of thanksgiving to God. Not only does a believer's generous giving meet an immediate need in the Lord's work (12); it may do far more; it may lift a great cloud from a discouraged heart and turn it into one full of thankfulness and praise to God. As Denney puts it, "How much more it is to change the tune of (a believer's) spirit, and whereas we found him cheerless or weak in faith, to leave him gratefully praising God". This is a ministry open to many, and should not be left to unusual or special promptings of the Spirit for its inspiration. Doubtless the Spirit does sometimes prompt in specific ways in this connection, but perhaps He would have to do so less if believers who were in a position to do so made this a matter of stewardship and enlightened spiritual thoughtfulness. The true attitude here should be that expressed by King David when he said (2 Samuel 9:1) "Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" Is there someone in the Lord's work that you could do such a kindness to today? Think!

98) 9:10-15

Another fruit of this generous spirit in the Gentile Christians was that the Jewish Christians, who had long had misgivings about the admission of the Gentiles into the Kingdom of God and were suspicious of them, would certainly be disarmed and their reservations swept away by such a demonstration of loving care towards those they had never met. If this did not convince the Church at Jerusalem that grace had wrought a change in the Gentiles, what would? (13) As one rendering puts it, "Through the proof which this affords many will give honour to God when they see how humbly you obey Him and how faithfully you confess the Gospel of Christ" How could they continue to condemn as Godless those in whom the Spirit of God was so manifestly at work for their good?

Another fruit of their giving was that a spirit of true and blessed fellowship was promoted between the Jewish and Gentile Christians (14). Those at Jerusalem were longing to see those on whom God's grace was resting so abundantly. Giving, whether of money, time or talents, of love or understanding, not only meets a need at the time, it creates fellowship and brings forth love and compassion, deepening the bonds that bind believers to one another and to Christ. This may be more significant than we realise for the Church's concern over unity in our time. This kind of "coming together" has a spiritual origin; it is born in self-giving to Christ (8:5) and is the fruit and expression of a spiritual dedication without which it could never have come into being. According to the teaching of the New Testament, it is spiritual awakening that leads to unity, not unity to spiritual awakening. This is worth thinking about.

99) 10:1-6

This chapter begins another new section of the epistle, in which the Apostle deals with the really disaffected element in the Corinthian Church. In chs 1-7 he had courageously aired the difficulty about the gross sinner in the fellowship and had effected a complete reconciliation. Now he proceeds to deal with "the opposition". This is interesting and significant. Paul was not one to cover up difficulties, and pretend that they were not there. He was too real for that. Titus, who had brought favourable and reassuring news about the other matter (7:9-11) had also brought a disquieting report about Paul's authority being questioned by a minority in Corinth, and possibly led by one man. His concern therefore is to vindicate his apostolic authority. The opening verse indicates the kind of detraction and smear they were making against Paul. This is what they said about him "He is humble enough in our presence, but bold when he is at a safe distance away". The charge of not having the courage of his own convictions would cut to the quick a lesser man than the great Apostle; but only a very great man could reply as he did beseeching them by the meekness and gentleness of Christ to come to a better frame of mind. It is always a danger, in such a situation as this, to enlist one's temper in the vindication of one's authority, and it says much for Paul's crucified heart that he should have taken their insult so calmly and with such detachment. It is a sign of the greatest kind of moral and spiritual victory to refuse to allow other people's attitude to us to influence our attitude to them. It is extraordinary that the "meekness and gentleness" of Christ in one of His servants should sometimes be mistaken for weakness and doubtless there was some tendency towards this in Corinth, and, as if to assure them of their error, Paul says in 2, "So order your conduct now that I may be spared the pain of demonstrating how wrong you were in thinking I would be weak and humble to their face". Meekness is strong enough to cow the boldest of rebels against the authority of God and His servants!

100) 10:1-6

The use of the word "flesh" in 2, 3, and in the New Testament generally needs to be understood. There are two meanings, which are brought out very clearly in the two adjectives that come from the noun "sarkinos" and "sarkikos". The first of these refers to human existence as such in the old order. Paul means by this word that he spends his life in this human nature with all its capacity for wrong and sinful behaviour, as all men do. He walks "in the flesh", but the second word refers not only to fallen human nature but to that in it which is against God. It is expressed graphically in Romans 8:7, "The carnal mind is enmity against God". This is what it means to walk "according to the flesh" or "after the flesh". Paul's point here is that although he is like other men subject to the weaknesses and frailty of fallen human nature, he is not ruled by it, but rules it, by grace. This is a word that applies not only to his association with the Corinthians, but to the whole of his experience and ministry. Significantly, he refers to the latter as warfare, and this reminds us of the often forgotten truth that there is a battle to be won first in our own hearts before we can work for God, and the flesh done to death before strongholds can be pulled down elsewhere (see Hymn 531 in RCH). It is a bad thing when some elements of the military go over to the enemy and fight against us instead of for us. To change the metaphor slightly, it is often the spiritual fifth column within us that betrays our "war-effort" and renders our service for God ineffectual.

