

Commentary on the Letters of Paul

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Introduction to Paul's Letters

Romans

1 & 2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1 & 2 Thessalonians

We are introduced to Paul and his teaching in the Book of Acts. We learn as much by the false accusations of his opposition as we do from the record of Paul's words and actions as recorded there by Luke. We learn early enough that Paul sees his work merely as a continuation of what Jesus did and said. By no means should we imagine that Paul regarded his letters as Scripture. Yet, the early churches must have deemed them too important a repository of truth to lose all of them in the dust of history. We know for certain we do not have them all, only these that have been preserved for whatever reason.

The greatest threat we face today is from people who insist on ignoring the context of these letters. The burden is upon us to understand the recipients, and occasion, but most of all the broader context of what Paul taught as a whole. Paul was a Hebrew man, a lawful citizen of Judah, along with being a Roman citizen. He had a foot in both worlds. He was not simply a highly trained Jewish scholar, but he spent years reviewing his entire rabbinical training in light of the teaching of Jesus. He did this all before he ever became acquainted with the Apostles. With Jesus, Paul rejected Hellenized Judaism in favor of the ancient Hebrew Mysticism of the Old Testament.

Paul is so reluctant to boast that he barely tells us how he learned the gospel message. He proctored the stoning of Stephen just a matter of weeks after Christ's Ascension. A few weeks later, he's on the way to Damascus to extend this persecution, is converted and stays there in town. From there, he hints at spending time alone with the risen Christ in Arabia, up to three years. From there, he returns to Damascus, but has to flee. It was only then that he met with the other Apostles, and they agree that what he learned is what they remembered of their time with Jesus. After that, he goes home to Tarsus for as much as a decade. Only later did he begin his missionary journeys.

He was so thoroughly literate in Greek that he could make up words from Greek roots that would be understood. He used Greek expressions and modes of thought, but he consistently uses these things to express a generally Hebraic mystical faith. Thus, we see him pulling in very ancient Hebrew customs as native to first century Christian worship. It is he who reminded Timothy that it was necessary to parse the Old Testament through the Holy Spirit to discern what was mere symbolism so as to abstract what was binding on the conscience of a Christian.

These letters are not at all in chronological order, but in order of importance as the early churches viewed it. The actual chronology is very hard to ascertain, and may not matter in some cases. For example, we know that Galatians came early, but we have only guesswork when. It would seem the Thessalonian letters came earliest, shortly after he got to Corinth, estimated around 52 AD. He wrote

the Roman letter while dealing with problems at Corinth a few years later, writing more than the two letters we have. We collect several of his letters as Prison Letters from Rome (Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians) often considered 60-62 AD. The letters to Timothy appear to come rather later in his life. Most people agree that Paul was released from his first Roman confinement, but was arrested again a few years later and executed roughly 66 AD.

Introduction to Romans

There is no mystery who wrote this letter. Paul was in his final sojourn among the Corinthians, about to sail to Jerusalem with the relief funds that had been collected from the Gentile churches. We believe that was in the year 57 AD. Typically, such letters would have been sent via some private courier. This was common in ancient times, and particularly in the Roman Empire. We also know Paul seldom actually put pen to paper, but used a professionally trained scribe.

Of all Paul's letters preserved by the early churches, this one comes first in the collection because of what it covers, and how it covers it. Paul writes to a rather large congregation, perhaps more than one. While mostly Gentile, it would naturally include some Jewish Christians. Paul addresses some of the standard residual differences, but there seems no significant conflict between these two groups.

Instead, most of Paul's effort is bringing the ancient mysteries of Old Testament faith, as understood by Jesus, the Son of God, to a very foreign Western world. Paul is uniquely positioned to understand both. This explanatory letter serves as a foundation for Christian doctrine, a fairly well organized explanation. However, Paul's intent is not so much offering some approach to systematic doctrine, but responds to questions and complaints. He seeks to correct false understandings and we sense not everything here is a direct response to something coming from Rome. Some are aimed at questions that seem to pop up everywhere he goes.

The biggest problem for the Roman believers was failing to understand how thoroughly Eastern Christian faith is, how different it is from Western assumptions about reality. Paul characterized the issue as flesh versus Spirit and knowing versus faith. While the two are not opposed by nature, they do make conflicting demands on human activity. The intellect recoils from things that it cannot seize directly via analysis. It becomes necessary to show how faith is above reason, but that intellect can be made to serve faith.

Romans 1

It's not as if the Christians in Rome haven't heard of Paul. Any discussion of faith begins with the one who holds it. Faith is not some objective reality holding a separate existence; it does not exist aside from people who are bound by its power. So it is, Paul begins by teaching about himself as the one whose faith holds him. The image is one who is committed to serving a Lord, a very Eastern concept of feudal allegiance. His service is carrying the gospel.

That gospel is the story of a long promised final revelation of God, commonly known as the God of Israel. Paul wastes no time in asserting the concept of Two Realms, that of the Flesh and of the Spirit. All the proof anyone needs in the flesh for Jesus' claim to be the Son of God was in the Resurrection.

His ultimate authority in the higher Realm of the Spirit most certainly trumps the power of death itself in this Realm of the Flesh. He also had the authority to bring that powerful revelation to life in others, which is how Paul came to be an apostle. He does not present it as a title, but as a mission to share the gospel with everyone, the Romans among them.

Paul thus addresses those in Rome who share that eternal spiritual heritage, regardless of their human background. Paul had been praying for them extensively, hoping to see them face-to-face. He wanted to be a part of what their faith had been doing, and make them a part of his. This is how the Realm of Heaven works. Paul mentions wanting to preach there and we know from other places he would never horn in on someone else's ministry, so it's safe to assume Rome had yet to see any apostolic visits.

While Rome had already seen some tensions between the government and this minor sect whose founder was executed for treason, Paul would be first to stand and deny that there was anything scandalous about following Christ. It is the hope of all mankind, arising among Jews, but certainly intended for all humanity from the very first. The message of Jesus is a living thing, growing stronger in all that receive it. From ancient times, it was understood that true Life was a matter of commitment.

God's wrath is justly poured out on suppression of this message. Sufficient was the revelation to all humanity; had they wanted to know the truth, it was always there. The starting point was simply acknowledging God as Creator. Instead, they began to seek other ways, whatever it was their minds could find. Humanity had long built upon what man could accomplish by his own power and intellect. But it led them to all sorts of filthy religious practices, things that really made no sense at all. They didn't want God's truth, so He allowed them free rein, as they strayed farther and farther from the truth. All the vilest human passions became religious necessity.

All the various sins of humanity are similarly the result of rejecting God's revelation and His provision for life in this world. Because they chose as their truth only what they could manage in their fallen blindness, God locked them under that choice. It didn't matter what flavor it was. Anything other than what God provides is sin, and sin's price is death. But mankind rejected the lesson of death, and provoked each other to greater depravity.

How bluntly could Paul have said it? By its very nature, fallen human understanding is incapable of approaching the truth. To this very day, the greatest heresy is assuming that the rational mind of man can recognize any measure of ultimate truth. The second half of this chapter is Paul's effort to point out that lie. Man avoided the truth because he could not reach it, could not even want it. That truth starts with the realization of God's holiness and our own horrific sinfulness. The mind of man must flee such truth, because it is utterly lacking in the means to process it. Yet God graciously provided a facsimile of that higher truth through His various Law Covenants, so there could be no excuse.

Romans 2

Paul eviscerates human moral reasoning. Since man has rejected God's revelation, God's declaration of what is sin versus what is righteousness, man is uniquely disqualified for judging anything at all. So long as man does not humble himself before the Lord, he cannot do right. Yet, because God does not stoop to simple stimulus and response in His wrath, man mistakes God's patience for proof there is no

God. There is no consciousness of how abundant is the grace of God, holding open the door to repentance. The fundamental nature of human life is that it ends, and after that is God's justice. There is no mystery about what it takes to please Him.

This regimen has been the same for all humanity from the beginning. Merely being a Jew is no advantage, either. For those born outside Israel, they perish by the conscience; those who had Moses perish by his much clearer standards. The Covenant of Moses was not about special privilege by birth, but by the privilege of properly informed obedience. Do you suppose God hated Gentiles because He didn't give them the Law of Moses? Anyone determined to please God inevitably does so by his desire, whether Gentile or Jew. The real standard is not blood kinship with some ancient forefather, but of spiritual kinship to Jesus the Messiah. He will be the standard of justice in the Final Judgment.

Surely, the gift of Jewish ancestry is precious, indeed! The clarity of God's Law Covenant for God's own nation, the sure knowledge of what God demands of all mankind, called as a nation to enlighten the world – this is the heritage of the Jews. Have you never thought to compare your own life to that Law? Do you preach about stealing, but find some other way to grab what isn't rightfully yours? You quote, "Do not commit adultery." Do you then excuse the lustful adultery of your heart? You find idolatry repulsive, but do you not make yourself repulsive to your own God? You boast in the Law while ignoring its intent. People see sniping legalism as a cover for lawless hatred. You give Jehovah a bad name.

By circumcising your foreskins, you bear in your flesh the mark of the Law. That's fine, so long as it represents your commitment to the Law. But if your life undermines the meaning of the Law, that circumcision means nothing. Someone you call "unclean" because he lacks the ceremonial mark, if he manages to observe the real intent of the Law, do you think God will not call that man His own? Such a man will stand as your judge, even though you have all these ceremonial trappings and a written Covenant.

What do you suppose it means to be a Jew? Nothing, if your heart is not right. God will call "His own" those who love Him in full commitment to His reign. Real circumcision is a heart cleansed of evil, regardless of any ritual in the flesh. This is a matter of spirit and Spirit, and God seeks those who conform to His Spirit.

Thus, Paul shows that the Jews had drifted far, far away from what God had intended. By that point in history, their distinction among the races of mankind was gone, frittered away, sold cheaply for the shallow thrills of rationalism. They thought they finally understood the Law, but were totally outside it.

Romans 3

It's not as if God granted no special privileges to the Nation of Israel. The thread of Heaven's narrative, the revelation of God, came through them. Though they failed to live by it themselves, the revelation is still binding on all humanity. Their failure was not God's failure, but forms the spiritual paradox of proof that God is just and all humans are sinners, seeing His very own People failed Him. Based on human reason, this seems quite unfair. If it took the failure of the Jewish nation to manifest God's righteousness, why are they still held accountable? This is part of the same foolish human reasoning

that claims Christians actually promote sin, as if that would make God's holiness even more evident. Such logic is from Hell.

So Jews have some advantage, but does it make them superior? By no means, since they are sinners, the same as all humanity. Paul quotes extensively from the Old Testament passages that it seemed many Jewish leaders forgot: No one stands before God on his own righteousness. Yes, He revealed His Laws to both Gentiles (Covenant of Noah) and Jews (Covenant of Moses). But the Laws were not aimed at establishing righteousness before God, but to establish the unmistakable knowledge of the Fall. Man is sinful and cannot instinctively know what's right, so the Laws were necessary to keep humanity alive, and to keep him seeking for something higher than his own senses and logic.

Spiritual redemption was another matter. The righteousness God seeks is not from the Laws, but merely indicated by Laws and prophecy. The righteousness he wants for us is found now in commitment to, and trust in, Jesus Christ. It is the same for everyone, since all are fallen, and all can be redeemed by making Jesus their Lord. His blood paid the final price for all sin, and this is the same justice of God still at work. Indeed, God had been more patient with Gentiles than with Jews, because Gentiles didn't have the revelation of God in their heritage. Now they have something within reach in the person of Jesus Christ.

So what is the point in boasting about obeying the Laws? Jews felt that having the Laws gave them an excuse for boasting, but God's requirement of faith in Jesus Christ destroys boasting. Mere ritual precision and fastidious legalism, the best human logic can make of God's revelation, accomplished nothing for the Jews. It was always a matter of full personal commitment, and that obviates any laws. It's not as if God denied making Gentiles, too. All mankind comes from His hands; all must face Him on the same terms. But only in foolish human reasoning would this make the Laws pointless. The Laws paint an image, a simulacrum of faith. The only way to obey the Laws truly is faith, so faith is the best support for Laws.

