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2 Corinthians

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2 CORINTHIANS

Introduction

Was the apostle Paul ever married? Did he ever have children? Irrelevant issues to many, but these are questions that some folk ask ... and some try to answer. But, whether it's a "Yes" or a "No" that they come up with, the answers are only guesses, really. We just don't have enough information to make a definite decision. What is certain though, is that Paul had many children *in the faith* ... people whose conversion and continuing spiritual growth was something he took responsibility for, something he was ongoingly involved in.

And as with any parent, Paul's relationship with his spiritual children went through a whole range of experiences ... from pride in their accomplishments to exasperation at their stubbornness, to thankfulness for their love and respect, to anguish at their alienation from him. As with any children, their immaturity and lack of experience meant that there were times when they needed to be taught and shown the right way, times when they needed to be rebuked and reminded of the way they ought to be walking, times when they needed to be praised for being in the right way and encouraged to keep on it. Perhaps more than any other church Paul was involved with, his dealings with the church at Corinth reflected this complex relationship. These complexities emerge in his letters to that church, especially the letter we now call 2 Corinthians. As we read this epistle, it will be useful if we are able to keep something of this in mind ... it's not an article about theology, it's a "living letter".

Paul had a special love for Corinth. When you look at Acts 15-18, you see that it was the place where, after receiving hostile treatment at Philippi and Thessalonica, (leading to a premature departure from those places), and after being treated with arrogant condescension by the Athenians, he at last found his call to carry the gospel into Europe (Acts 16:9-10) being confirmed. Under his ministry, a strong and vital church was established in the midst of difficulty and persecution. What's more, it was in Corinth that the Lord himself reassured Paul that this was a place where many would be found for Christ (Acts 18:9). Paul's attitude was that, more than anyone else, he had a special stake in the spiritual well-being of the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 4:14-15, 2 Corinthians 3:1-3).

Paul's work involved his travelling widely around the Eastern Mediterranean. This meant that, as he went from place to place, he would be separated from all the other churches needing his ministry. Sometimes, urgent matters would arise requiring his attention, at a time when it was a physical impossibility for

him to be there in person. As a caring pastor and “father figure”, one way he sought to deal with this problem was by sending trusted assistants, men such as Titus, Timothy, Silas etc. Another was by writing letters. In 2 Corinthians we see both of these in evidence. The ministry of Titus among them, and the usefulness his report is for Paul in gaining an accurate picture of things in the congregation is attested to. And we also learn of at least four letters sent to this particular church ... namely, the two we have, plus two others that have not survived. One of these was written before 1 Corinthians, one after. (see 1 Corinthians 5:9, 2 Corinthians 2:3-4, and 7:8-12)

Essentially, the difficulties in the church at Corinth seem to spring from two areas, and it's helpful to keep these in mind as we read Paul's letter to them. *The first* of these was that many Corinthians came to Christ out of a life, an upbringing, of rank paganism. Because they had taken in many of their values with their mother's milk, as it were, and because those values continued to be reinforced by the society that surrounded them, it was not always obvious to them why some aspects of their former lifestyle now had to be set aside. This is not their problem only. To a large extent, this will continue to be a problem for Christians today, wherever they are, because the morality and the values of the Kingdom of God will always be at odds with every human society. Just read the Sermon on the Mount, and that becomes obvious.

The second of these was that the church in Corinth had relatively recently been influenced by a group of teachers who had arrived on the scene. These people, so it seems, were big on being spectacular in some way or other (which, as 1 Corinthians shows, was a weak spot for this particular congregation), and were disparaging of Paul, not only because he wasn't as outwardly impressive as them, but also because he didn't enforce the laws of Moses as rigorously as they did. A significant proportion of the Corinthian congregation appears to have been influenced by these newcomers, who are never specifically identified by Paul in this letter. Although this particular group may not be in existence to affect our congregations today, it's wise to remember that fads and fancies of one sort or another continue to occur among the churches in our own day. As in Paul's day, the danger that many of these passing interests have is that they distract people from the significance of the gospel itself, and in the end serve only to shift the focus away from Jesus.