101) 10:1-6

The nature of Paul's language in describing the work of the ministry is suggestive and significant. Taken together with his statements in 4:3, 4, his words here make very plain the real issues that confront the evangelist or teacher of the Word as he seeks to persuade men. It is no mere intellectual matter solved when men's ignorance is answered or their intelligence satisfied with the truth of the Gospel. The fact is, men erect barriers in their hearts against God, and barricade themselves to withstand the coming of His Word to their consciences. Rightly understood, the work of the Gospel is the laying of a siege against the strongholds of men's hearts, and reducing them to absolute surrender to Christ, and this is what Paul means by the terminology he uses in these verses. The issue is moral and spiritual, and this is why no fleshly, carnal weapon can hope to prevail in gospel work. How should it be supposed that the pride of reason that exalts itself against the knowledge of God could ever be subdued by the enlistment of doubtful, fleshly expedients? Prayer and the preaching of the Word - these are the weapons by which God storms the bastions of human pride and leads men into the obedience of Christ. This is true evangelistically, in relation to the winning of unbelievers to Him, and also in the further work of progressive sanctification. There are always new tracts of our experience that require to be subdued and submitted to the Lordship of Christ. As in a major military operation, even when the decisive battle of the campaign has been fought and won, "mopping-up operations" continue for long afterwards, and in the spiritual life there are always fresh "pockets of resistance" discovered, and need to be dealt with.

102) 10:7-11

What lies behind these somewhat difficult verses seems to be the claim someone in Corinth was making that he was Christ's in a way that was meant to disparage Paul and belittle his authority. This subtle - and sometimes not so subtle - suggestion of spiritual authority is a common enough tendency even today, and it can be answered now as Paul did then by an appeal to the facts. In Corinth, it was probably a Jewish Christian who claimed to have known Christ in the days of His flesh, and on this account assumed a spiritual superiority. This of course is, as we have already seen previously, to misunderstand the whole point of the gospel, which stresses the spiritual relationship with the risen and exalted Christ as the basis of true spiritual experience, not recollection of a historical figure (See Note on 5:16,17, Sat. 20th July.) Here, however, the Apostle simply points to the fruits of his ministry and the vindication of his Apostolic authority. It is probable that the true rendering of 1 should be in the imperative: "Do look at things which stare you in the face" (J.B. Phillips). Denney renders it likewise, and goes on "The obvious facts in Corinth discredit the Judaists and support me." The fact is, every mark of true Christianity in Corinth was the fruit of Paul's ministry there. This is something that Paul's critics should have had the grace to remember, and it is something that those who disparage and belittle the ministries of some of God's best and most honoured servants today should remember also. A simple comparison of the plain and unmistakable fruits of those who criticise and those who are criticised is all that should be necessary to put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.

103)10:12-18

Paul hastens in 12 to disclaim any desire to commend himself or to arrogate any spiritual authority to himself to which he was not entitled (which is what those of "superior spirituality" were doing, to his disparagement, in Corinth). His concern has only been to defend himself against them. In doing so, he sets in sharp relief the error and folly of his opposers (13) in making themselves the only standard by which to judge themselves. This can never make for accurate estimation. We remember an example of this odd and really unintelligent attitude in one young Christian who had been brought up within one particularly strict religious environment to believe and assume as a matter of course, that there were no other Christians anywhere else: J.B. Phillips translates 13, "No, we shall not make any wild claims, but simply judge ourselves by that line of duty which God has marked out for us, and that line includes our work on your behalf". Paul was conscious that God had appointed him a sphere (measure) of service, which included working in Corinth, and he was not going beyond his remit, or exaggerating his authority, in acting as an apostle should among them (14). An interesting and significant point emerges however in 15, where he indicates very gently but nonetheless pointedly that God had other and further work for him to do, but that he was being hindered from doing it because of all the difficulties the Corinthians had put in its way. It was the weakness of their faith, and the multitude of their problems that had thus far hindered and prevented him going further afield in the preaching of the gospel. He hoped, however, as their faith grew stronger, he would be set free to carry the gospel beyond them to Italy and Spain. A devastating rebuke indeed for these proud Corinthians who thought so much of themselves, but a much needed one!

104) 1:1-3

The 'folly' spoken of in 1 refers to the thought of boasting in 10:13 which their criticism had forced from him. He found it necessary to state his claims at length because of their readiness to accept novel and false teaching. His appeal here is based on the feeling of jealousy in his heart - Godly jealousy. Paul's feeling was nothing unworthy or lacking in Christian grace, but akin to the attitude expressed in the words, "I, the Lord, am a jealous God". It was not that he could not bear to see his spiritual children grow up and assert their independence of him. No one would have been more glad than he that believers should become mature and be able to stand on their own feet; it was rather that he saw this throwing off of his influence and haughty assertion of their independence in the way they did as an unmistakable evidence that they were still very immature. The fact is, when you eventually become independent of someone who has been a strong influence for good in your life, you do not despise him or become contemptuous of him, you love him all the more, and independence brings a new and even deeper intimacy of fellowship, not estrangement. This is the explanation of Paul's anxious concern about the Corinthians. It was not that his personal influence should have been on the wane that troubled him, but that the work that had been done in their souls was being endangered. His work among them had been that of a friend of the bridegroom, to introduce them to Christ, and present them as a chaste bride to Him (cf John 3:29, Ephesians 5:25-27, Jude 24), He was naturally most unwilling that this work should now be put in jeopardy by any false teachers. Is this not understandable?