Romans 4

The Jews proudly proclaimed, "We have Abraham as our father!" While legally accurate, it was not necessarily the truth. Abraham came before the Law of Moses, which put him under the Laws of Noah. But in Abraham, we have the birth of something new, and it was not simply the foreshadowing of the Nation of Israel. It was the birth of a covenant that rose above Laws, anchored in the Spirit Realm of Heaven. Paul explains the Covenant of Abraham by correcting twisted Pharisaical logic, so it should not be read as answering all our modern Western questions.

In human terms, Abraham was the grandfather of Israel. He was a mighty Aramaic sheikh in the Land of Canaan. Yet, he was the vassal of God Almighty, according to a covenant offer extended by God. His calling was not a matter of performance, but something entirely within the whims of God's own mind. His standing was a matter of his wholesale commitment to the calling, not his ability to perform. We make a grave error when we propose it is either works or faith, if by "faith" we mean some abstract reasonable trust resulting from some cognitive process. It is not a matter of being or doing. We cannot ever really know the nature of things, including our own nature (being). It is surely not a matter of performance, because no man is perfect (doing). If it were the latter, Abraham could boast of an achievement, and make claims on God's blessings as pay due. But such lawful

performance would not grant him standing before God.

God exercised His unilateral choice to grant Abraham that standing. Abraham's part was to seize upon the offer, to trust God and commit to Him as Lord. A labor contract has wages that are earned, but to receive something you could not earn requires total commitment of the self. Abraham was being drafted as a family member in God's household. He was expected to commit himself totally. That commitment is the true work of righteous standing.

Even under the Law of Moses, David notes one thing had not changed since the time of Abraham: Right standing before God was a matter of God forgiving those who cannot help but sin. Do you suppose David could claim that forgiveness simply because he was a good circumcised Israeli? Cannot the uncircumcised find that forgiveness? The Scriptures said that God considered Abraham righteous by his complete loyalty to God. At what point in his life did it say that? It was well before he was circumcised. So that sign in the flesh followed behind the change in his heart. Literal Father of the Circumcised he may be, but what really matters is his spiritual fatherhood of the committed, regardless of signs in the flesh.

The Covenant of Abraham was neither about his lawful heirs seizing ownership of the physical land, nor primacy over the people of the earth. Rather, that covenant made him Father of the Faithful. The blessings of Abraham are for those who embrace his brand of faith. So if the Jews are by Law heirs of Abraham, then the man's faith meant nothing, and God's promises were just nice words. The purpose of Law was to bring a consciousness of sin, the need for redemption, so mankind would not be eternally lost thinking all was right with God by default.

The Covenant inheritance of Abraham is faith, which opened the door to God's grace on the earth. The Law was not part of the provisions of that covenant but of another covenant entirely. Quite literally, Abraham was the father of several other nations on this earth, but the point was spiritual inheritance. This was proclaimed while Abraham stood in the very Presence of God Almighty, to whom Abraham was personally and totally committed. By His words He calls into being things which had not previously existed. This is why Abraham was able to come to such commitment, because this same God was the one who said Abraham would have countless direct descendants. Abraham considered his advanced age, and Sarah's long-quiet womb, as minor details compared to the promise of such a God.

Upon the basis of such faith, commitment and loyalty, we hear it said of Abraham that he was considered and declared by God as righteous. God made sure this was published long after Abraham's life. If we can seize upon such loyalty to God, who gave a child to a couple nearly dead, and we can embrace the idea that the same God can raise His own Son from the grave, after that awful price was paid for our sins, then we can walk in His life and receive His justification.

Thus, Paul counters all the perverted notions about the Covenant of Abraham, showing that it was the first Covenant of Faith. Then he shows how Jesus renewed that covenant and gave it new meaning and new life in Himself.

Romans 5

Jesus rose from the dead, but the political situation didn't change. Obviously, He was raised to a

Kingdom not of this world, as He told Pilate. How do you explain gaining a spiritual birth, with citizenship in Heaven? How do you put into words the significance of that? Paul is forced to use symbolic language.

We gain entrance to this Covenant of Faith, receiving an eternal identity, as if we had always been part of it. We are on good terms with God, just as was Abraham, because of our loyalty to Christ. Not only do we have the lawful right to enter, but we are formally introduced to the Father by His Son. We wear God's glory in our souls like a vestment of authority as servants of the highest ruler of all. But if we see only with eyes of the flesh, we'll never understand how eternal things translate into our fallen world. Tribulation is a privilege that marks this divine office. It's good training. If we can bring ourselves to the place where we already expect troubles, where we consider this the norm, then we can exercise patience in every inconvenience. We take it in stride as a feature of our service, so that difficulties are precisely the context in which we are most confident. There is no shame at all, but we exude the serenity of His own divine Presence in us.

We can look back and realize that the timing of Messiah's arrival was perfect. He came when there was no other hope of redemption. We realize that in this world only rarely would anyone offer his life to save a really good friend, but the Best Man of all time willingly died for us while we were still His enemies. The price has been paid, and when the Final Wrath of God falls, we shall escape. If His death absorbed the penalties of our sins, His eternal life oozing into ours cannot be taken away. So we now strut confidently through the awful sorrows of this fallen world because when it is gone, we will still be standing.

The first human on earth somehow managed to bring sin into Creation. We aren't permitted to review the authority granted to him in making that choice on our behalf. With sin comes death, both literal and spiritual. But because that first man was tainted with death, everyone born from him carried the same fallen nature. Adam the man disobeyed a direct command. While it is true that his descendants didn't commit that same particular sin, it wasn't a matter of Laws, but of sin nature. It may well have been a single sin of a single man that brought death to all, but the grace of God isn't like that; grace brings life to many via the single choice of a single Savior. The inheritance of Adam is condemnation to all, even from one sin. But the inheritance of Christ is the redemption of all sins, not just that one sin of Adam. Death reigned over all men in that one Adam, but in Jesus Christ, those standing in God's grace and favor, His righteousness reigns to eternity.

So one man's offense condemned all humanity, and the other man's righteous gift to all humanity brings life. The rebellion of one made countless others sinful; the faithful service of another makes countless people just. The addition of Laws to the picture merely adds definition, showing just how many ways people naturally defy God. Law places the issue right where man can see it and his fallen mind can grasp it. But where sin became prominent and obvious, grace overwhelmed it. The power of sin lasts only until death, but the power of grace to bring righteousness is eternal, even as Jesus Himself is eternal. Paul struggles to put into words eternal truths, and if we cling to those words as absolute facts, we miss entirely what he is saying.

Romans 6

In terms of human logic, that mighty grace of God, that permission from Him to enter His presence

without facing His wrath, seems to arise from our sins – cause and effect, right? It's as if sin is a necessary ingredient in the formula. If some is good, is not more better? Do we not see more grace from more sin?

Such logic is pitiful, of course. From God's point of view, we have died to sin. He came along and breathed life into our dead spirits. That life is His Spirit. We who once were citizens of fallen earth, where man is fallen and it requires laws to point out that fallen nature, are now dead from that land. We are now alive in another realm entirely. The symbolic ritual of baptism from ancient times was not just washing away sin, and a little dirt isn't going to affect your soul, but baptism is a ritual of drowning, dying in this life and coming back up in another life. That new life is the same life of Christ risen from the dead.

What's the point of embracing His death as our own, if we do not embrace the life that follows? That old self was nailed to the Cross with Him. Our former citizenship was as slaves in the Fallen Kingdom of Darkness, and we are now free from that slavery and citizenship. In the likeness of our future eternal life in Heaven itself, we live now caught between the two. Jesus won't be dying again because His authority is well above the power of Death. He left the Fallen Kingdom where Death rules, and is now free. While you and I are still in the fallen bodies, we are already officially citizens of Heaven. So, it remains only the formality of this flesh expiring. While you are waiting, assert your heavenly privileges. Don't let sin tell you how to live. Don't allow any part of you to serve Death's purposes. Rather, live as infiltrators from Heaven, committing acts of sabotage on Death's kingdom.

Law is a part of the Fallen Kingdom; it is Heaven's response to man's fallen nature. Grace is the equivalent of Law in the Realm of Heaven. We live by grace, not laws. How could this mean we become lawless and sin again? Don't be silly! Whom do you serve? Which side gets to decide your actions? If you let sins and laws rule your mind, you are slaves of Death. If you let righteousness and grace rule your mind, you are servants of God. Show your gratitude to God, who set you free from sin's slavery. It was obedience to Christ's teachings that got you on the right path; don't turn back now. It's not about the mechanics, but a personal bond between God and you.

It's necessary to use human terms as parables of higher truths. Our remaining flesh prevents us from grasping higher truths easily. Human reason is the enemy of the Spirit unless it is the servant of the Spirit. Back when you were in the flesh, you could not have received spiritual things at all, because your fleshly intellect was the best you had, and it was completely effective for spiritual business. You dodge one sin by law and logic and end up in worse sins. The life of righteousness was impossible, because your spirit was dead. So what were the fruits of that life under the Law? Aren't you ashamed of how it obviously led to death?

Compare that with your new life in Christ. You serve with your living spirit the Spirit of God, and the fruit of your spiritual efforts yields a crop of righteousness, acceptable to God. Your spirit will never die. The economy of the Kingdom of Darkness is snowballing debt under sin, because nothing you do can pay what you owe, so you die deep in sin. The economy of Heaven is a gift economy, and you never die, you just keep receiving.

Romans 7

We have moved from one realm to another, not out of all realms. It is not as if we suddenly leave behind all constraints. Rather, we have moved from one system to another.

Paul offers first a lower example, a parable, which indicates something of the higher truth. When you are born in this fallen world, the Law Covenants apply to you. You are within a system. For example, you know a woman in this world can be married to a man. If she then tries to marry another, she breaks the law. If the first husband dies then that law no longer applies to her. Death is the endpoint of law. Now apply this to a higher case. If you die, the law has no hold over you. If you embrace the Cross of Christ, that old regime loses its claim on you. You now belong to the new regime of the spirit. The old cannot tax your labors, only the new. You are the Bride of Christ; you are bound to Him. You are not free from all constraints, but free in the sense that you don't serve sin. Instead, we serve righteousness.

Does this dire need for deliverance from the law mean the law is a bad thing? Don't be silly. Law serves a glorious purpose: It points out the need for redemption. It throws the nature of sin into high relief. That brings its own problems, of course. Once you become aware of sin, your sinful nature uses it to drive you mad with all sorts of irresistible temptations. It seems the Law defines for your sin nature what sort of fun you are missing. Paul makes it personal. There was a time when I sinned, he says, without any consciousness of sin. But when I finally grasped the authority of the law, sin revved up the engines, and I was doomed. That is an utterly necessary step toward life. Sin knew my weakness, hid it from me, and drove me to greater grief. I was trapped in guilt and sorrow, never able to climb out. Still, a consciousness of sin through the law is a good thing.

Was the good Law of God what killed me? No, sin killed me long before I knew the Law. The Law alerted me to my death, alerted me to the presence of something I could not eradicate. The Law is divine; it came down from Heaven. But I am from flesh. The Law places in me an awareness of what is right, but no power to act on it. I strain toward the right, but can never reach it. Instead, I end up in what I rightly despise. This shows I have embraced the standards of the Law. Sin living in me is now more powerful than ever. My heart belongs to the Law, but my flesh belongs to sin.

What an awful thing it is to believe in a law you cannot obey! It seems I am now twice accursed for having embraced the Law. It gave birth to a nagging conscience. The harder I try, the more surely I know I have failed. How can I escape this living death?

The same God who gave you the conscience is the One who delivers by His Son. But it begins when your mind embraces something it cannot extract from the flesh. It begins when your mind surrenders its throne and submits to the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8

The nagging voice of false guilt should begin to die in Christ. It belongs to the old fleshly existence. As we readjust ourselves to operating in the Spirit rather than in the flesh, we should realize that we are free from the old sentence of death. Embracing the Law was half the battle, but the victory was finished in Christ. He came to us under the Law, but lacking our sin nature, had the authority to pass sentence on the whole mess. Thus, what the Law rightly demanded He was able to fulfill in us,

because we pass from that old Fallen Realm into the Realm of the Spirit.

The human mind readily embraces only what it can control, what it can discern from its own resources. We who have His Spirit are able to rise above that limitation. Intellect alone is death, but a mind that follows the spirit learns eternal peace. Intellect alone is not capable of grasping things of God, but of necessity must rule Him out of all considerations. If your highest faculty is intelligence, you cannot please God. The most deadly error of modern Western Christianity is the assertion that the intellect needs no redemption or only partial redemption, that the mind does not fully participate in the Fall. Paul could hardly have been more overt in showing that human reason is incapable of finding truth on its own, or even wanting it.

