

THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS : AN EXPANDED PARAPHRASE

I. THE COMFORT OF GOD (Ch. 1: 1-7: 16) (*Continued*)

(f) *The Christian Hope* (Ch. 4:1 - 5:10)

THIS then is the ministry which we have to discharge, and by God's mercy we do not lose heart. We have renounced all secret and shameful devices; we do not behave craftily or adulterate the message of God. We practise transparent sincerity, and thus we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience as in God's sight. Our gospel may be obscure to some, but if so, it is obscure to those who are on the way to ruin, because their unbelieving minds have been blinded by the deity of this present age. His aim is to prevent the illumination of Christ's glorious gospel from dawning upon them. *Christ's* glorious gospel, I say, not ours : it is Christ, the very image of God, that we proclaim. We do not advertise ourselves, but we proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord; as for us, we present ourselves to you as your servants for Jesus' sake. Yes : the God who said, "Let light shine forth out of darkness", is the God who has shone in our hearts to illuminate them with the knowledge of His glory reflected in the face of Christ.

This glorious gospel is the treasure with which we have been entrusted. The treasure is kept in earthenware containers, indeed, but that is to make it manifest that the surpassing majesty of the power of this gospel is God's, that it does not proceed from us. We are hard-pressed at every turn, but never distressed beyond measure; always suffering privation, but never bereft of all help; persecuted, but never deserted; knocked down, but never finished off. We continually carry the death of Jesus about in our bodies, so that Jesus' life may also be displayed in these same bodies. I mean that, alive as we are, we are always being exposed to death for Jesus' sake, in order that His resurrection-life may be the more openly displayed in our mortal flesh. Death, then, is at work in us, while life is at work in you.

Yet we have the same spirit of faith as the psalmist had when

he said, "I believe, and that is why I have spoken."¹ We too believe, and that is why we speak as we do; for we know that He who raised up our Lord Jesus will raise us up also to share Jesus' resurrection and bring us into His own presence along with you. All that we endure, we endure for your sakes, so that the grace bestowed so abundantly on us may call forth the more thanksgiving from you, and thus redound to the glory of God.

That is why, as I said, we do not lose heart. Even if our outer man wastes away, our inner man is being renewed day by day. The affliction which we have to endure for the time being is, after all, a light one; it is producing for us in ever-increasing abundance an eternity of glory which far outweighs it — and meanwhile we keep our eyes fixed on the invisible realities, and not on the things that can be seen. The things that can be seen are of temporary duration; the invisible realities last for ever.

This we know, that if the earthly tent which is our present dwelling-place is taken down, we receive from God a house not built by human hands, an eternal home in heaven. In our present tent we sigh with deep longing to be "clothed" with our heavenly abode, so that, thus clothed, we shall not have to appear in disembodied nakedness. So long as we stay in this temporary tent, you see, we sigh under a sense of oppression; it is not that we want to be unclothed but rather clothed — we want to have our present mortal body swallowed up by immortal life. It is God who fashioned us for this very end, and He has given us His Spirit as an advance pledge of it.

So we are full of confidence all the time; we know that, so long as we are at home in this present body, we are away from our true home with the Lord (for it is faith, not sight, that keeps us going at present) — we are full of confidence, I say, and our settled preference is to be away from home so far as this body is concerned, and to be truly at home with the Lord. And that is why it is our constant ambition, whether at home or away from home, to win His approval. All of us must make a public appearance before the tribunal of Christ, so that each one may receive the due recompense for the deeds he has done by means of this earthly body, be they good or bad.

(g) *The Ministry of Reconciliation* (Ch. 5:11-6:13)

With the fear of the Lord in our hearts, then, we appeal to men, while our motives are exposed to the eye of God and (I hope) to your conscience too. No, we are not beginning to com-

¹ Ps. 116: 10.

mend ourselves again; we are giving you an opportunity to boast about us in reply to those people who boast in outward appearance, not in the inward reality of the heart. Are we mad, as some think? Well, let God be glorified. Are we sober and sensible? That is for your advantage. It is the love of Christ that is the impelling force behind all that we do: since one died for all, our conclusion is that all for whom He died died in Him. Why did He die for all? It was so that those who are raised to new life in Him should not live any more for their own interests, but for His, since He not only died for them but rose again.

For the future, then, we do not know anyone in terms of a relationship which is purely of this earth. Even if we used to know Christ Himself in a purely earthly manner, that is not the way we are to know Him from now on. So then, whenever someone comes to be "in Christ", a new creation takes place; the old order has passed away and the new has come into being. All this is the work of God. It is God who has reconciled us to Himself through Christ and has entrusted us with this ministry of reconciliation. As we discharge this ministry we proclaim that in Christ God was reconciling a universe to Himself, no longer counting men's misdeeds against them, and that He has given us this message of reconciliation to proclaim. We are ambassadors on Christ's behalf; God, we may say, is extending His invitation to men through us as we urge them for Christ's sake to be reconciled to God. The One whose conscience was unstained by sin is the One whom God has appointed to be a sin-offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the very righteousness of God.