105) 1:1-4

The reason of course why a situation like this should ever have arisen in Corinth is that there is a devil who makes it his business to introduce dissension and trouble of this nature into the life of the Church. It is as if the Apostle were quoting our Lord's own words and saying "an enemy hath done this" - this is always the deepest word about such a situation. The simplicity that is in Christ, from which he feared they had been beguiled, may be understood in two ways. It can refer in the first place to their first simple loyalty to Christ - in the sense that the Church at Ephesus lost it (see Revelation 2:4) but it can also refer to their wholehearted acceptance of Christ as Paul had preached Him to them, and of the true Biblical understanding of His Person and work. That this is at least in part his meaning seems likely from what he goes on to say in 4, in the reference to "another Jesus" and "another Gospel". This is something which is very relevant in the Church today, as the following quotation from a letter to the Editor of the "Scotsman" only the other day shows: this written by a Minister of the Church! "After all, the good news of Christianity is not that stereotyped scheme of salvation expressed by this sect and that, it is, rather, loving-kindness in action, compassion, charity, brotherly goodwill. These things are brought into light - not in the gridiron of historic declaration but in the released resolving of 'Man's inhumanity to man!'. This, then, is the issue; for this is, there can be no question, "another Gospel" than that preached by the Apostle Paul. How are we to know which is right, and which to believe. This is a legitimate question, to which there is a simple and conclusive answer: The only Gospel that has a right to the name "Christian" is that preached by the Apostles. Now there is a uniform testimony in the New Testament to the message they proclaimed; it related to the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ; it asserted a "plan" of salvation based on His "finished" work, and offered forgiveness through "this Man", crucified, risen and exalted to the right hand of God. True, this is to "theorise" about the facts recorded in the Gospels, to interpret them, but then, the facts can have no kind of significance until some interpretation is put on them, and this is in fact the interpretation the apostles placed upon the facts, and it is their interpretation of them that makes them a Gospel: And we are not at liberty to put another interpretation on them and call that a Gospel. If we make the facts mean something else and something less than they meant to the apostles, we are guilty of preaching "another Jesus" and "another Gospel", and are in danger of incurring the apostolic anathema (Galatians 1:9).

106) 11:5-12

These verses refer to the charges Paul's detractors had brought against him in their attempt to undermine his authority in Corinth. The first was a contemptuous slur upon his "rudeness of speech". This Paul was quite prepared to concede to them, but then to him the real point in preaching was not a question of fine oratory, but the unction of the Holy Spirit. Rude he might be in speech, but it carried the impress of the Spirit of God (see 1 Corinthians 2:4). The second was a mean and scurrilous innuendo. He had preached the Gospel without charge in Corinth, refusing to claim any maintenance from the Corinthians. This, however, his enemies explained by the implication that he was afraid to live by his work, as the other apostles did, because he knew it was not what he intended it to be. "The fact", they said, "that he claims no maintenance shows he has a bad conscience". Earlier, they had levelled the base insinuation against him of having financial interest in the Gospel, and now when he is at pains to be financially independent of the Gospel so as to avoid any such charge, this is what they say! But they cannot have it both ways. Yet, such people are determined to have it both ways. The fact is, when men are determined to find fault, all the canons of logic and even of common sense are violated. The servant of God has not been born who can remain unscathed, whatever he does, when men are intent on vilifying him and imputing unworthy and base motives to him. After all, they said that Jesus had a devil and was casting out devils by the Prince of devils!

107) 11:13-15

The reference at the end of yesterday's Note is timely, for when men come to the point of imputing godliness to the power of the devil, it is a sure sign that the prince of darkness is hard at work in them. Nor is Paul slow to challenge his detractors with being messengers of Satan. The particular satanic activity Paul refers to here is that of appearing as an angel of light to deceive God's people. This is the most dangerous kind of device he can employ, using light, not darkness as his disguise. In this connection it is significant that at the beginning of the chapter Paul speaks of the deception of Eve in the Garden of Eden, for in Genesis 3, the word "serpent" in the story means literally "the shining one", and it would seem that the Tempter appeared to her as an angel of light, deceiving her with what appeared to be spiritual and good. She was made to think that the tree was good for food, and pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise. It was light, not darkness, that deceived her. The principle underlying this is surely plain. If you are going to commit forgery, obviously a child's imitation of a £5 banknote will not get you far, but one that is identical in every detail may deceive even the experts. The closer to the real thing, the likelier is the forgery to be successful. By this token we should learn that Satan's best successes and greatest dangers lie not in low forms of evil (how unlike the good these are!) but in the high, where the possibility of deception is very real and, except to the most discerning, almost inevitable. Satan's best and most effective disguise is as an angel of light.

