

# Commentary on 2 Corinthians

## *Paula Fether, 2006*

### Chapter One

#### Verses 1–14

As with his first letter, Paul begins with the positive. He explains that the things we suffer are partially to make us sympathetic with others who suffer and show them how we get through it. This is good to remember whenever we start thinking Christians aren't supposed to suffer, or that being saved means a life of ease. Paul uses his own experiences as an example of this principle.

#### Verses 15–20

Then he mentions his intention to visit them previously but was unable. For this 'crime', he was accused of being two-faced! He appeals to their memory of his original presentation of the gospel to them, which he did clearly and without confusion. This should dispel any accusations about his intentions.

#### Verses 21–22

These verses show the 'how' and 'why' of the security of the believer. We have been sealed and given the Holy Spirit as a "down payment on what is to come" (The Source). Both of these are legal terms: the seal was an official authoritative stamp of authenticity, and the down payment is a guarantee of the eventual completion of a transaction. So every true believer is stamped with the Seal of God, and has a Deposit to guarantee our inheritance, which is eternal life in heaven. Neither of these things depend upon us or have any kind of 'escape clause'. We are not at liberty to revoke either. Remember that Paul had earlier spoken of how we will have our deeds tested, and here he gives further assurance that our deeds have nothing to do with our salvation, but only our rewards.

### Chapter Two

#### Verses 1–4

Now back to the subject of discipline and Paul's authority. Notice that he says that "we do not have mastery over your faith... but work for your happiness". Many think that authority among believers is all about domination and control, but instead it is about people of varying gifts serving each other. He then explains that he had sent

the earlier 'harsh' letter for the purpose of showing how much he cared about them, and that he had no pleasure in having to write such a letter.

### **Verses 5–11**

Some scholars believe that when Paul uses the singular (someone, a person, a woman) that he means a specific individual. There is good support for this also in light of the fact that when Paul discusses a false teacher he names names, but a deceived or ignorant person doesn't get named. This section seems to be addressing the situation of the man practicing incest that Paul had written about before. Paul is telling the Corinthians to now restore this repentant man publicly, since he had paid the due penalty for his sin and turned away from it. The devil would have loved nothing more than for this healing believer to be crushed and defeated, and for the others to be hard and proud.

### **Verses 12–17**

After briefly mentioning his short visit to Troas, Paul gives an analogy of the believers' effect on the world which parallels that of Jesus' "salt and light" analogy. We are described as 'smelling like God'. To those who are open to the gospel we are a sweet aroma of life, but to those who are not we are the stench of death. This is good to remember when we witness, since by their reaction to this 'smell' we have some idea of whether the lost person is open or not to hearing the gospel. Further, he points out that we are to be sincere in our witnessing, not following the worldly model of marketing.

The idea of marketing the gospel is a great blight on the churches today. Everything is packaged to sell to the masses and appeal to the emotions. The emphasis is now on 'the experience', on the here and now, instead of on Jesus and his sacrifice for us. We have lost our 'scent', our saltiness, our light. People are no longer able to 'smell God' in us, so they do not react with revulsion even if they are not open to the true gospel. We were promised persecution, not pampering or popularity!

## **Chapter Three**

### **Verses 1–3**

Apparently some at Corinth were demanding that Paul produce some credentials to prove his authority over them. But he reminds them that they themselves are his "letter of recommendation", one written by God.

### **Verses 4–18**

All comes from God, not any human, and the old ways are gone. We are under a new "contract" or Testament that brings life, as opposed to the old Law that brought death. Yet if even the old Law had its glory, think of what must be the glory of the new Testament! Paul is trying to express how much superior the new ways are to the old, and he uses it to explain his boldness in speech.

Paul makes the statement that the minds of people are still "veiled whenever Moses is read", and some take that to mean they are incapable of accepting the gospel message. But that notion is demolished in the very next statement: "But when someone turns to the Lord, the veil is removed". The Calvinists would say it exactly backwards: "When the veil is removed, someone turns to the Lord".