But you are not left there. You have a higher spiritual faculty if God has brought to life your spirit where His Spirit dwells in you. Without that presence of His Son, one cannot claim the Father. So while your flesh perishes and your mind with it, your spirit comes more alive and righteousness invades your being. The presence of His Spirit in you marks you as one who will share in the same resurrection as the Son, and your mortal existence here will be His life.

We do, indeed, have obligations, but not to the flesh. Living by laws in the flesh is not life. Living by the Spirit is real Life. When you surrender your will to the Spirit, you become a child of God. Your citizenship in the flesh was bondage and fear, but your citizenship in Heaven starts with calling the Creator "Daddy, Papa." God Himself makes this clear to us in our spirits. We become fellow heirs with Christ if we can just let go of this life, and embrace suffering on the human level just as Jesus did.

Whatever people of this world call "suffering" is hardly an imposition compared to God's glorious revelation manifested through us. Indeed, all Creation longs for that full revelation coming through us. The whole universe is held hostage to sin, captive under the Creator's Laws, He who offered it up as the prize to be won back. Our presence and obedient living reclaims it, we who have also been won back from sin. Something in us hears the cry of agony, on the verge of delivering a whole new existence, and we join in the plea for full release for all Creation. We are eager for God to keep adding more to His Kingdom, because each one is another part of us yet missing.

The only thing that keeps us from going insane in this life is the knowledge that we are tools for some further addition to the Kingdom. As long as we don't see it finished, it remains a hope of longing, the urge to keep struggling. Yes, we are failures in this flesh, but the Spirit uses us anyway. We can't even pray for the right things, but the Holy Spirit in us prays things for which there are no words. God knows our situation, and provides the intercession for us that covers our needs. So, for those of us who desire to please Him, it all works out the way He wants.

We cannot imagine how, but He knew us before we knew Him. The end result of our lives was established before Creation itself, that we should each be conformed to the standard set by His Son, so that He would be only the First Son of many. With our destiny set, we each were called out of this fallen world, granted His pardon, and we shall surely reflect His glory onto this awful world.

Where does that leave us? It won't matter who opposes us, because there is no authority on a par with the God we serve. If God has gone so far as to offer His own Son, surely all the things He gave to His Son will be ours, as well. Who is left to accuse if God says we are innocent? There is no one whose authority matches the Son, who walked through human death, then rose again on His own authority,

who took His place at God's right hand, and stands there defending us in the Court of Heaven. There is nothing that can remove us from His favor. All the sorrows of this world combined should not be enough to make us doubt. What better situation is possible than to be counted worthy of dying in His service?

Count Paul among those who have seen it all. Dead or alive, facing angels or demons or other spirit beings, any time, any place, and under any other condition you can imagine or can't imagine, nothing can change God's decision to embrace us as His children in His Son, Christ Jesus.

Romans 9

So with this marvelous redemption from God comes one sorrow for Paul's heart: his nation. He would gladly exchange his own great salvation for theirs. Look at all they have had – adopted as God's own nation on earth, chosen to reveal God, inheriting the covenants, recipients of God's own Laws for mankind, His divine worship in the Temple, all those promises from obeying the Law, inheriting the blessings of the Patriarchs, the people from whom the Messiah was born, and Him as God Almighty in the flesh. They refused, not only the Messiah, but also everything necessary to understand the Messiah, and could not be bothered to remain faithful to the Law. If Paul could change that, he felt it would be worth going to Hell in their place.

Why could God Almighty not make His plan work? Did He choose the wrong people? No, because it's all too easy to forget that the name "Israel" was not about DNA, but a matter of covenant identity. Paul has already explained how their claim on Abraham was false, since only those who inherit his faith inherit his blessings. It was Isaac, the symbolic Child of Promise, not the other sons of Abraham, who carried forward the blessings. It was the matter of God's unilateral promise to Sarah that she would bear a son in old age. And so it was for the next generation, where before the birth of Rebecca's twins, God chose the elder to serve the younger. Some things have nothing to do with human character, but are a matter of God's divine prerogatives bringing about His desire. Do you doubt the same principle applies in succeeding generations, down to that very day Paul wrote?

Such a thing would be unfair if we did it, but this is the Creator we are talking about. Even with Moses, God warned that His favor rested where He pleased, needing no consultation with humans to decide. So Pharaoh, who would have been just as mean and nasty had he been a peasant, was made ruler of Egypt so that God could reveal Himself in crushing that nation. God does not have to meet our tests of fairness. Dare we question why He considers sinful some that sin when He hardened them? Go ahead, human; go argue with Him. Try to imagine a clay pot arguing with the potter. Meanwhile, consider how long God waited before He executed His punishment. That's how He reveals Himself. He sets forth some vessels to carry His mercy through this fallen world.

So, He calls to His mercy both Jews and Gentiles. He warned through Hosea the prophet how He could decide for Himself whom to call "My people." Isaiah offered the same warning. Just as He chooses but a handful of sand from the seashore to preserve, so a very few from the Nation of Israel would see Heaven. Even earlier, Isaiah said that Israel deserved the same fate as Sodom and Gomorrah, but He saved a few of them.

So here we are, with Gentiles who never knew nor cared about God, called to redemption and made

righteous by faith. Compare that to Israel, who were sure they had God all wrapped up, chasing the tiniest implications of the Law that cannot bring righteousness. Why? Did the Law fail? No, they failed to seek it through personal commitment. They objectified a very personal covenant with God. You would think, as Isaiah also said, that if you keep tripping over something, maybe you would pay attention to it. So, God made faith the central issue, personified as a man, and anyone who embraces His teaching would never stumble again.

So the key to understanding predestination is embracing it as a personal truth, as the choice of God to reclaim you individually from the flood of damnation rushing down to Hell. To see it as some impersonal principle is blasphemous, just as objectifying the Law was blasphemous. Jesus was the Law personified, and His own nation rejected Him. They rejected the Law, as surely as they closed themselves off from its ultimate purpose.

The purpose of the Law was to offer a front-row seat with a program guide to the show. It could not allow you to rewrite the script, but to understand and appreciate what someone else has written. You can be ignorant of all this and be totally infuriated when you are treated as mere scenery, or you can sit down and let God have His way and discover the marvelous story as it unfolds. It is your one best chance to get every good thing available in this life, in part by letting you understand what is good.

Romans 10

This one-on-one redemption from God is very hard on the Jews. If it were possible for a whole nation to be redeemed, it would be so much easier. Paul prayed constantly to see his nation turn to Christ. As nations go, they surely have a zeal for God. Too bad it is not mated to discernment. They had cut themselves off from the higher spiritual understanding, so the true nature of justice with God escaped them. Instead, they struggled to establish a justice that mere intellect could build, and this was never what God had in mind. His Son was the final culmination of what the Law meant, the ultimate expression of that Law, so that God's justice would come to every one who embraced Him.

From the beginning, Moses wrote (Leviticus 18:5) of the Law as the path to God's justice, the starting point. But it required complete loyalty, not something one can do simply by observing rituals; that loyalty was part of the Law. Passing through the Law, one can find a higher plane of existence. It was there in plain sight for anyone with a living spirit. Moses also wrote (Deuteronomy 30:12-14) that there was no need to go to Heaven and pull it down; Christ Himself came down from Heaven voluntarily. There was no need to die before you found it; Christ died for us, and came back with the final solution. If there is any hope at all of understanding it, surely it can be no plainer than it is in Christ. It was always a matter of confession (symbolized by the mouth) and commitment (symbolized by the heart).

Paul quotes Isaiah's prophecy (28:16) of the Cornerstone. When you build your life on Christ, you won't be acting rashly, but will have a solid hope. This is the same for everyone on earth, and it was always planned to include the Gentiles. Paul quotes Joel 2:32, which falls in the context of God's promise to pour out His Spirit on all flesh. Israel had no reason to expect that this would apply to them alone. They had the privilege of revealing it, not of owning it. Any human seeking God will find Him.

Israel was supposed to carry that message to the Gentiles. They were supposed to live the truth before a watching world, so the world could commit themselves to the Creator of All Things. The nations could hardly be moved to belief if Israel never delivered the message and God made clear the calling to preach it. Way back, when Israel was suffering under threat from Assyria, Nahum promised good news was on the way. And when Isaiah had warned that they would be carried away to Babylon, what a blessing it would be to hear the news that Cyrus had released them to return. Why was this blessed good news of redemption never shared with the Gentiles? This is the sort of thing one boasts of to the ends of the earth! But Israel did not obey, nor even receive the true meaning of the message themselves.

This, too, was prophesied, when Isaiah asked, "Who is going to believe this?" For in that context (ch. 52-53), Isaiah had warned that the redemption of God would go to many nations who had never known Him, because Israel would reject it. Indeed, faith lies dormant until the message is heard, and that message is God's revelation. How were the Gentiles prepared for this? Creation itself was sufficient testimony to reveal God, David said in Psalm 19:4. Why did Israel not confirm that message? Didn't they know it was the mission? They knew. Moses warned them (Deuteronomy 32:21) that having been unfaithful to God, two could play that game. He would shame them by creating a new nation for Himself of faithful people, drawn from Gentiles. Isaiah was more blunt (65:1-2), when he said God would draw directly to Himself people who never heard of Him. They would be only too glad to embrace Him. But concerning His own nation, Israel, He had been striving to get their attention from the very beginning.

So we see that redemption of a whole nation had been tried, and it could not be done. God could do it, but the people would not. Instead, redemption came to individuals, scattered across the face of all humanity. Only from that personal spiritual birth could a nation be formed.

Romans 11

So the Jews cannot sneer any longer at Gentiles. By the same token, hating Jews for failing to seize the opportunity is also evil. The magnificent failure of Israel as a nation does not condemn every Jew individually. That should have been obvious, given that Paul, the writer of this letter, is Jewish to the point that he could trace his tribal heritage. God knew how this would turn out, and He knew some of the Jews would turn to Him in faith. Indeed, Elijah learned that lesson. When he complained that he felt alone in his faith, the Lord told him there were yet 7000 that He had preserved who had not committed idolatry. There has always been a Righteous Remnant, and there was one when Paul wrote this letter.

It is by grace alone, and such has always been the case. They refused to take the grace route. Twisting the Law from its mystical basis into a matrix of mere performance closed off the way into God's presence for the nation as a whole. The very thing they claimed to have, and should have had – access to God's favor – was denied them. Even on the fleshly level, they lost His favor. So a select few rediscovered the path, and the rest were driven farther from it. Isaiah had prophesied that they would progressively lose what little they had. Paul also quotes a Psalm in which David laments his own kingdom struggles against his determination to seek the Lord. Thus, let them have that rejection of God in full measure.

Recall here the long history of Israel's slide away from truth revealed. From the foundation of the Patriarchs, and their Ancient Near Eastern mysticism, Israel suffered either the emotional superstitions (fake mysticism) of the Baal worshipers, or the man-centered notions of Babel. The Tower was based on the idea that mankind united can overpower God. So, the leadership of Judah first drifts into the arrogance of human wisdom, aping Assyria and Babylon. Then came the wealth-centered religion of Persia, followed by the high rational intellect of Greece. In the end, it was this embrace of Gentile culture that killed it for them, as they rejected the spiritual mysticism of God's revelation.

But this did not mean every Jew is forever condemned. Rather, the rest of the world should be grateful. Given the track record of Israel in spreading the message, it's a good thing they rejected Christ. So now the gospel goes to Gentiles so the Jews can see what they are missing. When the elect from among the Jews turn, it's an even greater blessing to Gentile believers. Did the Roman Christians not rejoice in Paul's faith? Paul surely rejoiced in his apostleship to the Gentiles. Does anyone notice that all the Apostles were Jews? His joy in missions was the greatest inducement he could offer to his fellow Jews. The Gentiles need faithful Jews, so should celebrate especially everyone who turns.