As we study this letter which has a lot to say about “church stuff”, it's good to keep in mind that that was Paul's ultimate concern in writing ... that the people under his care, by their lives together, give Christ the glory that's rightfully his.

Week 1

Theme: THE COMFORTABLE MESSAGE

Day 1 Read Acts 18:1-11

What encouragements and discouragements did Paul find when he came to Corinth?

Day 2 Read Acts 18:12-18a

Describe the opposition Paul faced from the Jews. How does this compare with what Christians face today?

Day 3 Read Isaiah 40:1-2

These verses introduce God's great message of comfort. If you have time, read the whole chapter with the idea of "comfort" in mind. What, in essence, is the comforting message?

Day 4 Read Jeremiah 31:10-14

What comforting message does Jeremiah bring?.

Day 5 Read John 14:18

"I will not leave you as orphans" (NIV) is translated by the RSV as "I will not leave you comfortless". What is Jesus going to do to comfort his followers? Why?

Pray that we might avail ourselves of the comfort God provides, and also know how to be a comfort to others.

Study Passage ... 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

1. List some of the problems affecting the Corinthian church when Paul wrote his first letter. (eg 1:10-17; 5:1-5; 6:1; 11:17-22; 12:14-20; 14:40; 15:12 ... there's more)

What negative opinions does I Corinthians suggest some of them hold with regard to Paul? (eg 2:1-5; 4:8-13; 9:1-6)

2. What is the key word in 2 Cor. 1: 3-7? Try to summarise what Paul is saying in these verses ... keep it to one sentence if possible.
3. Why is Paul feeling so comforted? (v 8-9, possibly also 7:13b-16). What experiences may we have which in some ways are similar to the things that happened to Paul?
4. How does Paul's attitude and experience contrast to (1:8; possibly also 7:13b-16) contrast with the message that many preach today? Can you think of other verses that line up with these? (Use helps if you have them)
5. If a Christian friend of yours was going through hard times, would you tell them the sort of things Paul tells the Corinthians here? Give reasons for your answer.

Week 2

Theme: PROMISES, PROMISES

Day 1 Read Genesis 3:1-7

What was history's great lie?

Day 2 Read Romans 1:24-25

How do people keep the lie (see yesterday's question) alive today?

Day 3 Read Genesis 12:1-4

What is his history's great promise?

Day 4 Read Romans 4:16-25

How do people keep the promise (see yesterday's question) alive today?

Day 5 Read 2 Corinthians 2:5-17

How can our lives be a sweet fragrance and an awful stench (v. 15-16) at one and the same time?

Pray that God would give us a love of the truth and an earnest desire to always be true to our word.

Study Passage ... 2 Corinthians 1:12-22

1. Think of an occasion when a promise made to you was not kept. How did it affect you? On reflection, can you see that there might have been any acceptable reason for them to break their word?
2. What promise had Paul made to the Corinthians, and why did he not keep it?
3. With regard to the promises of God, both Jesus and the Holy Spirit have specific purposes to fulfil. What are they?
4. “Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and your ‘No’, ‘No’ ” (Matthew 5:37) There seems to be a contradiction between Jesus’ command and Paul’s actions ... doesn’t there??? Explain.
5. What are some of the results when professing Christians turn out to be untrustworthy? Should Christians keep all the promises they make, no matter what? Why/Why not?

Week 3

Theme: THE OLD AND THE NEW

Day 1 Read Exodus 34:29-35

What does it mean for a Christian to have “a radiant face”?

Day 2 Read Deuteronomy 29:2-4

Why is it not enough to see the great things ... miracles even ... done by the Lord?

Day 3 Read Jeremiah 31:30-34

How does the new covenant differ from the old?

Day 4 Read Ezekiel 36:24-28

“Heart of stone:”/”heart of flesh” (v 26)What ideas does this contrast bring to mind for you?