## **Chapter Four**

### **Verses 1–4**

Paul again testifies to his motives and innocence in declaring the truth to them. But then he refers again to "veiling" and talks about unbelievers being blinded by "the god of this present age". Again, some would take this to mean that the devil overrides a person's will so they cannot respond to the gospel. But if this were true Paul would be contradicting himself. I think the key is found in Romans 1, where we see that God only "gave them over" to depravity after they "suppressed the truth by their wickedness" (vs. 18). These people had known God but rejected him (vs. 21). Clearly, the Paul that wrote those words would not tell a different story to the Corinthians.

### **Verses 5–12**

Paul again points out that it is not himself or his fellow workers but Jesus that is being preached. The same One who said "Let there be light" was shedding light in their minds. Yet this amazing light is held in common pottery so to speak, mere mortals. As such, we are under constant pressure but we must endure it and be found faithful. But of course our strength comes only from God, not ourselves.

### **Verses 13–18**

As further encouragement, Paul tells them that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead will raise us up too. Outwardly we appear to be wasting away, but inwardly we keep getting renewed. We keep our eyes fixed on the goal, on things we cannot yet see, which are the only things that last.

## Chapter Five

### Verses 1–10

Now we are given more detail about "this earthly house" and its temporary nature, to be replaced by an "everlasting house". After commenting about how we "groan" in our mortal bodies as we wait for our spiritual ones, Paul makes the comment he has made elsewhere: we have the Spirit as a down payment for our immortal bodies. We are guaranteed to get them! This gives us confidence, the assurance of our hope in the Lord.

A word about "eternal security" here: this is not the belief in a "license to sin" as opponents of ES claim. Paul wrote much about the high standard to which believers are called, and warned about losing rewards. So to accept ES is not a free pass from all moral restraint, but just what Paul said: confidence. We need not fear our failing to reach heaven, because as was already pointed out, it does not depend upon us at all, but only on our having been sealed with the Holy Spirit— a seal nobody can break (It is **God's** seal, not ours!). Even in this passage, Paul emphasizes the importance of good behavior, to "please the Lord". It speaks of "getting what we deserve", that is, what we earned or worked for. This is another support for the view that rewards are in mind here.

Another point in this passage is that "to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord". This mitigates against the idea of "soul sleep", which argues that when a believer dies s/he enters into an unconscious state until resurrected. There is no hint of any time gap between the two events (death and heaven), seeing that they are even uttered in the same sentence! Who looks forward to aeons of sleep? There is no comfort in being in the Lord's presence if we are unaware of it.

### Verses 11–21

Back to Paul's having to defend his motives and actions against the false teachers. In so doing, he writes once more against the "license to sin", that we "should no longer live for ourselves". We are "a new creation" that seeks to please the One who died for us.

An important statement about what exactly Jesus did for us is brought out here: that he reconciled (restored to friendship) **the world** to God. This is the gospel message we are to be spreading! We are ambassadors on Jesus' behalf. He reconciled the world, so that all anyone has to do to be saved is accept Jesus and what he did.

No, this is not Universalism, which doesn't understand the difference between reconciliation and salvation. What Jesus did was to reverse the separation between God and man that Adam caused, making salvation by faith possible (and

'legal' concerning God's holiness). The difference between a person's spending eternity in either heaven or hell is based solely on faith in the risen Lord, not on our deeds. So "judgment day" is not about salvation, but about "payment" for wages earned. Remember John 3:18? "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

So the whole world was reconciled with God by Jesus' sacrifice, and now we are to spread this good news to everyone, showing them that they can have salvation just by trusting in the Jesus who died for them and rose again. Reconciliation involves two parties, so even though God did his part in this, we still have to accept it to make the 'transaction' complete. Anyone who is not reconciled to God has only him/herself to blame.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Verses 1–13**

After explaining the gospel message, Paul once again implores the believers to not "receive God's favor in vain" but to 'walk the walk', to live like salvation matters. Again Paul gives his credentials, listing the ways in which he and others have given themselves to the spreading of the gospel. Paul shows by personal example the proper Christian life, and the perseverance required in the face of opposition. He contrasts appearances and outward treatment with the inner strength and purity of those who are truly disciples. He continues by appealing to the Corinthians to observe his openness and honesty. Any problems between them and him are laid at their feet, so he challenges them to return the favor.