108) 11:16-21a

An alternative translation is almost essential here for a true appreciation of the force of Paul's words, and the NEB rendering will be found particularly helpful. It reads thus: "I repeat; let no one take me for a fool; but if you must, then give me the privilege of a fool, and let me have my little boast like others, I am not speaking here as a Christian, but like a fool, if it comes to bragging. So many people brag of their earthly distinctions that I shall do so too. How gladly you bear with fools, being yourselves so wise: If a man tyrannises over you, exploits you, gets you in his clutches, puts on airs, and hits you in the face, you put up with it. And we, you say, have been weak: I admit the reproach." The reference here is, of course, to those who had supplanted Paul's influence and authority in Corinth, and with fine scorn, the Apostle exposes how completely they, who claimed such gifts of discernment, had been taken in by these false apostles. "You call yourselves wise, yet you suffer fools gladly" (19), men who have lorded it over you, (one thinks of the ruthless and merciless grip the false sects have over their hapless adherents) taking advantage over you and being obnoxiously overbearing in the fellowship. Compared with their behaviour, Paul's stood in absolute contrast, for he exercised a tender pastoral concern over them. "Compare my treatment of you with theirs. If that is strength, and this weakness, then I am weak, I admit the reproach." The holy sarcasm in his tone should not be missed. It is an effective introduction to his "boasting" in what follows.

109) 11:21b-29

The ground of Paul's "boast" if it could ever truly so be called, lies in the comparison he makes between his own ministry and that of his opponents. Clearly, they had been claiming superiority on the basis of their being Hebrews, Israelites, of the seed of Abraham (that is, standing in a special relation, as Jewish Christians to Christ). They prided themselves on their birth; that was all there was to it. And Paul dismisses the claim in a word, reminding them that he too could claim exactly what they claimed, but that this was really irrelevant. The real mark of a minister of Christ is not in the accident of his birth - nor indeed in the last analysis, in what he believes and preaches but in the effect his beliefs have on his life and service for Christ, and in the fellowship he shares with Christ in His sufferings. Paul's words here are an eloquent commentary on his earlier verses in 4:7-12. It is as if he were saying, "Do you not recall what Jesus said, 'Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you for My sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven.' That is what a true servant of God is taught to expect. Now look at my experience in the work of the gospel. All this has happened to me. Does this not clearly show that I am indeed an apostle?" This is in fact an unanswerable argument (used also in Galatians 6:17). He bore in his body the marks of these sufferings, and they were the marks of the Lord Jesus, authenticating his apostleship in a way nothing else could possibly have. Not what he had achieved (though that was a very great deal!) but what he had suffered for Christ's sake - that was the ground of his glorying; not his strength but his weakness. And is it not the weakness of the earthen vessel that shows forth the glory of the treasure committed to it?

110) 11:21b-29

Another lesson needs to be learned from this moving catalogue of suffering and cost in Christ's service. It is the dastardliness of the criticism that had been levelled against such a life as the Apostle's was, bearing as it did the unmistakable marks of fellowship in the sufferings of Christ. This is seen all the more clearly when it is remembered that much of the suffering had been for the Corinthians themselves, and that it was out of such travail that they had been born into the kingdom. They were reviling the very source of their spiritual life. This is an attitude that can only be called sinister, and fraught with dire consequences for those who indulge it. Paul speaks elsewhere of those who are "without natural affection", and includes this in the terrible catalogue in Romans 1 as one of the evidences of reprobation. How much more then is this true in the spiritual sense, where the bonds that bind believers to those who have brought them to birth and maturity in Christ are even stronger and more lasting, and more completely of God? Reference has already been made (see Note on 11:12) to the question of believers becoming independent of their spiritual advisers and to the fact that this should never lead to contempt of them, but rather to ever-deepening fellowship and love. When this is lacking, it is such an evidence of base ingratitude that God must chastise severely those guilty of it.

111) 11:30-12:6

We couple the last verses of ch 11 with what follows in order to show the connection between what he has just said and this reference to his unusual vision. Compare 11:30 with 12:5b; this is the point he is making; there were not wanting high and exalted spiritual experiences he could boast in if he chose to do so, but though he mentioned them (12:1ff) he refuses to glory in them or indeed make them the basis of his claim to apostleship (as well he might:); rather does he glory in things which in the judgment of his detractors, could only bring him shame. This is why he refers to his experiences in Damascus; doubtless his opponents would deride him in the indignity expressed in 33, perhaps even accuse him of cowardice in making such an ignominious escape from the city. But for Paul, these experiences were all part and parcel of being set forth last (1 Corinthians 4:9ff) and made a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men; they were the "shape" of the cross which he had taken up for Christ's sake, and the ground on which he could become a fruitful servant of the gospel. Denney comments, "in Christ's service scorn is glory, ignominy is honour; and it is the mark of loyalty when men rejoice that they are counted worthy to suffer shame for the Name". This he formulates in the following verses, in relation to his "paradise" experience, in words as moving and profound as any in his writings, but these must wait until we discuss that experience in tomorrow's reading. For the present, it is enough to see that he refuses to glory in any spiritual exaltation because Christ taught him something far deeper and more wonderful in and through his infirmities than ever he could have learned "in the third heaven".