Day 5 Read Habakkuk 3:17-19

What makes this such a strong statement of confidence in God?

Pray for confidence. Pray that it might be appropriately placed.

Study Passage ... 2 Corinthians 3:1-18

1. People occasionally reminisce about “the good old days”. While not denying the good, it's often true that we don't remember “the bad” aspects of “the good old days” so easily, things which, if we had to endure them now, we'd find hard to take. Share some of those
2. In this passage, Paul is contrasting “the old” with “the new”. What are some of the differences he highlights between the two?
3. “Christ is the end of the law” (Romans 10:4) “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17) Do Christians no longer have to keep God's rules? Why/Why not?
4. What is Paul confident about (v 4)? How does this differ from any other sort of confidence people may exhibit? What are some matters that give you personally cause for confidence in your Christian life?

Week 4

Theme: PUTTING MINISTRY IN PERSPECTIVE

Day 1 Read Matthew 15:1-10

What warning does Jesus give about people who are spiritually blind?

Day 2 Read Ephesians 5:14-20

Note down some of the behaviour appropriate for those “living in the light”

Day 3 Read Isaiah 40:28-31

What keeps people from falling by the wayside in the Christian life?

Day 4 Read Romans 8:18-25

According to Paul, what belongs at the other end of this scale?

Day 5 Read Colossians 3:5-11

What effect is “inner renewal” meant to have on the believer?

Pray for a mature understanding of success and failure.

Study Passage ... 4:1-18

1. Reflecting on your life so far, note down one or two things which you consider personal successes -- "feel good " memories for you.
2. What does Paul avoid in the way he conducts his ministry (v. 1-6)? Note down some modern-day equivalents of these. What, by contrast, does Paul make sure he does?
3. "Treasure in jars of clay" (v. 7) is a striking image. What ideas about gospel ministry does it convey? Are these concepts helpful for you personally? Why?/Why not?
4. Does Paul pretend that the hard things confronting him simply aren't there? Or does he admit they are happening but "They're not such a big deal"? How does he face them without losing heart?
5. In what ways does the passage challenge our notions of "successful" ministry?

Week 5

Theme: AN AMBASSADOR'S MESSAGE

Day 1 Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-5

In what way does the Holy Spirit help us reach our heavenly home?

Day 2 Read 2 Corinthians 5:6-10

What is one reason for faith being essential to the Christian life?

[Note:--Paul has already written in 1 Corinthians about their tendency to set one ministry against another (1 Cor 1:10-17) and to place excessive emphasis on the gift of tongues(1 Cor 14:1-35). These problems, in an altered form, seem to be still affecting the Corinthian church]

Day 3 Read Romans 14:9-13

Name one way our behaviour ought to be affected when we truly grasp that we must all appear before the judgement seat of God."

Day 4 Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

What is required of those who (like ambassadors) have been given a trust?

Day 5 Read Isaiah 53:4-6, Galatians 3:13

What happened to the penalty for our sins?

Pray for the ability to discern between matters that are central to our ministries and matters that are ultimately side-issues.

Study Passage ... 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

1. Have you ever had strained relationships with other Christians? Did things ever get put right? If so, how? (Share if you are able ... change details to protect identities if it will help)
2. To whom is “tongues” directed? When Paul speaks in an intelligible and clear manner, who benefits (v 13)? “Pride goes before destruction” (Prov. 16:18). Why, then does Paul encourage pride here (v 12)?
3. What two realities control Paul’s exercise of his ministry (v 9-10, verse 14)? What does he hope will be the end result when these realities are properly appreciated?
4. Learn 2 Cor 5:17 by heart (including the reference). This will take more than the one week. Check one another out. Remember the 3 rules for scripture memory ... 1. Repeat. 2. Repeat. 3. Repeat.
5. What is the meaning of “Reconciliation”? (Use a dictionary if it helps) Whose fault was it that we needed reconciling with God? Who took the necessary steps to make reconciliation possible? If the strained relationship in Q. 1 was never resolved ... What could you do to set things right? *or* What could you have done back then when it was possible?