### **Verses 14–18**

Next, the famous passage about being "unequally yoked". But this is not between spouses of varying ethnicity or skin color, as has been popularly supposed. Instead, it is between believers and unbelievers. Marriage isn't even in view here. The language Paul uses is clearly about good and evil, light and darkness, God and Satan. He appeals to the Old Testament for the need to "be separate" from all evil.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Verses 1–16**

Paul continues to implore the Corinthians to open up to him and stop the false accusations. He regrets having had to grieve them over various issues, but at the same time he is convinced it was necessary. It fulfilled its purpose of changing the people's minds.

Keep in mind that the word 'repent' simply means to change one's mind or direction to the exact opposite from where you were heading before. The 'repentance' Paul speaks of here is to correct wrong thinking, not to become saved in their case. In general though, as he points out, there certainly is a need to 'repent' in order to be saved. This is not a turning from sin *per se*, but a change of mind from rejection of Jesus to acceptance. In other words, this is not a matter of personal confession, but of personal conviction over the truth of the gospel.

This is an important point pertaining to ES. Some believe that even the smallest unconfessed sin can negate a person's salvation, and they have no confidence as a result of always wondering if such a sin remains in them. They live in fear of God watching over them, not for protection, but for being 'zapped' at the smallest infraction. This "now I'm saved, now I'm not" idea makes entrance into heaven like a revolving door. It creates the absurd scenario of a child of God being disowned and re-adopted on a daily basis! In stark contrast, as we have seen, Paul explained that we are guaranteed heaven, because it's not up to us anymore.

## Chapter Eight

### Verses 1–15

Paul abruptly changes to the subject of charity among believers of differing locations. He stresses that such giving cannot be coerced, demanded, or forced, but must be free and voluntary. Verses 8-9 make it even clearer that this is not a "divine command" at all.

What Paul is telling the Corinthians is that they must follow through on their prior actions when it comes to giving; they must not only talk about it but do what they said they'd do. Notice that this is not to be a "giving beyond your means" as the popular saying goes, but "from what you can afford". Preachers like to insist that a Christian can't really give until they have first "tithed", and lay a major guilt trip on any who disagree. But this flies in the face of what the Bible actually says to believers. God looks on the heart, not the bank account.

Further emphasis on the nature of true giving is spelled out for us: Giving is not so "others will have relief and you will have hardship", but to produce equality. We give to those who are in need until they are back on their feet, and then if the tables are later turned, those who are then in need can expect help from others.

Notice also that there is no mention here of "giving to the Lord's work" or buying a building or paying salaries or anything else "Churchianity" has invented. This is people with means helping people without means, and it only goes one way until the situation is remedied. It is not a perpetual, planned, legalistic obligation at all. When preachers try to shame people into "giving", they remove any possibility of it being done Biblically, since paying out of fear or guilt is the wrong motivation.

### **Verses 16–24**

Brief mention is made of Titus, whom Paul recommends to them and encourages them to respect. There is speculation that this unnamed believer travelling with him may be Onesimus who is mentioned in Philemon, but we really don't know.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Verses 1–15**

Paul continues with exhorting the Corinthians to follow through on their intention to give generously, recommending that they don't wait till the last minute to collect the money. Paul has stuck his neck out in boasting about them, so he doesn't want to look like a liar if they don't put their words into action.

Again, he makes it clear that any real giving is a matter of personal conscience, because "God loves a cheerful giver". We can't give cheerfully when we have fear or guilt. God will prompt the people's hearts to give as he wills, not any preacher. Lastly, Paul reminds them of the Gift of Life they received, as further incentive.