112) 12:1-6

The Apostle is of course referring to himself when he speaks of "a man in Christ". It is perhaps significant that he should choose to speak in the third person of such an exalted experience, as if conscious of the danger of spiritual pride. The experience belonged to a time fourteen years previously, which means that it cannot refer to his conversion on the Damascus Road which had taken place twenty years earlier than the writing of 2 Corinthians. In all probability it belonged to the period of his life before he was summoned by the Holy Ghost to missionary service, when he was being taught of God about the implications of the gospel that had apprehended him. Elsewhere Paul refers to his ability to speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:18), and it may well be that this latter was associated with the unspeakable ecstasy of the experience spoken of here. That this was a special manifestation given to Paul we cannot doubt, and surely a high honour bestowed on him by the Lord. One recalls how it was given not to all the disciples, but only to Peter, James and John to see Christ's glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, as if to nerve them for the high responsibility laid on them in the founding of the Church in the Pentecostal age. They "beheld His glory" (John 1:14), and "were eye-witnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16) in this special sense, in a way not given to the other disciples to see it. Nor is it without significance that Paul makes mention of it in the verses immediately following those which recount his costly sufferings for Christ's sake and the gospel's. It is as if the recollection of the ineffable beatitude of the experience were a balm to his spirit, to assuage the pain and agony of the cross. This, indeed, is one of the things the sweet intimacy of fellowship Christ bestows on us is for. How often, in hours of lonely battling and wrestling, does the recalling of some precious promise or assurance from the Lord uplift and encourage us to fight on and fight through to victory, when otherwise we would have faltered and lost heart! The vision on the Mount is for the shadows of the valley.

113) 12:7-1

Paul's thorn in the flesh is a subject rich in spiritual instruction, but it is open to misunderstanding, and we must be careful how we interpret it. First of all, the Apostle says it was given him "lest he should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations". This bears witness to the profound truth that frail mortals, even when they are spiritual giants like Paul, cannot stand high spiritual exaltation without being tempted to spiritual pride. It is solemnly and sadly true that it is in the further reaches of Christian experience, when the elementary problems and difficulties and sins have been overcome, that the greatest dangers lie for the believer. Many a man has lost himself spiritually, not because the sins of the flesh have crept back upon him unawares, but because the sins of the spirit have tempted him to spiritual arrogance and pride. It was to prevent this that Paul recognised the thorn was given him. But what was this thorn? It may help considerably if we first of all say what it was not. What we must realise is that it was not a besetting sin, and we have no right to speak of our own besetting sins as if they were thorns in the flesh. God is always prepared to deal with besetting sins in His children, and no one comes to Him crying for deliverance to find Him denying it. Yet God would not remove this thorn from Paul; it could not therefore have been some sin from which he longed to be delivered. Nor in fact can we say with any certainty what it was, apart from the fact that it was some definite infirmity which caused him great and continuing distress and suffering. What we should see is the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in concealing it from us, in order that any thorn in the flesh suffered by any of God's people might be ministered to by what Paul says about it. For him, it was not the affliction itself, but its spiritual significance and the wonderful experience he had in connection with it, that were really important. To these we will turn in tomorrow's Note.

114) 12:7-10

Paul speaks of the thorn as having been given to him. Given by whom? Undoubtedly it came from God, and yet he can call it "the messenger of Satan". Can both these statements, seemingly contradictory, be true? We can only answer in the affirmative, and for this reason: for long enough Paul saw it only as a messenger of Satan, and cried out in his agony for its removal, but God revealed to him that, Satan's part in it notwithstanding, He Himself was even more sovereignly directing it and using it. This not only holds the key to the mystery of suffering, in that it tells us that pain and affliction can be a means of refinement and sanctification in the sufferer, but also reveals that in some mysterious way God is able to further His sovereign purposes in vanquishing evil through it. It is as if God were saying to him, "Paul, I want this thorn to remain. If you are prepared to allow it as a symbol of weakness and infirmity, it can be a door to Me through which I will come in blessing to many". It is surely this that made Paul willing to bear it, and glory in his infirmities, in order that the power of Christ might rest on him. The same mysterious interaction of God and Satan is seen in the opening chapters of Job, where the adversary is allowed to afflict the Patriarch, but always within the limits imposed by God. Job became, so to speak, the battleground on which the divine war against the power of darkness was waged. It is not every man that God can trust with a thorn for not all would react as Paul or Job did, and be prepared to trust the sufficiency of His grace in the agonising experience. This should teach us to be wary of asking God to remove the painful from our experience, crying, "O God, remove this, I cannot stand it anymore", for did we but realise it, He is whispering to us, "My child, I have put it there because I have a purpose of grace in it for the world. Do you realise you are asking Me to remove the one thing that can make your life a blessing to others!" What could Hosea have done in Israel without a broken heart?