As fellow-workers in God's service, then, we entreat you not to frustrate the grace of God which you have received. You know what the Scripture says:

At an acceptable time I have listened to you;

In the day of deliverance I have come to your aid.²

The "acceptable time" is now; the "day of deliverance" is now. We try to put no stumbling-block in anyone's way, lest our ministry should come into disrepute. We endeavour rather to commend ourselves as true servants of God, showing the utmost patience amid affliction, distress, privation, beatings, imprisonments, riots, hard labour, sleeplessness, fasting. We seek to be characterized by purity of life, spiritual knowledge, forbearance and gentleness, by the grace of the Holy Spirit and unfeigned love, while we

² Isa. 49: 8.

proclaim the truth in the power of God. Righteousness is our armour on the right side and the left, as we persevere amid honour or dishonour, ill repute or good repute. We are called deceivers, though we are honest men; we are ignored, yet we are well known; we are constantly exposed to death, and yet (as you see) we continue to live; we are chastised, but not put to death; we are overwhelmed with sorrow but always full of joy; we are poor, and yet we enrich many; we are destitute, and yet secure in our possession of everything.

Look, my dear friends at Corinth, we are speaking to you frankly; our hearts are open before you. It is not in our estimation of you that you are limited, but in your own affections. Please do as much for us — after all, it is to our own children that we are speaking — open your hearts to us.

(h) *Warning against Pagan Associations* (Ch. 6:14 - 7:1)

Do not be misdated with unbelievers. What share can righteousness have with unrighteousness? What has light in common with darkness? How can Christ agree with Belial? How can a believer be partner with an unbeliever? What has God's sanctuary to do with idols? Remember, we are the sanctuary of the living God. God Himself has said :

I will dwell in their midst, I will walk among them;

I will be their God, they shall be my people.³

So come out from their midst and be separate from them (says the Lord),

Touch nothing that is unclean;⁴

Then I will receive you⁵ and be your Father,

And you shall be my sons and daughters :

Thus speaks the Lord Almighty.⁶

With promises like these, my dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that defiles; let us bring holiness to full fruition in the fear of God.

(i) *Paul's Confidence in the Corinthian Christians* (Ch. 7:2-16)

Please, make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged none of you, injured none, defrauded none. I am not trying to condemn you when I say this; I have told you already that you have a secure place in our hearts, come death, come life. I certainly use the utmost freedom in what I say to you, but then I boast to the uttermost when I speak about you to others. I have been comforted to the full; in all the affliction I have to endure I bubble over with joy.

³ Lev. 26: 11 f. ⁴ Isa. 52: 11. ⁵ Ezek. 20: 34.

⁶ Hos. 1: 10.

And why? When we came into Macedonia, we could not feel at all settled; affliction beset us on every hand. We had conflict all around us, and fears at heart. But God, Comforter of the downcast, brought us comfort then by the arrival of Titus⁷ — and not only by his arrival, but also by the comfort which he himself had received on your account. As he told us of your earnest longing for us, your mourning over what had happened, your eager zeal to right the wrong, I rejoiced more and more.

Now, even if I did grieve you with that letter of mine, I am not sorry that I sent it. Even if I was sorry at the time, when I saw how much it grieved you (if only for the time being), yet I am glad not because you were grieved, but because your grief made you repent. It was God who made you grieve like that, to prevent my letter from causing you any harm. Grief which comes from God leads to repentance and brings about a release over which no one need repent; the world's grief is deadly in its effect.

For look at the effect of this God-given grief of yours! What concern it produced in your hearts! What eagerness to vindicate yourselves! What indignation! What fear! What earnest longing! What ardour! What determination to punish the wrongdoer! You have put yourselves completely in the right with regard to this matter.

So then, if I did write you such a letter, it was not because of the wrongdoer or the wronged party; it was for your own sakes — that your concern for us might be openly shown, that it might be plain both to yourselves and to God. And that is the ground of our comfort.

And over and above our comfort we found further cause for rejoicing in Titus's joy; his spirit had been so greatly refreshed by you all. I had boasted to him about you, and you did not let me down. No! I had spoken the unvarnished truth to you, and similarly our boasting about you was seen by Titus to be nothing but the truth. Now his affection for you keeps on growing as he calls to mind your obedience — the spirit of fear and trembling with which you received him. I do rejoice because of my perfect confidence in you.

(To be continued)

⁷ Cf. ch. 2: 13.