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Verses 1–6**

Now back to the people who have been opposing Paul.

Some take Paul's military analogy here as a sanction for the occult practice of ritual exorcism, all based on the phrase "destroying strongholds". Specifically, they think we actually have to go to a "demonic" area and pray and do certain things to drive the demons away. There are large movements for this today, where people go from city to city performing rituals. Yet nobody ever seems to notice that nothing changes; evil marches on. Instead, the context indicates an internal struggle, the one even Paul expressed frustration with in Romans 7.

## Verses 7–18

If the Corinthians thought themselves to belong to Jesus, then certainly Paul could more easily make that claim. Yet the false teachers were apparently not only challenging his authority, but his very salvation! They also basically called him a 'paper tiger', bold from afar but meek and lowly in their presence. Of course Paul was meek in person, not wanting to draw attention to himself but to Jesus. But now, since they've been asking for it, he intends to take the gloves off at his next visit.

He goes on to tell them where the line is drawn when it comes to boasting. And it is not their approval but the Lord's that really matters.

## Chapter Eleven

### Verses 1–15

This chapter is largely a rant about the Corinthians' amazingly easy acceptance of any 'teacher' that comes down the pike, while at the same time rejecting Paul and the others. They are easy prey for smooth talkers. With much sarcasm he tells them he was not like that, being humble and honest, but maybe he should have been harsh and domineering like these "super apostles".

Here is where we see the well-known statement that Satan pretends to be a "messenger of light". The churches have pretty much forgotten this, following any and all who tickle their ears, leaving discernment in the dust.

### Verses 16–33

Next Paul reluctantly lists the things he has suffered for the gospel, and dares the false teachers to match his dedication in the face of hardship. If these things are seen as a weakness, then Paul is glad, because it glorifies the Lord.

## Chapter Twelve

### Verses 1–13

Here Paul gives his account of having been taken up to heaven to receive "visions and revelations" from the Lord. Although he speaks of this in the third person, scholars generally agree that he is really speaking about himself. It's possible, but of course not known for sure, that this is when he was given the "mystery" of the



church, which is salvation by faith alone as the hallmark of what we call the "church age".

Next he tells of his "thorn in the flesh", another debated item. He at least tells us that the purpose of this thorn was to keep him humble after his visions (another hint that he was speaking of himself). Scholars debate about the nature of this thorn, mainly over whether this was an actual physical infirmity or a spiritual harassment. Support for the spiritual view is from Paul calling it a "messenger of Satan", while support for it being physical by virtue of the word "flesh", and also his statement in Gal. 4:15 about them being willing to give their own eyes to him (also 6:11 where he says he has to write large letters when he writes with his own hand, instead of dictating to someone else).

Personally, I lean toward the thorn being a physical infirmity. Satan can attack the flesh as a means of wearing us down or causing us to blame God, for an ultimate spiritual consequence. So I don't think the thorn being a "messenger of Satan" necessarily makes it a spiritual oppression. Also giving weight to the physical, specifically the eyes, is Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus. He was struck blind for three days.

But Paul's purpose in all this is to show his weakness, and therefore his dependence upon God. Physical weakness can drive a person closer to God, the complete opposite of Satan's intentions, and this is yet another testament to God's power, his ability to make "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28). He sarcastically adds that he should ask the Corinthians' forgiveness for not being a burden to them like the false teachers, and for doing all those miraculous signs among them.

### **Verses 14–18**

The Corinthians had accused Paul of treachery and deceit. Yet Paul assures them that he will not change the way he relates to them, but will continue to live the example of a faithful servant of God. He wants to build them up, not tear them down, in spite of how they have treated him.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

### **Verses 1–13**

Paul again promises them that he will not 'cut them any slack' next time he visits them. He will give them the proof they demand that Jesus does indeed speak through him. He warns them to test themselves before he comes, so he won't have to make himself treat them harshly after all. And as was his custom, Paul ends the letter with a final exhortation to mend their ways, and a blessing.