115) 12:7-10

There are two further points to note in this moving passage. The first is, as has been pointed out by scholars, that 9 should read "And He hath said unto me ...", and the force of the words is that this is Christ's continuous assurance to the Apostle. It is not merely something that Christ once said to the Apostle in the past, but an abiding and recurrent word each time the thorn caused him pain and agony. Nor was this a vague, general word of comfort, for grace, as the text makes plain, means strength, and divine strength is magnified in human weakness. The second point is that in 10 Paul seems to link the "thorn" with the other hazardous and painful experiences which he has already mentioned, as being of the same character. The thorn in the flesh is similar, he means, to the other indignities and infirmities which he suffered, and afforded with them an opportunity for a manifestation of divine strength. It is the theme of the treasure in earthen vessels all over again, applied in a particular case (see 1 Corinthians 2:3-5). In the Christian life weakness is strength, the way up is down, life comes through death, because it is when we are at an end of ourselves that God is able to work in us and by us. In this, as in all else, Christ is the pattern. It was because the cup did not pass from Him that salvation came to the world. Crucified in weakness, He became the power of God unto salvation.

116) 12:11-13

Paul is conscious of embarrassment at having been forced, as it were, by the Corinthians, to glory, and reproaches himself for his "foolishness" in having felt obliged to do so. The fact is, they should have upheld him against the base accusations of his detractors, but instead, they sided with them against him, and thus forced him to plead his own cause, when it ought to have been a burden on their loyalty to do so on his behalf. There is a certain pungency in the thrust he gives in 11 "though I be nothing" - for although in the absolute sense he was weak and as nothing in God's sight, he was not a negligible factor as they thought him, but a quality "nothing", taken up by God and clothed upon by His Spirit in the service of the gospel. Indeed the proof of this - as it is also the proof of what he has just said in 7-10 about God's strength being made perfect in weakness - lies in the fact that the signs of an apostle were manifest in his ministry - souls had been born and nurtured in grace and established in the Church of Christ. This, in fact, is the only incontrovertible proof of the validity of a man's ministry - what has it done? What fruit has it borne? How else should a man suppose he is in the apostolic succession, than by the undoubted repetition of apostolic signs and wonders and mighty deeds in his own ministry? This should serve to silence - far, far oftener than it apparently does (!) - the arrogant criticisms made by fledgling aspirants to holy orders - themselves as yet largely untried and inexperienced against men whose spiritual work has been proved and sealed by God in the fruit it has borne for His glory. Unfortunately, for them it often takes the bitter experience of failure and fruitlessness in the work of the kingdom to convince them that the holy anointing of the Spirit is not something they should have assumed as a matter of course to be resting upon them. In this, as in other things, some learn the hard way.

117) 12:14-15

No words in Scripture could breathe more beautifully the Spirit of Christ than these two verses. They are a loving, tender appeal from the Apostle to those who had wronged him and repudiated his authority, and we may gather from them something of the depth and reality of the love that he held for them in the bonds of Christ. But they are more: they afford us a unique illustration of what Christ Himself says to the soul. Viewed in this light, they tell some very wonderful things. He is ever "ready to come" to the trusting soul, for He is waiting to be gracious to His people. The following words will not be burdensome to you and underline a truth which is in great need of being emphasised today. So often, when He comes to us in the challenge of discipleship, we tend to shrink from Him, as if we thought He was demanding too much of us, and laying impossible burdens on us. But Jesus pledges Himself to lift our burdens and lead us into rest. His commandments are not grievous - except to those who will not receive them and for this reason, that 'I seek not yours, but you.' This goes very deep into the eternal realities of spiritual life. Paradoxically, it is both easier and more difficult to surrender oneself than to surrender things or people to the Lord, and it is certainly true that the latter can become a substitute for the former. But when we give ourselves to Him, everything else should fall into place (see 8:5). This is what He desires because He is the Lover of our souls, and will not be content even with all we have, if we withhold the love and devotion of our hearts from Him. If we had any misgivings about yielding ourselves to Him, surely they should be dispelled by the assurance given in 15, that He gives Himself so completely to us. It is because we lose sight of this glorious and blessed fact that we hold back so much and so often from complete commitment to Him. The trouble is, we are too easily satisfied; it is not that our human desires are too strong, but too weak. We content ourselves with things and people when infinite joy and rapture is offered us in the love of a real Christ Who is prepared to give Himself without reserve to us. This is what grieves Him most - that the worth of His love should not be recognised by those to whom it is offered, and set aside so casually in favour of infinitely lesser things. How blind can we be?

118) 12:16-18

The force of 16 is not immediately apparent in the AV. The RSV very properly introduces the phrase, "you say" after "I was crafty", and this makes it clear that Paul is quoting what they were saying about him, "I was crafty", you say, "and caught you with guile". It was as if they conceded to him that he had not been burdensome (14), but insinuated that nevertheless in the matter of the special collection he was out to gain his own ends and benefit himself by means of it. One can only marvel at the patience and long-suffering of the Apostle in face of such mean and cruel charges against his integrity. How they must have lacerated his gentle and sensitive heart! It is here that the real ugliness of the situation in Corinth is seen most clearly. They were determined to put the worst possible construction upon his actions, and nothing would satisfy them but to think of him as dishonest and double in his dealings with them as an Apostle. We may recall how in the first epistle (13:5) he had taught them that love "thinketh no evil" a phrase which Moffatt translates "Love is always eager to believe the best", but they were intent on thinking the worst of him. It is this that should enable us to trace this disaffection to its real source in the devil himself. It is true that it had begun when at some point the Corinthians had balked at the challenge of the Cross preached by Paul, with its heart-bruising and self-crucifying discipline; but when men refuse that challenge they enter a stage in which their hearts, being convicted and condemned, react in bitter opposition and antagonism against the minister of that challenge; until eventually there seems almost no limit to the devilishness they engineer. A man who is wounded by the Word, but not healed, is one of the most dangerous men on earth.