Paul refers to the practice of offering God the first portion of a batch of bread dough, which portion sanctified and blessed the rest. It's too easy to miss this: The batch of dough is the Kingdom of Heaven, and the firstfruits are the Jews; the bulk would be Gentiles. Then Paul uses the image of root and branch, extending it to the concept of olive trees. Domestic olive trees lived incredibly long, but were fruitful only if pruned, cut back yearly. The trunk was preserved, and if the branches failed to grow any fruit, they were cut off and a wild olive branch was grafted in to revitalize the tree. Wild olive trees were typically not very fruitful. It was no point of pride to be a grafted wild branch, since it was the root that caused the fruitfulness. Rejoice in being made fruitful, Gentiles, lest you embarrass God, become fruitless, and He takes your life.

It is too easy to miss the very vital point of that image. The revelation of God should bear fruit. You can't draw truth from outside the revelation, since all truth reflects revelation, or it's not truth. The Gentiles must absorb the entire understanding and world-view of what Israel was meant to be, or there will be no oil of the Spirit, no flame of revelation in the lamp. This is not mere belief in intellectual propositions, but something much deeper. The grafted wild branches had to absorb an entirely different juice, a wholly different frame of mind, including the Ancient Mystical Hebraic epistemology. Israel as a whole was cut off, but any Jew can be grafted back into his own heritage.

Everyone has to make the shift, because that's where the grace of God rests upon the earth. The mystical understanding sees that God revealed His truth, and the Law was simply a concrete image pointing to a higher mystery. The revelation of God was aimed at creating a spiritual nation, but Israel rejected the terms, and drifted farther and farther away from it. The promises of God are in that domain of revelation. If the Jews evacuate the domain, it does not go away. It stands open to anyone else who will embrace the truth. But the truth is eternal, and cannot be modified by human effort; human wisdom cannot open portals of entry different from the ones God first created, rather like the Flaming Sword standing at the entrance to Eden. People would like to ignore the necessity of the ancient mystical epistemology, but that is part of the package deal.

So a part of this mystical spiritual mystery, Paul says, is realizing the arrogance of Gentile intellectual

culture is part of what killed it for the Jews. Judaism is an expression of that Gentile intellectual arrogance applied to the Covenant. If Jews can't bring that garbage into the Realm of Spirit, neither should Gentiles expect to bring it with them. God is making a New Israel of the Spirit. Paul has already shown that it's not about Jewish DNA or legalistic zeal, but about faith. So a bunch of Jewish people lacking faith were pushed aside so that whatever Israel should have been could be rebuilt – though mostly coming from Gentile nations.

This New Israel will be composed entirely of people of faith; otherwise, fulfilling the promises of “all Israel” repenting cannot happen. The impossible promises about taking away the sins of His People are not a matter of targeting Israel-the-Nation on earth, but Israel-the-Mission. So while Jews in the earthly sense are hostile to the gospel, this was for the benefit of Gentiles elected to salvation. Gentiles should be grateful for sharing in the spiritual heritage of the Patriarchs. The blessings and promises cannot be revoked, so they have to be given to someone else. But this is no excuse for being hateful to Jews, since their sins are no worse than those from which Gentiles were redeemed.

Paul reminds his readers that God is ineffable. The human mind cannot fathom even the little of God that He has chosen to reveal, never mind His very wisdom and justice. He strings together a trio of quotations from Isaiah, Jeremiah and Job, all of whom make it clear that no one can know God's mind, pretend to advise Him, nor have any claim on Him. We are most fortunate just to have a chance to acknowledge Him as Creator and God. We don't have room left for animosity between Gentiles and Jews.

Romans 12

Again, there is no room left for animosity between Gentiles and Jews in the church, because we all stand before God in the same blood of Christ. Paul begs the Roman Christians to realize the symbolism of the Old Covenant offerings was in reality offering oneself as a living servant to God. Nothing else makes sense when we consider what He has sacrificed for us.

This sacrifice is not a matter of partitioning ourselves to give God his share, but giving Him the whole self. We cannot go on in the human ways, but in divine ways, allowing the presence of His Spirit to renovate the mind, make it serve divine purposes in desiring God's pleasure.

How did grace work out in Paul's life? It made him an apostle. That was God's choice; Paul couldn't seek God, much less apostleship. Because it's based on God's choice, let no man take himself too seriously. Whatever role you fulfill in the Kingdom of Heaven is only what God makes of you. Every role is essential; what a monstrosity the body would be if it were all one kind of thing! All of us together are a single living being made by God.

So each of us should glory in the role for which God calls us. Don't let your gift outrun your commitment and calling. Prophecy, management, teaching, preaching, supplying, leading and supporting – whatever character is consistent with that role, embrace it.

Paul lays out a powerful list of traits. Each by itself is a resounding message of Christian character. It is nearly impossible to restate each one and do them justice. Rather, it is utterly critical that we see beyond these admonitions to what ties them all together. We make the congregational meeting too much a social affair under the terms of our old lives. Because of that, the supposed new life we live is

fake, and it can't follow us very far out the door of the meetinghouse.

This is not about being or doing, but about commitment of the whole self. It's not a change of status that we can simply assume and think of ourselves as different. It is most certainly not a mere performance on any level. It requires an ongoing struggle to stamp out the old ways of human effort and to force the entire being to heed the powerful call of the Spirit to our spirits. The items in Paul's list are not commands, but an effort to build an image in the mind of what to expect from the spirit. Everything men once sought is of no value to you any longer. You want what God wants.

Thus, we are transparent, letting God shine through us. We have nothing to lose with total honesty, since God owns it all. There is no way we can draw any barrier between fellow believers and ourselves. What they feel, we feel. Yet, no matter what we give our hands to do, it's not about results, but about God's pleasure. When things don't work out, we bear the blame in the sure knowledge that we cannot be perfect. If it really is someone else's fault, that is God's concern. We are so embraced in His goodness we have no room for evil in our lives.

Romans 13

Can we think of any examples where Paul defied an earthly government figure? He was under orders of the Sanhedrin to cease from speaking the gospel, and only by playing political games did he escape their first attempt to have him face their charges. Sure, it was legal in one sense, but every time he spoke the name of Jesus, Paul was defying the Sanhedrin. Eventually doing so was in defiance of Roman edicts, too. It did not stop him. Whatever Paul means here, it cannot be pulled out of the context of his life and teachings, nor any of the rest of Scripture. To use this chapter as a bludgeon against conscience is simply the work of Satan, who also knew a thing or two about perverting Scripture.

Given what we know of the situation in Rome at about this time, we can recognize that Paul is addressing the very Jewish tendency to reject any political regime that wasn't to their liking. Jesus said His Kingdom was not of this world, and from the days of Wilderness Fasting, He was tempted to engage in political processes for worldly ends. Jews in Rome would be tempted to use their hatred for pagan Roman government as an excuse to support, or even join, in armed revolt against the Roman government.

Paul thus corrects this tendency. You should humor secular governing authority when you can. As far as you are concerned, Christian, God put them in place. Don't be surprised if God allows them to execute civil and criminal penalties against you. God planned for them to keep evil under control, according to the Covenant of Noah, and that Covenant is binding on them. If they stray, that is His concern, not yours. In the long term, they tend to support good and suppress evil; that's why God commanded them to form. Those who walk in righteousness have nothing to fear. Not only do you avoid government enforcement, but also you keep a clear conscience. It should be obvious Paul is referring to overt acts of defiance against government claims of secular authority, not every little thing governments attempt to rule. Governments have God's permission to organize, collect taxes, and demand some element of allegiance – all on the earthly plane, of course.

On a social level, your fellow humans generally have a claim on you, as well. The Kingdom of Heaven

does not benefit from truculence and intentional strife among men. Can anyone forget the contempt Jews poured out on everyone else? We are supposed to hear echoes of the Good Samaritan here. Notice Paul refers to the Law of Moses, which helps us understand that the Jews are particularly at issue in this discussion. They knew full well the Ten Commandments were divided into two sections, with the first four about our duty to God directly, and the rest about our duty to Him regarding our fellow humans. That second batch Jesus summed up in loving your neighbor as yourself – respect. So if you offer due respect to everyone, most of your problems go away, and only suffering which arises from holiness in a fallen world will come upon you. In summing up, Paul says proper respect, this commitment to exert yourself on behalf of everyone’s welfare, is going to accomplish all God had intended in the Law Covenants.

Paul then urges the Roman Christians to walk in this loving respect because major changes were on the horizon. There is an insulting myth Paul and the other Apostles somehow imagined Jesus was coming back in their lifetimes. While they surely considered it possible, given that Jesus carefully said it could not be predicted, that’s a far cry from twisting this passage to make Paul out as some poor benighted fool. Rather, Paul is thinking here about the high likelihood that he would be dead very soon, as would be all the other Apostles. When they were gone, the time of dependency would be gone, and all Christians would need to take up the burden of missions. Therefore, it was time they all grew up and seized spiritual maturity with full ardor.

People fully devoted to walking in the Spirit would face all sorts of trials and tribulations. How could they know which of their sorrows were just part of the game if they wallowed in immaturity? By clinging to their old worldly habits of mind and body, they were sure to suffer a lot of things God didn’t intend for them. The world is messed up enough without us adding to it by trying to reform political and social problems. Come to terms with human folly, be it from government officials or your neighbor, and determine to strike the blow of love and grace against their sin. It’s the only thing that works at all. Bring Jesus to life afresh in your flesh. There should be no one deceived about how that could end in worldly terms, but we are not entangled in this world.

Romans 14

Two particular issues would serve to distract the Christians at Rome from living the gospel message of Jesus Christ before a watching world. Between those of Jewish and those of Gentile background, it was all too easy to find conflicts regarding food and holidays. Only a fool would fail to differentiate which position was common with Jewish Christians, and which was typical of Gentiles. Both sides had been sniping at each other, causing embarrassing divisions.

Paul has just finished saying that faith and love takes away the need for laws. Someone who is strong in the Law is likely still weak in faith. Thus, Gentiles who outnumbered the Jews were not to raise unnecessary barriers to Jews seeking Christ. If each Jewish seeker had to run the gauntlet of debate and dispute about the place of the Law, not many would stick around. Jews by reflex observed kosher, and were unlikely to change a lifetime of habits the first day. So Paul was telling the Gentiles to lay off the contemptuous poking remarks, and he warned the Jewish Christians to quit condemning the relaxed attitude of the Gentiles.

Each of us stands before God on every issue, which includes a whole range of nonessentials. The First

Church Council had already addressed some of this (Acts 15), and left it open for Jews to follow their conscience. Obeying the Law, particularly as Christ taught it, was surely not harmful, as long as they didn't press Gentiles to conform in every detail. Their Law never applied to Gentiles outside Judea. And Gentiles did have some requirements under the Laws of Noah, and had no business tearing down fussy Jewish habits. Obviously, Paul favors the more open understanding, because faith obviates any laws, but faith also didn't pry into another's conscience.

The same goes for observing Jewish holidays, just as it might for anyone who carried the pagan instinct regarding holidays. Some had learned to consider every day a holy day, and Paul subtly commends this as the better view. But both are a response to God, so there is no wrong answer. What matters is that you dig into your own soul and find the convictions God planted there for you. That's the same standard for eating habits. What does it take for you individually to be at peace with God?

We live and die in the community of faith, and there are no Lone Rangers. We are held as one body before the Lord throughout life and over into death, as well. That's why Jesus died, and then rose again: He is Lord of the living and the dead, because He reigns in both domains. It is not in our hands to decide if someone else is a friend or a foe of Christ, since we all have to stand before the same Eternal Judge. Paul then quotes a section of Isaiah (45:23) which comes from a passage where God declares in a very obvious literal warning that there is no other deity, so all humanity would surely bow before Him sooner or later. We have no business preempting that event by making demands on our brothers in areas not under our authority. It's all we can do to prevent tripping or trapping each other by our personal failures.

Paul bluntly states that he is certain kosher means nothing spiritually. That doesn't answer the question for everyone else. Flaunting your spiritual freedom to those still trying to get freedom will not bless them. If you demand too much of your freedom to eat, you aren't really free. The Realm of the Spirit uses food as a tool for the gospel, not some inviolable right in itself. Where is your focus, on the Spirit, or on your belly? Look for ways to reduce tension and build up faith.

So, fellowship meals should take into account the sensibilities of those involved. It's about fellowship, not about the meal. Don't rush the Jewish converts about kosher. Give them time to grow in faith, and leave behind the Law. If your brother can't handle that extremity of freedom, it won't hurt you to eat vegetarian and drink water in their presence. It's a small price to pay for the great blessing of time with Christ's Body. Let them go away with a clean conscience so they can hear the voice of the Spirit; don't let them leave afflicted and conflicted, because faith won't grow there.