Week 6

Theme: THE OX AND THE ASS*

Day 1 Read Exodus 34:11-17

What instruction did God give the Israelites concerning the inhabitants of the land? What reason did he give?

Day 2 Read 2 Chronicles 18:1-3; 19:1-2

Why was God angry with Jehoshaphat? With whom had he made an alliance? What do you think induced him to do this?

Day 3 Read I Corinthians 15:12-19; 33

What sort of “bad company”(v 33) is Paul referring to? What influence is this having on the Corinthians?

Day 4 Read Matthew 5:13

What role do the people of God have in the world? How may this be compromised?

Day 5 Read Matthew 9:10-13

How is it possible to reconcile the attitude of Jesus towards sinners with all the other injunctions above (see Days 1-4)?

Pray for the courage to stand apart from others when faith demands it, the compassion to stand with them when love commands it, and the wisdom to know the difference.

see Deuteronomy 22:10

Study Passage ... 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:4

1. Can you recall examples of partnerships between people who differed so much that the partnership failed? (This might be in the area of personal relationships, in business, in sport, in the carrying out of a specific task such as an assignment at school/uni/college.)

What about partnerships where the differences served a **positive** purpose? Why the difference?

2. What is the mood of Paul's words in 6:16-7:1 (angry, pleased with them, a neutral imparting of a list of instructions ...)

Clue: Check the verses surrounding 6:16-7:1.

3. What connotations does the word "yoking" have? (It might be helpful to consider how it differs from "partnership", "friendship", "social acquaintance".) What reasons would you give to someone if you were advising them not to be "unequally yoked"?

What reasons does Paul give?

4. It's obvious that, in using the term "yoking", Paul isn't talking about a literal connecting between persons by means of a wooden bar. So how would you apply his instructions today?

Write 2 Corinthians 5:17 as you best remember it. Revise it again.

Week 7

Theme: ARRESTING THE SLIDE

Day 1 Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

How does Paul's care for the Thessalonians show through?

Day 2 Read Luke 3:7-14

What indicators will show that repentance is genuine?

Day 3 Read Acts 3:11-23

What results does repentance bring? What happens when people remain impenitent?

Day 4 Read Luke 15:11-32

What does Jesus teach about God that encourages repentance?

Day 5 Read 2 Corinthians 2:12-13, 7:6-7, 7:13, 8:1-13

What role has Titus played in Paul's ministry to the Corinthians?

Pray for the sensitivity and the love to be willing to restore gently those who are wandering, and to accept rebuke with grace. Galatians 6:1

Study Passage ... 2 Corinthians 7:5-16

1. For one reason or another, some mistakes we've made really stick in our mind. Describe a past mistake that's still clear to you.
2. What does Paul say here that reveals his depth of concern for the Corinthians?
3. Sometimes, in an attempt to make the gospel message clearer, people will use the phrase "be sorry" to replace "repent". (eg "Be sorry for the things in your life that make God unhappy") Taking note of Paul's comments in this passage
What difficulties/misunderstandings can that cause? Try to come up with a simpler, more appropriate way of saying "repent".
4. If it were necessary for you to rebuke another person, how would you do it? Are there other avenues of correction apart from rebuke? What would influence your choice between these?
5. How do you respond when corrected? Could your response be better? How?

Week 8

Theme: FREELY, FREELY GIVE

Day 1 Read 2 Corinthians 8:16-24

“Be as wise as serpents and gentle as doves”, Jesus told the disciples (Matthew 10:16). What wise policy has Paul adopted in regard to the monies that are being collected? ?

Day 2 Read 2 Corinthians 9:1-5

What other purpose is served by Paul’s sending representatives for the collection?

Day 3 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Paul doesn’t only give words of encouragement to the church. He also provides sound, practical advice to individual givers. What is it?

Day 4 Read Luke 6:38, Matthew 6:1-4

What principles does Jesus urge his followers to keep in mind when it comes to the matter of giving?