119) 12:19-21

In 19 Paul obviates the possibility of their thinking he is trying to justify himself in what he has been saying. He is not concerned to plead his cause defensively before them; he stands, rather, before the bar of God. It was what God thought of him, not what the Corinthians thought, that mattered to him: His next words "We do all things for your edifying" explain the whole tone of the epistle. Paul was not concerned and he was not prepared, to gloss matters over in the fellowship at Corinth, for the sake of "keeping the peace". The slogan "peace at any price" is not one that would ever have applied to him. He was too true to the highest in the gospel to lower his sights, even when "edifying" meant very plain and very sore dealing with the defaulters. When keeping the peace in a fellowship is the supreme concern, truth and honour will end up at a discount. There are times when peace and harmony in a community or a fellowship are an indication not that all is well but that the Holy Name of God is being dishonoured, and ugly, shameful things being tolerated that need to be purged and driven out. How could any man worthy the name of an apostle keep silent when sins such as those mentioned in 20 and 21 were being condoned and ignored in Corinth? And Paul was surely the man to speak of them. To him they were, in spite of their disaffection, dearly beloved (19). When plain speaking and blunt dealing is needed, the man with the loving heart is the one to do it. Not otherwise can Church discipline be effectual. Where love is, severe discipline can be both dreaded and welcomed.

120) 13:1-3

The opening words of 1 echo those in 12:14, but whereas on the former occasion he uses language of tender appeal, here he speaks with great severity. There is no real contradiction in this, for a true pastoral concern will be, and must be, at times stern and severe. This underlines the truth - one which apparently the Corinthians had not perceived - that meekness is not weakness. What Paul refers to here is something like an official, judicial inquiry in terms of Old Testament principle, and he quotes from Deuteronomy 19:15 (which see). We are reminded of our Lord's own words, based on the spirit of Deuteronomy, in Matthew 18:15-18, where formal excommunication seems to be advocated as a last resort, after private and personal pleading have failed. No one could have fulfilled either the letter or the spirit of our Lord's words more completely than Paul in his relations with the Corinthians, and we can well imagine how he would shrink from this last extreme expedient, although he would not hesitate to apply it if nothing else would avail. This provides us with an object lesson in Church discipline, reminding us on the one hand that lack of moral courage to take unpleasant, distasteful steps when they are necessary for the well-being of the Church's life, and on the other the application of harsh and stringent measures without a spirit of love and as anything else than a last resort, can be equally damaging to individuals and the fellowship alike. A true and healthy Scriptural position will avoid either error.

121) 13:3b-4

The meaning of these words appears to be that as Christ was crucified in weakness, and that apparently he had been triumphed over by sin, so also Paul had been humbled in Corinth by this evil, in that, in spite of his warnings, it had waxed strongly among them and persisted in spite of him. But just as Christ's weakness was not the end of the story, but was followed by the resounding triumph of the Resurrection in which sin was utterly vanquished, so also it would be with his servant. As Paul has shared in Christ's sufferings and His "weakness", so also he would share in His triumph. He would not always be weak or seem to be ineffectual or defeated by the evil, but would come to Corinth clothed with divine power. "I will not spare", he says, "since ye seek a proof of Christ speaking in me which to you-ward is not weak but is mighty in you". It is scarcely possible to overestimate the practical importance of this thought for those engaged in the work of the Lord. "If we suffer, we shall reign", says the Apostle elsewhere, and it is this "death-life" pattern which recurs again and again throughout the epistle and affords such assurance and encouragement to those who are for the moment "up against it" in the costly service of the Lord. God always sees to it that the deaths we die in His service - whether they have the shape of oppositions of evil men, or wrestlings with the devil himself - are followed by accessions of new life and power that are a constant wonder to even the believing heart and a source of discomfiture and conviction to those whose evil brings them about.

122) 13:5-6

Paul reminds the Corinthians that it is their own standing in the faith, not his, which is in question. "Try yourselves, put yourselves to the proof, not me", he says. This was not only a skilful thrust by the Apostle, turning the tables neatly on his opposers, it contained a simple and unpalatable truth for them. They were calling in question the validity of their own experience by their attitude to Paul. They, in fact, were on trial and were being sifted as to fundamental issues. There is something very important here for us to learn. The attitude of criticism that is adopted against God's servants and of questioning their legitimate authority reveals with a dreary clarity not so much that the servants are at fault (not even those who love them most would imagine they were perfect) as that those who criticise them are out of joint spiritually. As James Denney puts it, "It is when people ought to be putting themselves to the proof, and are with cause afraid to begin, that they are most ready to challenge others". A critical spirit is not, as critics tend to suppose, the sign of superior spirituality, but of something much less worthy, and only the undiscerning fail to see through it and recognise it for what it really is. It is doubly sad when the spirit of criticism is produced, as it seems clear it was in Corinth, by the hurt that had come to them in the challenge of the Cross, a challenge which they had refused. This fact serves to explain a very great deal of the harsh and uncharitable strictures passed by out of sorts and backslidden people upon men who in simplicity and godly sincerity are seeking to do the work of the Lord.