Romans 15

If all we had were the Laws of God on this earth, we would never stand before God. If our actions on this earth hang merely on what is lawful by God's Word, we hardly show Christ. Paul first makes the subtle point that he agrees with the Gentile Christians regarding freedom from Laws through the higher principle of faith – a direct and personal commitment to God. Then he says that by grace we surrender some of that freedom back to the Father whence it came, so that we may keep the door open to those still bound by scruples from their old life under the Law.

The obvious example is Christ Himself. Surely, He passed up a lot of lawful opportunities and

freedoms because His message mattered more. Paul quotes from Psalm 69. There, David notes that zeal for God guarantees harassment from those around you, because too many people aren't all that interested in what God demands. Those who revile God deserve serious wrath, but it seems the wrath that falls upon them still afflicts us who love God as we live among the sinners. But we know this passage carries Messianic implications, for it was quoted in reference to Jesus cleansing the Court of Gentiles in the Temple. Paul quotes the very next line, showing Jesus received upon Himself the wrath for all the sin of mankind.

Paul then defends using those Old Testament passages as having an application to us today in Christ that might not be obvious to those who first read them. So, we can understand how it might be a good idea to skip the bacon when we have reason to expect we'll be spending time among Jewish Christians who aren't quite ready for that. And by implication, let the Jews set aside some of their scruples, because they cannot apply to Gentiles. Once we realize truth – as Truth Himself – is far more important than any of us, we can get over our minuscule sacrifices. The unity of seeking truth and peace with others is what brings glory to God's name. It's a powerful witness to love someone for whom we have no earthly reason to even be near physically.

This openness to others, looking for common grounds instead of differences, is simply the manifestation of how Christ opened the throne room of God to Gentiles. Jesus did come directly and solely to the Jews, and said that Himself regarding His earthly ministry. But He did so to shake them loose from centuries of lies about what it meant to be "Israel" in God's eyes. Paul quotes several more Old Testament passages from Deuteronomy 32, Psalm 18 and 117, and Isaiah 11. We have here the testimony from David how he would witness to the Gentiles of His beloved God, and he with Moses calls for the Gentiles to worship Him. Then Isaiah reveals that there will come a time when the Gentiles would eagerly seek God's reign, and would be accepted. Paul adds his own prayer that this would result in people getting their eyes off themselves and onto the glory of God, the only reason any human has for living.

Why this long diatribe on the apparent tensions in the Roman churches between Jews and Gentiles? Paul wasn't scolding them over something they obviously should have known already. Were it not for God's grace keeping Paul alive and calling him to serve, there would be no letter at all. So this boldly worded reminder is simply a reflection of God's prodding. God called him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, making them acceptable to God, fulfilling those Old Testament passages, but by the Holy Spirit, not by some silly demand that they come under the Law. Paul had no accomplishments, but God had them through Paul. He didn't make up any embellished tales of grand piety, only related the miracles God gave for His own work. This spread from Syria all the way to modern Serbia.

Paul had no intention of taking credit for the gospel work of others. The Jews were covered well enough. He went to places where Christ was unknown, in fulfillment of Isaiah's promise (52:15) that God would reach out to the Gentiles. It was this pursuit that kept Paul so busy all these years, making Rome naturally a lower priority, since there was already a church there. It had nothing to do with whether Paul wanted to see them; he surely did long for it. And on his next mission trip to Spain, he would simply have to pass through Rome. Then he would fellowship with them, refreshed and ready to face the next unknown.

Meanwhile, he had a mission already. It turns out that the Christians in Greece had taken up a

collection to relieve the economic troubles in Jerusalem. Those Greek Christians thought it their privilege and duty. Having received such a rich spiritual gift of grace through the Judean believers, there was no way they could be too generous with mere money. Paul had been entrusted with the collection, and as soon as he had delivered it, he had plans to come immediately back in the direction of Rome, ready to share everything he had to offer them.

Then Paul asks that they pray with him about this trip to Judea. First, there were a lot of Jews there who hated Paul and wanted him dead. Second, he hoped the fund and report would be acceptable to the church in Jerusalem. Provided there were no troubles, he would hasten to come see them, full of joy.

Romans 16

It would be nice if we had more details about the people Paul names in this final chapter of Romans. The two groups include those in Rome to whom Paul sends greetings, and those near Paul in Corinth, from which the letter is written, who send their greetings to Rome. Some we know, some we can guess, and some remain unknown.

Phoebe is a deaconess from Cenchreae, the port city on the eastern coast across from Corinth, whereas Corinth faces the western sea. She is the courier who carries this message, and we gather that she is quite the matron, probably an organizational leader in the church. Thus, Paul invites the Romans to assist her in the business matters she bears.

Priscilla and Aquila we know from Acts 18. They were originally from Rome, driven out when Emperor Claudius banned Jews from the city. They met Paul in Corinth on his first visit and allowed him to earn his keep because they shared his trade, tent making – leather, heavy fabrics, and articles made from them. They followed Paul as far as Ephesus, where they were able to receive Apollos who came over from Alexandria with only the message of John the Baptist. They filled him in on the gospel of Christ, and he went off to Corinth with letters of recommendation to the church there. Paul notes that they had risked their lives for him at some point, but they were back in Rome when he wrote this. Paul mentions that they host a home church, which was altogether common in Rome, and other parts of the Mediterranean.

Andronicus and Junia were Judeans, Christians before Paul was, and known to the other Apostles. They had shared a jail cell with Paul at some point. The names Aristobulus and Herodion suggest members of royal households from Syria and Palestine. Rufus is likely the son of Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus' cross.

Paul takes a moment to warn of those who carry the typical Roman political methods into the church. His choice of words seems to indicate folks who try to make a name for themselves by defaming church leaders. It's not as if we are required to revere mere humans, but no one is sinless. Discussing the human failures of another with them in private isn't harmful, but ambushing them in public is not right. It can only come from a desire for unjust gain, which Paul characterizes by the image common in those days of "serving one's belly." Being a talented talker only makes them all the more dangerous. Paul wants the Roman believers to study all about doing good and not waste time trying to understand the many ways people can do evil. This is how Satan is crushed.

Then we have the greetings to those in Rome from Corinth. We know Timothy as one of Paul's closest friends, like his own son. Jason seems to be the fellow in Thessalonica who had been Paul's host, and had to pay a bond as the result of a riot when the unbelieving Jews of the synagogue grew envious of Paul's success in siphoning off Gentiles who had been attending worship there. Sosipater appears to be an alternate spelling of Sopater, whom Paul met at Berea. Gaius is the man who hosted Paul and the entire church during this second visit to Corinth. We find the name Erastus inscribed on a stone in Corinth from that period, and Paul calls him the City Treasurer.

The final words are a delightful formality. Paul manages to make them sound fresh in each place we see such language, which gives them more meaning. In this case, it seems almost a summary of what he covered throughout the rest of the letter. The whole point is that Jesus is the only way anyone can really know God.

Introduction to the Corinthian Letters

Of all the churches Paul planted, the one at Corinth is by far the most interesting, in that she caused him the greatest heartache. Of all the cities in which Paul labored, this one was the most famous for her sins. Thus, the church members as a whole struggled through more and greater barriers to the gospel truth than any other for which we have any significant information.

Hellenist culture was always bad enough in its own right. Corinth was the epitome of all that could go wrong, and in many ways a microcosm of where Western Civilization was headed morally. The location had long been the perfect place to build a city, on a narrow neck of land between two seas, and between Achaia (lower Greece) and Macedonia (upper Greece). Just about everything a Greek could do was done in Corinth, whether it was business or the various hedonistic pursuits such trade afforded. The city's name came to be a by-word for drunken excess and sexual perversion. A "Corinthian girl" was the euphemism for a slut. Corinth was the home for the Temple of Aphrodite, with its alleged thousand or so temple prostitutes.

Destroyed by a Roman general in 146 BC, Corinth was rebuilt as a Roman colony and regional capital a century later. Paul visited the city after roughly another century of thriving trade and on-going expansion and construction. Perched on a wide coastal shelf on the western shore of a low and narrow rocky ridge, from ancient times the wagon road (*diolkos*) across from the eastern coast had long been cut deep through that ridge. People from every nation on the Mediterranean shores, and somewhat beyond, could be found there. Cosmopolitan as a word was defined by this city. Paul found the typical Jewish synagogue here, where he always began his church planting in any city.

In our study, we tie the two letters together because it is utterly necessary to see them as reflections of the harsh tale of the church born there. Our best guess of the chronology goes like this:

1. Roughly 50 AD, Paul visits the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18), keeping a low profile with his message while he works with Priscilla and Aquila for his keep. Having escaped a nasty fate farther north, he is eventually joined by a couple of assistants and devotes more time to preaching, and doing so more boldly. This gets him and his group tossed from the synagogue, but the ruler of the synagogue eventually follows them as a convert. Paul stays another year working next door to the

synagogue. When a new magistrate comes on the scene, the Jews try to bring a case against Paul, but fail. He stays longer, but eventually leaves, once again barely escaping assassination.

2. After arriving at Ephesus around 52 AD, Paul wrote a letter back that we do not have. Apparently, whoever carried that letter to Corinth returned with some disturbing news about how things were going there.

3. Paul writes the 1 Corinthians letter we have in response to this news. This did not solve the problems, but we don't know how long the issue festered. At some point, Paul may have made a hurried return visit to exercise his authority directly, a very painful experience for all involved. We can't be sure, but it may have come after his return to Ephesus for a longer stay.

4. Paul writes back again a letter that we do not have, but is mentioned in 2 Corinthians. Titus carries it. Paul heads to Troas but finds he cannot wait for Titus to come back that way, and crosses over to Macedonia. He finally meets Titus there and hears good news about Corinth. From there, he writes 2 Corinthians. Eventually he makes his way in person for a second extended stay.

1 Corinthians 1

From a highly developed pagan Western culture, it is a very long journey into spiritual living. The Corinthian church carried excess baggage comparable to shiploads that needed to be cast overboard. Paul addresses a number of serious problems. Doing so requires him to remind them what role he played, and why. He was an apostle only because God said so. Sosthenes inscribed this letter, but it's unlikely the same fellow who was beaten in front of Gallio at Corinth.

First, Paul asserts that he knows there are people at Corinth who are very much of the Body of Christ, so he greets them in the grace that saved them. This same grace was poured out in full measure on them, and God didn't short-change them in anything. When those gifts are allowed to work, a church becomes a powerful symbol of righteousness, standing pure for when the Lord returns.

That purity, by definition, includes spiritual unity. There is plenty of room for Christians to be different under God's hand, and each stands alone before Him. But the report Paul had from a reliable source depicts the Corinthian church divided into little political parties. Where there are two or three gathered in Christ, there must be some politics, because that's how humans relate. But nothing justifies creating artificial political parties with differing platforms and agendas, as if the church were something other than a family. There should be no Paulicians, no Apollonians, and no Cephasites, nor any snide elitists claiming Christ. The Kingdom of Christ does not have political parties. Paul is particularly offended that there would be a party named after him. If it came about because he personally baptized them, then he would stop baptizing altogether. This partisan bickering was gutting the power of the gospel.

Here we see Paul most bluntly condemning the ways of the world in measuring what matters most. In particular, human wisdom fails utterly. God's logic and wisdom make no sense at all on the human level. The Cross is a direct challenge to human rationality, an utter failure from man's best understanding. Yet it is also the greatest achievement of God on the earth, the sole means for mankind to know Him, and to know how He views things in this world.

Paul quotes Isaiah 29, prophesying during the time when Israel first began trying to adopt worldly wisdom wholesale. The Omride Dynasty in the Northern Kingdom became entirely political, relying on the human wisdom of statecraft. It worked out well enough on human terms, but ended in the destruction from God's wrath. Was Judah now going to emulate what brought them death? So Isaiah warned the leaders of Judah that God would show them how utterly incapable was the human mind in discerning wisdom. It was no different for Corinth. God was not impressed with sages, writers and professional scholars if they drew their wisdom from any source but Him.