Day 5 Read Mark 12:41-44

Do you have to be wealthy to be generous?

Pray for insight into areas of your life which don’t sufficiently reflect the overflowing generosity of God

Study Passage ... 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

1. Think of one generous act you have committed in your life. Who was it for? Why did you do it? What did you get out of it? If you were able to relive the moment ... knowing what you know now ... would you do it again?
2. What was exemplary about the generosity of the Macedonian churches? (verses 1-5)
3. What encouragements does Paul give the Corinthians to be generous? (verses 6-11)
4. Paul could have commanded them to give, but he pointedly refused to do this (verse 8). Why (do you think) does he take this course of action?
5. What is one area (not necessarily money) where you could be more generous than you are now? Think of one specific circumstance, or one specific person, where you can practice this greater generosity over the remaining weeks of this study series. If possible, think through in concrete terms what you would need to have available to follow through on this. (eg, if it is to do with money, you might need to decide to put some aside on pay-day for this specific purpose)

Week 9

Theme: MINISTRY UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

Day 1 Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-14

Paul has already defended his apostleship to the Corinthians. What right does he affirm that ministers have?

Day 2 Read 1 Corinthians 9:15-25

What has Paul done with regard to his rights as a minister? Why?

Day 3 Matthew 23:1-12

What (in a few words) does Jesus condemn the pharisees for?

Day 4 Read 2 Corinthians 11:1-6

Who (does Paul suggest) is behind the deception of the Corinthians? Where has this deception led them?

Day 5 Read 2 Corinthians 11:7-15

What financial resources did Paul have during his time at Corinth? Try to find two results of this with regard to the Corinthians.

*Pray for the ability to encourage sound gospel ministry
without that encouragement degenerating into pride and rivalry*

Study Passage ... 2 Corinthians 10:1-18, 11:1-8

1. When a teacher is faced with an unruly class, he/she may:
 - a) ignore the disruption
 - b) punish those causing the disruption
 - c) punish the entire class

Share an experience of any of these that has happened to you/your children/grandchildren.

Paul's sudden change of tone in these verses has puzzled many. Do you have a suggestion to explain it?

2. What criticism does Paul level at the Corinthians (verse 7a). In what way are they being superficial?
3. Why is Paul not ashamed to "boast somewhat freely" (verse 8) of his authority as an apostle? Does this have implications for pastors today? Please explain.
4. "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord (verse 17)". What do you think Paul means by this? Is it wrong to take pride in a job well done? Why?
5. When is it O.K. to compare ministers with one another? When is it not?

Week 10

Theme: DISCIPLINE AND THE CONGREGATION

Day 1 Read 2 Corinthians 11:16-29

Look at the catalogue of sufferings Paul has undergone for the sake of the gospel.

If you went through something similar, what could be some *wrong attitudes* you could have about this?

Day 2 Read John 9:1-7

How long was this man blind? Why?

Day 3 Ephesians 1:7-10, 3:4-6

What is one of the deep mysteries God has revealed in New Testament times, unknown beforehand?

Day 4 Read Matthew 5:11-12

What reason does Jesus give for rejoicing in hardships?

Day 5 Read 2 Corinthians 13:5-14

What are the Corinthians to do in preparation for Paul's visit?
What does Paul hope will result?

*Pray that we might, as congregations of Christian people,
be responsive to the discipline of godly and loving teaching*

Study Passage ... 2 Corinthians 11:30-13:4

1. If you are told “So and so had a powerful ministry here” (referring to a previous minister in your church), what do you understand by that statement? What sort of activity does it bring to mind for you?
2. Go through the passage and list the aspects of Paul’s ministry you would consider to be “powerful”. Also the “weak” things.
3. Was Christ’s ministry powerful or weak?
What reasons do you have for saying this?
4. What will Paul do if he comes and finds the Corinthians living lives of open ungodliness? (ie, what form will his actions take?)
5. What sort of discipline is appropriate in our churches today? How (if at all, does this differ from Paul’s situation?)