123) 13:7-10

Paul however is content to let the Corinthians think what they will of him provided his prayer for them is granted, and they do no evil, but rather that which is good before God. His attitude is that if the gospel is going to be furthered by his being thought little of, he is well content that it should be so. This is the force of "though we be as reprobates" (7). This spirit echoes the words of John the Baptist when he said of Christ, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30), and this is perhaps the best testimony to Paul's greatness as an apostle that we could find. He recognised that not he but the gospel, and its furtherance in them, was the all-important factor. It is nevertheless true to say that if the gospel had in fact been having its way in the Corinthians as it should have, they would have been far less critical of him than they were. For when men are right with God, and following on to know Him, they are never likely to be contemptuous of the instrument in God's hands that has been used to bless them. It is true - and Paul himself would have been the first to admit it - that he had many faults, but he had given himself without reserve to God and to them in the interests of the gospel, and all right-minded believers would thank God for this, and honour him and respect him accordingly. It is safe to say that no man who despises or belittles the work of those who have been put to the test by God and entrusted with the gospel, will ever do much or be much himself in the kingdom of God. Any unskilled navvy can demolish a building with crowbars or a battering ram; but it takes a wise master-builder to lay a foundation and erect a spiritual edifice to the glory of God. A simple comparison between Paul's work and that of his critics is sufficient to carry this point home!

124) 13:7-10

It is on the ground that he wished for their perfection - that is, their full maturity in Christ, that he says he wrote so firmly and bluntly (9, 10) to them, and in turn, he wrote thus warningly in order that divine discipline might not come upon them (10). This in fact is a divine principle - warning always comes first before action from God, and Paul is simply following the divine pattern. He hoped that the stern tone of his rebuke would be sufficient, and thus obviate the necessity of exercising his God-given power to "use sharpness" (cf "I will not spare" in 2). What the precise nature of the discipline was that he threatened to exercise we do not know - perhaps excommunication, as suggested in 2, or even the drastic measure of delivering them to Satan (see 1 Corinthians 5:5), but this is not so important for us to learn as is the solemn lesson that when the normal disciplines of the Word of God are not allowed to do their gracious work in sanctifying our hearts and leading us on to maturity, He will lay other and more severe disciplines upon us and sanctify us through pain and chastisement and sorrow. Many a believer has learned to his cost that God takes His work of sanctifying us and conforming us to the image of His Son very seriously, and that to refuse the Word is to invite the rod of chastening upon their lives. Some men need to be cast down (see 10:5, 8) and broken, before they can be truly built up in the Lord. God is not prepared to allow the wilfulness of the human heart to stand in the way of His sovereign purposes in us.

125) 13:11-14

Paul's concluding exhortations in 11 echo both His love and concern for the Corinthians, and his prayer for their good is shot through with the consciousness of their problems. "Be perfect" might very fairly be rendered "be all that God means you to be" and such a word must always be challenging to us who read it today, whether our problems are those that beset the Church at Corinth or not. Are we being all that God means us to be, or are we living on a lower level spiritually than we know to be right for us? The challenge is matched by the grace that follows it, for Paul adds, "The God of love and peace shall be with you". It is certainly and blessedly true that when we really aspire with full purpose of heart to be what God means us to be, all the resources of the Godhead are there to meet us in the endeavour. In this respect, Paul's words are analogous to those in Philippians 2:12, 13, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure". To be sure, it is only because He has made us perfect in Christ that we could ever aspire to be all that He means us to be, for it is this alone that gives meaning to such a command; and by the same token, it is clear that we can never be content with less. The mighty indicative of the divine work for us in Christ undergirds every exhortation to rise on the wings of faith and be what He has made us. It is this that makes the failure of the Corinthians - and ours - so inexcusable. Full provision is there for all who will use it. Thanks be unto God Who gives us the victory.

126) 13:14

We close this study with some quotations from the writing of Samuel Chadwick, the Methodist teacher and saint on what is called "the Apostolic benediction": "Grace is more than mercy, and greater than love. Justice demands integrity, mercy is the ministry of pity, love seeks correspondence, appreciation and responsiveness, but grace demands no merit; it flows unrestrained and unreserved upon those who have no goodness to plead, no claim to advance. Grace seeks the unfit and the unworthy. It is love, mercy, compassion, stretching out towards the guilty, ungracious and rebellious. It is the only hope for sinful man. If salvation comes not by grace, it can never be ours. Without grace there can be no reconciliation, no pardon, no peace. We are saved by grace ... grace pardons the guilty, restores the fallen, delivers the captive, sanctifies the sinner, sustains and perfects the believer.... Jesus dwells in man the source of all grace; God abides in him the spring and perfection of all love, and the Holy Spirit communes with him and energises for all the will of God. There is no habit or condition over which grace cannot prevail. There is no want in the life, nor hunger of the heart that is not met in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost. If these abide with us, we shall never fail nor want for any good thing.... The message of the Church to the world is the message of the Benediction".