It was characteristic of Jewish human wisdom to demand some concrete miraculous sign as proof. Greeks were big on rational logical proofs. The Son of God died on a Cross and called it "victory" – incomprehensible to Jews and Greeks alike. Yet, from both groups, whom Christ calls by giving life to their dead spirits, it suddenly makes sense, not in their minds, but in their hearts, for a power to live faithfully. The very worst of God's servants can accomplish more than the wisest and strongest among men.

Paul asks the Corinthian church to take account of their membership. What kind of people did Christ call into His family? Was it warriors and noblemen? Surely there would not be very many of them. Instead, He chose the fools of this world to outsmart the wise, and the weak to lead over the mighty. What the world rejects is what God prefers, and greatness on a human level is quickly forgotten. Nobody stands before God on his own merits. How can anyone stand before Him? We stand in the shadow of Christ, who is the source of all wisdom, not to mention God's brand of righteousness, purity and redemption.

What is the one thing you can claim that would last through eternity? Paul paraphrases a passage from Jeremiah 9, where the prophet warns neither human wisdom, nor military prowess, nor worldly wealth matter for much. Knowing God and reflecting His glory is all that matters.

1 Corinthians 2

In the entire Bible, there is no statement so blunt, so patently obvious as this one in rejecting the importance of human reasoning and logic in understanding spiritual truth. Lest anyone forget, Paul wrote this to a congregation that came out of a Hellenist intellectual background, either of the Jewish brand, or the original Greek. Short of using the term "Aristotelian" itself, how can he not be addressing that very false worldview?

Paul had been to Athens before coming to Corinth. Doing his best to reach that particular audience in Athens, he spoke on their academic level, offering a very well reasoned and logical explanation of the gospel. Mostly, it fell flat. Upon coming to Corinth, he was rather low-key for a while. During that time, we can sense that he regained his composure after that bad experience in Athens, realizing that the gospel of Christ could not be made reasonable enough to win hearts that way. So he writes here how he approached the Corinthians altogether differently than he had the Athenian crowd.

Setting aside the fine oratory, the sharp logical structure, and anything arising from human intellectual authority, Paul spoke simply the truth of Jesus on the Cross. This was not some grand performance and skill, but a man shaken by the vast glory with which he was entrusted. If the power of God Himself could not accomplish the mission, nothing any man could do would make any difference.

Thus, many in the city came to Christ simply because Paul told the truth and told it simply.

Surely, there is wisdom from God among mature believers, but it is nothing like the wisdom of this world. The most brilliant of rulers can't possibly grasp the wisdom of Heaven. This world and its rulers will be forgotten, but the mysteries of God are eternal. Had the high and mighty been aware of this wisdom, Christ would have been crowned, not crucified. Paul quotes Isaiah 64 where the prophet notes that if God were to make a demonstration that human minds must acknowledge, they still would not understand the things God shows His servants without all that noise. The truth comes through the Spirit, not the intellect. And it is the full and ultimate truth of all things, because the Spirit who dwells in us has seen it all. Do you understand that no one knows the intentions of man so well as the man himself? Just so, God the Spirit knows the mind of God the Father.

When the Lord awakens our spirits to receive His Spirit, we reject the things of this world. Whatever God has for us comes through His Spirit. This is what Paul had been teaching, not speaking with the best understanding of human intellect, but the way God speaks to us. He spoke in a way that required exercising the spirit to grasp spiritual truth. Men with dead spirits have no place for God's Spirit, and no capacity for receiving the Truth. They dismiss the whole thing as senseless babble. We who have living spirits see things through God's eyes, and we are above human understanding, living in ways mere intellect finds incomprehensible.

Again, Paul quotes the prophet, this time Isaiah 40 where God is described as measuring the universe with the span of His hands. Who is on a par with God? Who has standing to advise Him, let alone evaluate what He has done? By implication, the only answer would be His own Son. That Son has brought His mind into our spirits.

1 Corinthians 3

Paul bluntly condemns the management systems produced by human intelligence. The truly otherworldly, spiritual outlook pays little attention to persons, but sees people in light of the Realm of the Spirit. What any of us are means nothing, particularly as men measure such things, and what we do counts only if it meets a spiritual purpose.

Paul could not preach to the Corinthians as he would to spiritual people because the folks in Corinth were not very spiritual. They barely grasped the concept, much as infants cannot eat solid food, but are limited to mother's milk. It was obvious to Paul they were not yet weaned from the carnal existence.

Spiritual people did not give much attention to human significance. If you are seeking Christ, you aren't going to pay much attention to what other people have. Spiritual folks have no use for political maneuvering, jockeying for position, or forming teams and parties. Paul didn't consider himself important, just someone God chose for some work, same as Apollos or any other preacher. They were simply farmers on God's plantation, of no consequence in the eternal view, receiving the blessings of serving. The only thing that mattered was what God made of things.

Or perhaps we should see it as a building. Paul was no more than a master builder who knew a good solid foundation when he saw it: Jesus Christ. Someone else built on that, and it would only be so good as it matched the foundation. When the fires of suffering and sorrow, so common in this world,

come upon such a building, only the best materials and structure would survive. What stands in the proverbial Day of Testing is only what God has done. Those who let God work through them already have their reward. Those who hinder His hand may still be saved, but barely. Worldly methods won't produce anything of value.

Individually and together, the Corinthian Christians were God's Temple. The Spirit of God now dwells in human spirits. All this business of dragging in considerations of persons, titles, positions, parties, committees, rosters, debates, political maneuvering – those things defile the Temple of God. All your fleshly work will be gone when God gets through with you, when He cleanses His Temple.

It is a very deceptive thing to rely on human organizational talents, on human intellectual calculations of the way things ought to be. If that's the best you have, step down and take your place among the neophytes until you learn God's ways. Paul quotes a couple of Old Testament passages. An epigram from Job reminds us that God is not impressed with human wisdom, as does a supporting verse from Psalm 94. God's ways are entirely different from those of fallen men. In His Kingdom business, we use His ways. There is no place in the church for worldly standards, worldly management, and merely human organizational schemes.

Christ gave to His Bride everything she needs. That includes servants such as Paul, Apollos and Cephas, along with every resource in the world. Both death and life are gifts, too, along with today and all the future days to come. Whatever it takes for His Kingdom revelation, God will provide. That's because we are in the hands of Christ, who came from the Father. Nothing else matters.

1 Corinthians 4

In the Kingdom of Heaven, a mystery is mysterious, not because those who know it keep it away from prying eyes and ears, but because it can scarcely be spoken under any circumstances. The Ultimate Truth of things is ineffable, cannot be told, only indicated by human words. It is so much greater than any of us that we wisely avoid taking ourselves seriously. Those whose spirits are dead cannot grasp any part of this. Paul says the Corinthian church acts too much like they have no spirits.

A mystical faith is self-effacing, making no claim in the person of any. So it was Paul said the most important thing any man could know of him was his service in the Realm of the Spirit. The one and only thing that matters is a desire and commitment to serve. Paul had no concern whatsoever how the Corinthians or any human court might judge him. By the same token, he didn't trust his own judgment of himself. While his conscience was clean, that was no proof of innocence. God alone judges and God alone can say whether Paul pleased Him. So it is we who walk in Christ refrain from presuming to judge anyone, because God alone will reveal such things when He is ready.

By using himself and Apollos as examples, Paul simply offered a demonstration of the principles. No one on this earth has a call from God to lord it over anyone else in Kingdom matters. The only difference between any two believers is whatever God has done in their individual lives. No one has any gift, calling, office or anointing that they earned, so no one has any reason to boast at all. The Corinthians were so full of themselves! What marvelous things they boasted! If only it was true, Paul and the other preachers could then share in the blessings.

It seems God left out the poor apostles. Instead of big titles, accolades, power and riches, they got

death sentences, public ridicule, and were a laughing stock in view of heaven and earth. They did not compare well with the boasts of the Corinthians. The apostles barely survived in a very hard life, and many had to pay their own way. But they never took it personally; they accepted every abuse as an opportunity to bless. Sorrow was something they took for granted. They knew they were called to walk the Way of the Cross.

Paul wasn't trying to make the Corinthians feel sorry for him. Rather, he was trying to warn them. Now, a child might pass through any number of teachers and tutors, but he would only ever have one father. Paul was their spiritual father, and it was only natural that they should model themselves on him. Toward this end, Paul sent Timothy, rather like their big brother that had already begun walking in Paul's footsteps. His very presence would remind them of Paul's teachings, the same teachings Paul consistently shared wherever he went.

The Corinthians weren't being short-changed. Paul had the same mission to teach everywhere he went, and the Corinthian church was hardly the only one he started. Their pity-party was unjustified, and accusations that Paul had abandoned them were silly. If God allowed, Paul would return to them shortly following this letter. He was not concerned about the rowdy talk against him. People say all kinds of things having no connection to reality. What mattered was whether God worked through them. The gospel of Christ, and His Kingdom, is not wrapped up in mere words of human language, but in the power to turn men's hearts to eternal things.

Would they be impressed if Paul showed up with a fasces, some symbol or means of exerting human authority? Or would the Corinthians want to learn the power of God through love and gentleness? That's how the Kingdom of Heaven operates.

1 Corinthians 5

There are some sins so obvious that we are shocked when anyone challenges whether they are sin. Jesus said human sexuality had boundaries from the very beginning, back in Eden. This comes from before there was any law from God; it's fundamental to human existence. Thus, Paul need not hesitate to condemn something that, sadly, garners little comment these days.

The report came to Paul that the church at Corinth was actively protecting a member who had married his father's hand-me-down trophy bride. Obviously, it was not his own mother. We have no idea how she came to be single again, but nothing justifies a son taking any woman who shared his father's bed. At no time in the history of humanity was it proper, and Paul notes that even pagan Gentiles should be scandalized by it.

The Corinthian church not only accepted this arrangement, but also was perversely proud of it. They should properly consider it a grave offense, something to be mourned, a cause for ostracism. Paul does not need to be physically present to know this is wrong under any circumstances. Upon their next meeting, they should proceed as if Paul were actually there, because his spirit would be.

What catches most of us off guard is the wording of his judgment. He mentions passing one over to Satan for mortification. People fail to understand that a primary function of Satan, in the eternal scheme of things, is God's Lictor. It's part of the judgment against Satan; he is forced to engage in something other than his original mission of bearing the traffic between God and the other angels. His

current mission is not a privileged position by any means. When a large group of people tends to obey the Laws of God, it protects them from Satan and the demons by reducing his jurisdiction over them. What Paul refers to is the church carrying out a ritual that removes the church's coverage from the man. The reason is obvious: The man's sin becomes a gateway that weakens this protection. Paul uses the ancient parable of leaven and bread dough. Christ called us to be pure by walking in His teaching, and some righteous things are just too easy to choose.

In the previous letter Paul wrote to the church, he had warned the church not to keep fellowship with those who expressed no regret for sexual promiscuity. It's not as if he expected the church members to avoid all worldly contact with sinners. The world is full of libertines, greedy, rapacious, weak willed, and so forth. But we don't have to treat them as Christian brothers and sisters.

They belong to the Kingdom of Darkness. In those days, eating at the same table signaled a covenant of peace, and we cannot have a covenant with Darkness. So, while we hardly condemn folks who are sinners, since we barely escaped our own sins by grace, we should certainly not make them members of the family. Anyone claiming to be a fellow Christian is subject to the discipline of the church. Those who make no such claim are God's problem; so put this so-called "brother" outside the fellowship where he belongs, lest his sin destroy the fellowship.

In modern times, the cultural meaning of sharing food has changed from Paul's time. The spiritual purpose of the symbol is more important than the ritual and custom that are the symbol. In a single household today you would not so easily refuse to feed a family member who is unrepentant. Nor would it work well in modern Western society to refuse to eat in the workplace or in recreational settings with sinners, since you often would hardly know their hearts in every case. Today sharing food is an invitation to be friends and serves to witness Christ's love. Thus, the point of Paul's mention of not eating with sinners is to avoid acting as if they were part of your spiritual family. You have to decide what that means within each context.

1 Corinthians 6

Does it not seem insane? Paul has just finished discussing Kingdom justice. By God's Spirit, we discern the Body; by faith, we apply His justice. Those outside the Body are God's concern. Yet now we learn that the Corinthians have been turning things upside down by taking each other to court, where those outside the Body judge what goes on inside the Body. If there is any part of humanity capable of rendering justice, it should easily be those on whose hearts are written God's Laws.

At the Last Day, the risen saints will be like Christ, and will participate in judging the rest of humanity. Indeed, even the angelic powers will be subject to our review. How much more so are we capable of understanding God's justice regarding issues of this fallen world. It's not as if the Laws of Noah are mysterious. How dare we bring members of the Kingdom before those we rightly distrust for everything else! Civil courts are no friends of the Church, because they don't have a clue what really matters. The Corinthian church boasted of so very much, yet could they not find a single member better fit to settle disputes than a Roman magistrate? It is a tragedy beyond words when one believer takes another before a civil court.

Whatever happened to the otherworldly calling of the Holy Spirit? Are we so wrapped up in worldly

possessions that we can't let God take it all? If you feel someone has defrauded you, let it go! Better that by far than to file a lawsuit before pagan unbelievers. Indeed, this would never arise were there not so many so deeply tied to material goods that they simply must cheat fellow believers. The Spirit of Christ is sacrifice, not sharp dealing.

The call of the Kingdom is to escape this world. You can't bring the filth of fallen living into the Kingdom. Paul lists a bunch of things that don't belong. Some of the Corinthian church once served those vile callings from Hell, but Jesus rescued them, washing away all that filth. The call is to His justice, His holy desire for a pure life.

There is a sense in which nothing in this world really matters. If it exists, it can be used. At the same time, almost anything in this world can enslave us. For example, we know that God gave food for the stomach, and designed the stomach to handle food. That's necessary for life in this world, but eventually this world will be destroyed along with food. That surely includes our fallen flesh with our stomachs. It's just a normal human appetite. However, sex is not in the same class, not a mere human appetite. Food is digested and eliminated, but sexual relations touch another human life, and it touches the moral fabric directly. God did not design us to treat sex as a mere function of the body. He designed the body to serve His calling. Some things you do with your body have eternal consequences.

How easily we forget His claims on our flesh! We are His Bride, His hands and feet. How can we then marry Him to a prostitute? Sexual union is not like eating, but consummates an eternal union. From the very beginning, it makes two into one, and that hasn't changed. It's symbolic of the spiritual union of Christ and His followers. Of all the sins in which men indulge, sex is the only one that touches his very soul, and immoral sex is an attack against the self. Christians don't have the right to abuse themselves that way, because their bodies carry the Holy Spirit. Your body is His temple.

You have a body for only one reason, and that is to serve Christ. That service is consumed wholly in glorifying His name. We do this by losing ourselves in the leadership of the spirit where His Spirit resides in us.

1 Corinthians 7

The Corinthian church forced Paul to write in terms of God's Laws because they could not handle grace – they still needed milk. God's Laws are the path to grace and spiritual understanding. Once you internalize the demands of the Laws (specifically the Covenant of Noah here), you are in a position to reach a more spiritual understanding that transcends mere principles of Laws. It should surprise no one that marriage and sex is a major issue for the still carnal Gentile Christians, particularly in a place such as Corinth, the imperial capital of sensual pleasure.

It would seem their letter to Paul suggested he declare sex itself a sin on some level. This heresy was already ancient in Paul's time, so he clarified the issue. Sure, it's great if a man can do without sex. But humans weren't designed for that. Sex is a gift from God, and mere procreation was not the only purpose, else the wiring in our bodies would not make it so irresistible. The Fall did not create sex, merely ruined it. There's nothing wrong with getting married, because it provides the one valid sexual outlet ordained by God.

Paul goes on to explain a vital principle ignored in almost every culture throughout history: husband and wife in marriage equally own each other. That is, each has full legitimate claims on the body of the other. Paul teaches from the unspoken assumptions that appear in almost no other culture except the Ancient Hebrew. Sexual passion does not rule, but is merely icing on the cake, and will most certainly follow your commitments. If you are committed to obeying God, then you can take just about anyone suitable in marriage, sight unseen, and the heat of passion will naturally follow. But once awakened, passion tends to be rather indiscriminate. God smiles if you keep it within the marriage bed. Otherwise, it can destroy your loyalty to Him. No one should be surprised that Satan uses that passion to break our loyalty to God, so prepare your mind to keep the marriage bed busy or Satan will offer sinful substitutes. This much comes from the Laws of God on the matter.

However, Paul's personal preference is total abstinence. Realizing that is actually a minority calling, he cannot pretend it's what God requires of all. Everyone has to find their own peace with God on such things. If one has never married, or the spouse has died, Paul encourages them to stay single, if they can bear it. Prostitution and even rare casual sex are sinful. If you must have it, make it lawful in God's eyes.

Carrying on in terms of God's Laws, Paul reminds them that marriage is sacred, even when it was entered before spiritual birth. Your spouse may be dead spiritually, but divorce is not an option in this life. If they find your faith intolerable, let them go. If they aren't bothered by it, let them stay. But by no means can you now seek to drive them away as an excuse to replace them. You only get one shot at this until God calls them away from this world. To our undying shame, we find this very harsh in our modern world, but we see Gentile Christians of Paul's day struggling no less with it. Within the context of God's Laws, we find the blessings of the Laws attach directly to lawful conduct. Thus, in this context, Paul's use of the terms "sanctified" and "clean" refer to purity under the Laws. The spiritual element comes in the possibility that your lawful conduct may draw your unbelieving spouse to repentance.

So, Paul's teaching is that we can't throw away everything from our previous life when we enter the Kingdom of Heaven. God calls us as we are, and it remains His alone to require changes. Using the figurative language of circumcision, Paul notes that a Jew in Christ should not go pagan and a Gentile should not attempt to ape Judaism. We are entering the Realm of the Spirit, where the details of this life are simply the circumstances in which we reveal Him. Slaves can live in the freedom of the Spirit, and freemen can act as slaves of Christ. If you can get out of your earthly slavery legitimately, do so, but don't obsess over it. There is no spiritual gain in struggling to fix your circumstances as men measure such things, since this fallen world cannot be made somehow good by reforming.

In the Gentile world, a great deal of superstition is attached to virginity. It's not magical; there's no particular power in a physical artifact either way. Paul says there were no Laws from God, nor deep spiritual principles on virginity, only pragmatic suggestions from a man whom God had called and used. Given the difficult circumstances of Corinth in that day, and at that time in the Roman Empire generally, it was a good idea to remain a bachelor. If a man is married then let him prepare to face the days ahead in that condition. If she leaves him, he shouldn't seek a successor. But going through with a planned marriage is fine, though the costs could be high. It's not as if Paul is deluded in thinking Christ was coming during those days, but he states something hard to put in any language: God was

moving in ways that would bring sudden changes. Keep your eyes on Heaven, and on the God who granted marriage among humans, and who can take it away from anyone He chooses. His words paint a picture of keeping a very light hold on every part of this life, because nothing is permanent. This whole fallen existence is actually a delusion, from which all Creation will awaken quite suddenly, and not even the Son knows when that shall be.

Marriage, while terribly important in God's plans for this world, enough so that He places very high demands on it, can still be an impediment to serving Him. Unmarried people only have to worry about pleasing God directly, but married people have to consider the spouse in everything. Even without children, marriage looms quite large on your mental horizon, and naturally comes with tons of frustration even for the most spiritually minded believers. Still, marriage is a covenant, and God takes a dim view of covenant breakers. Keep this in mind when you consider whether to go through with a planned marriage. Again, Paul emphasizes that it's not a sin for guys to grab the bride before she gives up on him and marries another. But if he's strong enough he can afford to keep his own virginity, it's not about magic, but simple pragmatism.

The same can be said for the father of the bride. If he can't afford to keep her at home let him give her hand in marriage. But never forget such decisions are binding for life in the eyes of God. If a widow can shed the burden of a husband, she would be wise to consider staying a widow, never mind the fragile position such women maintain in this world. We too quickly let ourselves be managed by common secular assumptions about things in this life, instead of looking to God and questioning in our hearts those assumptions. Paul has found God faithful against the sorrows of this world, so his opinion should count for something.

1 Corinthians 8

The Corinthians had asked in their letter about offerings to idols. Throughout the Roman Empire, but particularly in Greece, sales from pagan temple offerings were a major source of income for temples. Sometimes the prices were quite competitive. We note particularly that cooked meat dishes, some rather fancy, were often prepared as an offering to some pagan temple, and it was hard to be sure when you saw it in the marketplace whether it wasn't an offering. There was apparently some dispute in the Corinthian church regarding food devoted to a pagan deity.

Paul openly condemns letting the intellect take the throne. He refers to having knowledge (*gnosis*) using a term often associated with the abstract reasoning of philosophers, but also with the heresy we now call Gnosticism. From the very birth of the Greek churches, the Apostles had to contend with elitist intellectuals. The very existence of reliance on reason, the smug self-assurance of those who "know" on some alleged higher level, is proof of spiritual failure. Paul declares that the sacrificial love of Christ trumps any human intellectual activity, regardless how high and pure the latter may be. Nobody knows on God's level, but if we live in His love – in His Son – He recognizes us as His own, and nothing compares to that. So it's not what we know about God but what God knows about us that matters.

Intellectually we do well to realize there is only One True God, and all the rest are simply the imaginations of the fallen human soul. So, some physical object that is offered in a pagan temple, or shared in the name of some non-existent deity, is by no means actually sacred. The world is full of

such silly nonsense, with deities, demigods and all manner of superhuman myths. But we know better, simply because God has revealed Himself to us in ways that cannot be uttered in words, on a level of knowing and assurance which all Heaven and earth cannot shake. We know He has chosen to reveal Himself through His Son, the One who was His agent of Creation, and without Whom there is no one spiritually alive. If you don't love Jesus and follow Him, you cannot claim to know God at all.

All well and good, but if this is nothing more than doctrine to you, God is not impressed. He works outside the intellect first, and some folks are a little slow to catch on to the logical implications of what their spirits know. After their spirits come to life, they may for some time harbor strange assumptions about other deities. In their minds, food dedicated to pagan deities is demon-infested. For all the difference it makes in their minds, it might as well be so.

Paul denounces the notion there can be "holy" food. In spiritual terms, it makes not a bit of difference what you eat; it is never more than a simple matter of health. Sin is in the heart, not in the mouth. Exercising faith and eating temple delicacies does not make you superior to the superstitious. Thus, we gain the sense that there were some smug and self-righteous "mature" believers harassing those who were hesitant. The latter preferred the safety of food not typically offered in temples, which usually meant avoiding all meat. Paul says such scruples are not directly harmful to spiritual growth.

What does harm spiritual growth is a cavalier attitude about the souls of others. Liberty in the Spirit is not an excuse for leading astray those who aren't quite so free. Don't flaunt your liberty before those who need more time to understand. You may cause them to jump too soon before they are ready to fly, and your silly indulgence of the moment would cause them months of sorrow. Once they stumble, nothing you say or do can restore what you destroyed. It's all well and good to trust in God for the soul of another, but don't leave messes for Him to clean up. You might as well be attacking Christ Himself.

Paul declared himself willing to accept the most grueling dietary restrictions if that was what it took to keep from distracting a new believer by unimportant externals.

1 Corinthians 9

Paul continues explaining the spiritual discipline of declining your rights and privileges on behalf of the gospel message. He launches into the example of his self-supporting ministry in Corinth.

We get the sense some visiting preachers and teachers had questioned Paul's spiritual authority. In the sense of civil law, Paul was not a slave. Further, he had been with the risen Christ, and could point to a track record of gospel ministry. These were basic requirements for claiming to be an Apostle. While there were surely folks who questioned whether Paul should be considered an Apostle then, and no small number even today, it would be hard for the Corinthian Christians to do so. There would be no church in Corinth were it not for Paul.

Even if Paul were simply an itinerant preacher, would he not have a reasonable expectation of at least food and drink from the church? Would it be permissible for him to expect them to accommodate him if he brought a Christian wife? We know that the other Apostles, and the brothers of Jesus who later went about preaching His message, all did that and no one gave it a second thought providing room and board, at least. Could they have also chosen to travel as Paul and Barnabas, at their own expense?

Paul cites established practice from ancient times. Even conscripts in the military got paid, and basic life support was provided. If a peasant worked in someone's vineyard, he was always permitted to graze on the fruit. Or if they played at shepherding, they at least got milk from the flock. This was not simply Paul's imagination; these things were enshrined in human laws. In particular, the Law of Moses forbade muzzling the ox that pulled the sledge over grain, or pulled the mill stones for grinding. The literal meaning pointed to a higher truth. The divine principle was that those who work should share in the product, if nothing else. Otherwise, the workman would be careless, alienated from the results of his work.

But the literal-spiritual understanding works both ways. If someone does things on a spiritual level, why should they not benefit literally? Could not Paul have reasonably asked for material support in Corinth? But he did not assert that right, because it would have hindered the gospel. With all the contrariness the Corinthians evinced on every little item, Paul already had too much to do getting them to think spiritually. It was no different than the Temple priests whom the Law asserted were to draw their living during terms of service from the Temple offerings. Now in Christ, those committed to divine service are to be supported by the church offerings. Yet neither directly nor by written request had Paul sought such support. He would rather have starved to death, if necessary, than weaken his message.

No one could claim Paul was in it only for the money, as with so many religious cults. He was no religious entrepreneur; this was not about his fame and wealth. By no means did Paul enter this work voluntarily; God seized him and commanded that he preach. Had he volunteered, he would have room to boast, but this was entirely against his human nature. He was a conscript of the gospel, a slave of the Kingdom. His reward was precisely in participating in a message utterly worthy of any sacrifice, so abusing any privilege was simply out of the question.

Thus, no man could make any claim on him. Yet, he voluntarily subjected himself to all sorts of claims. Among Jews, he subjected himself to Jewish requirements so that he could demonstrate the real meaning of Moses and win them to Christ. To Gentiles he presented himself as the ultimate free man, bound under the Laws of Christ alone, to lead them out of bondage to sin. So, those who are weak of faith because they are still under legalism, Paul is willing to abide by their sensitivities. He did this to show the Corinthians that rights were not a Kingdom concept.

The famous Isthmian Games were held every other year right near Corinth, so the city bore a strong athletic tradition. Those who competed in foot races all ran their hardest, but only one could win. Paul warned the Corinthians to understand the whole objective of the gospel and to not get lost chasing rabbits, or carrying unneeded baggage. Athletes trained to master their weaknesses, and it made them stronger to avoid self-indulgence. Yet, their little green wreath crown was a fleeting glory, whereas the gospel crown was eternal. Don't get lost. Paul fought hard against very real sin, not like a boxer who missed and swished his fists through the air. He struck at the sin in himself. His body was the slave of the gospel, not the master of it. How could he preach repentance from sin if he yielded to it himself? He would see thousands enter eternity and find himself left outside.

1 Corinthians 10

The only doorway of the Spirit Realm is repentance according to the Laws of God. People not

burdened about their sins should not pretend they are spiritual, because everyone inside that spiritual place remains permanently penitent. The Laws of God always properly inform genuine penitence. There is a reasonable assumption that we would live more or less in accordance with those Laws, though a spiritual conscience knows that those Laws do not cover every situation. Nor can they, for Laws but paint an image of godly living on the surface of the human conscience. They cannot *be* godly living, because that is a matter of a living spirit, and walking according to the Spirit, which no Laws can express. But our fellow man with a dead spirit knows only what he perceives with senses and logic. There is enough difficulty in calling men to repentance when we walk utterly by the Spirit; we only hinder our mission to reveal Christ if we are profligate in seizing upon liberty when it appears libertine.

Paul refers to Israel as our spiritual ancestors. What a marvelous thing it was to see first hand the mighty works of God! They lived daily in the presence of the Pillar of Fire and Cloud, and followed that Pillar through the sea while the waters stood on either side. It was like a baptism, itself a mere ritual symbolizing spiritual things. They even ate food from Heaven – echoes of the Greek mythology and ambrosia, the food of the gods. Israel shared in supernaturally supplied water, as a symbol of the Living Water of Christ. Paul almost mocks the rabbinical mythology of a stone that supposedly rolled along behind the nation, because he gives the true meaning of what the image would have to mean, that Christ was inherent in their calling as the very foundation of why Israel was even a nation.

Yet, for all these mighty miracles, Israel was not able to remain faithful. The bodies of that generation were scattered in the wilderness, lost in moral wandering. For us today, the narrative of the Wilderness Wandering symbolizes the dangers of fleshly desires. Israel could not resist the party habits with the Golden Calf, nor the Moabite sexual depravity of heathen rites of spring. Yet, in each case, such adultery-idolatry ended in deaths on a massive scale. They complained against Moses, acting as if he were some crazed cult leader, rather than the voice of Jehovah. So would the Corinthians whine about the demands of following Christ?

Again, the Old Testament narrative is a cautionary tale. The New Testament generation saw the completion of those things. With Paul, they were entered upon the final age of human history – “these Last Days.” If having seen all those mighty miracles did not stop Israel from falling into sin, why should we who see far fewer miracles think we could keep it together by our mere intelligence, by simply holding correct doctrine? No one can claim to have it all figured out. Nor should we think ourselves uniquely tested. Whatever we face, it is simply part of our fallen existence. God is more than adequate to keep us from facing anything He hasn’t prepared us to handle. In every temptation and trial, God opens a spiritual portal to escape this awful sorrow here below. Not in the sense of rescuing us from misery, but He empowers us to face it.

Don’t be like Israel, but flee idolatry. Surely, the readers in Corinth were wise enough to understand these issues. The communion ritual was identifying with Christ, a declaration of covenant with Him. This is what holds us all together in spirit. Consider the literal example of Israel, in the ritual meals, where they symbolically sat at the table with God. What does it mean when something is offered to an idol? If anything, the “gods” are demons; do we commune with such? Serving God makes us enemies of the demons, so we can’t eat at their tables. You sit at God’s table, not He at yours. Paul warned the Corinthians to avoid pagan worship rituals, not as an eternal principle, but because of what it

symbolized in their context.

He repeats the principle: All things in Creation are tools for the Kingdom, but not everything is useful in every time and place. Our aim is to build up the Kingdom. If we are self-seeking, then we can't claim to be Spirit-seeking. There is a total discontinuity between dying to self versus indulging the self. Seek the welfare of others in the Spirit. You can buy any food you find in the public market so long as you don't know the source, since everything is provided by God's hand. When invited to a private meal in a non-Christian home, it's the same principle. Don't ask, and you won't have to worry about whether any dish came from a pagan ritual. If someone present with a legalist conscience notes this or that should be avoided, go along with it. You know it actually matters not, because it all belongs to God, but your witness to their conscience is the issue.

Why should I submit my liberty in Christ to the conscience of another? Because it only complicates our message if they abhor what we give thanks for. We close the door in their hearts. What's the whole point, anyway? It's the glorious revelation of Christ in us. We eat, drink, breathe and do everything else with an eye to that glory. Keep your behavior appropriate for those present at the moment, whether Jews, Gentiles or fellow Christians. Paul sought to appeal to all men with his message, because the message was the whole point, not him.

1 Corinthians 11

Christ died on the Cross, closing the old regime of Moses. More importantly, His teaching completely shut out the massive perversion of the Law from Talmudic literalism. Simply making rules about liberty versus restraint will always miss the point in the Kingdom. Rather, there is only one rule of the Spirit: nailing our old self to the Cross daily. Shall we then presume to bind Paul's teachings back under those old Talmudic perversions of legalism? Much evil has come from modern Christian Pharisaism pushing false legalism in this chapter, as well as in dismissing the chapter altogether as purely cultural.

We know that Rome destroyed the Corinth of old, with her massive temple prostitution service, in 146 BC, but rebuilt it more or less as a Roman city a century later. Yet, it remained cosmopolitan, along with reactionary influences seeking to recover former glories, if only as mythology. We can't know precisely how strongly this or that cultural influence affected custom and fashion for women at any particular time, only what was left in artwork and scattered references from writers, none of which can be ascertained as fully representative of the actual situation. This alone should remind each believer that they are obliged to answer directly to the Father in their own best understanding of what faith requires in any given circumstance, without presuming to know what He demands of others. If anything, the foregoing chapter emphasizes how contextual awareness trumps law, both in freedom and in restraint.

Paul transitions from discussing contextual self-restraint to encouraging the Corinthians to consider his example in following Christ. Then he praises them for at least remembering those items abstracted from the Law of Moses that applied rather universally, and proposes to fill in some blanks. He breaks here from both Old Testament and common Greek assumptions. Note he uses the word "head" with typical mystical ambiguity. Having one's literal head covered was broadly understood as marking one under some earthly authority: slaves, soldiers, etc. We understand that Christ is under the authority of

His Father. In similar fashion, a woman would be under her husband's authority. In Christ, while we may humor earthly authorities, He is our One true Lord. Men as spiritual heads of household pray uncovered, because in the symbolism of worship, they recognize no earthly authority.

Worship is inherently symbolic, and these guidelines don't always apply outside of worship. We see here that Paul reverses the Hebrew tradition, where men covered their heads in worship, something symbolizing the necessity of the veil in the Temple. That veil was torn in two by the Cross, so the newness of things applies in the symbolism of Christian worship without a covering, where we all come face to face with Our God. While women also stand before God uncovered, we show respect to the proper order of things on this earth by covering their heads in worship, married or not. As a historical footnote, we find this did not apply to children, who were presumed always under some earthly authority. The point here is spiritual symbolism. Women can lead anywhere except in spiritual matters, even though they could pray and prophesy during common worship.

Paul lays out the issue in terms of created order. Modern notions of equality are totally out of place, a fallen agenda contrary to Scripture. That men have perverted Scriptural headship does not justify efforts to suppress it. Adam came first, and Eve was made to support his calling. Whether an individual woman ever marries or not, her redemptive role includes bearing children and being a mother. That's how men get here in this life, so both are needed. The issue is one of role and calling. God reveals Himself in that division of labor, and seeking to redefine the fundamental facts is a rejection of His revelation.

Angels, for all their power, cover their heads, as it were. Seeing in this something of the mythical glass ceiling also misses the point. A woman cannot replace a man, nor can a man replace a woman. They are not interchangeable. Our earthly lives may see a lot of things overlap between the sexes, so it's not a question of absolute equality as is commonly perceived. There is a large degree of historical drift on specifics, but the one place where things never change is in the presence of God. Our task here is to understand how that looks in our conduct.

Paul plays on the common symbolism of hair, which has suffered much in modern times from legalism. How long is too long? Paul doesn't say, nor should we. Rather, it's a matter of symbolism. A fellow may be able to grow long locks enticing to the ladies, but there would always be some that didn't like it. Paul isn't offering a fashion statement. Nazarites in the Old Testament were required to grow theirs long. Rather, he is referring to natural processes, in which men are more likely to be bald, and women are more likely to have glorious tresses. The point is to notice that, in most churches, when gathering for worship, women cover their heads (not their faces), and men do not.

There is, however, something for which Paul cannot praise the Corinthians: They don't seem to understand the essence of gathering to worship. They are partisans, forming multiple competing congregations under one roof. That could be a good thing if there were one clique consistently faithful to Christ, but it seems that was the one thing missing. Both the ritual and what it symbolized was broken in their communion service. Whatever they were doing hardly resembled the original event. Their Love Feasts turned into selfish little group picnics. Some got nary a bite of anything until the communion ritual, while some defiled it with drunkenness. If that was the best they could do, it was time to drop the so-called Love Feasts and eat meals at home. They were soiling the gospel.

Part of that gospel message was the narrative of the Last Supper. Paul recites the essentials. Once the spiritually dead Judas was gone on his errand of betrayal, Jesus instituted the New Testament version of the Passover Meal. The wine came to symbolize His sacrifice on the Cross, and the bread was His teaching as He lived it. The Corinthians lacked reverence for the gravity of what the symbols portrayed. It was to be a time of introspection and repentance, and people who could not humble themselves before God should not expect to reap any of the blessings of this life, since they were totally unaware of how Christ expected us to live. We are stuck in a world richly deserving of God's wrath, and when God acts, our only hope for not being swept up with sinners is in seizing the opportunity He grants to recognize our own sins and repent first. Keep that humility in the forefront of your consciousness, so that when you come together for communion, nobody gets left out. Eat your meals, and satisfy your other fleshly desires, at home. The worship gathering should be the last place anyone sees such things.

Paul seemed to feel they had enough to do trying to work out that much. While typically considered the opposite of Pharisaical legalism, they still suffered from the sin of literalism, even when buried in abstract logic. Confusing the symbol with the thing itself was Satan's favorite ploy in attacking the churches and the gospel message.

1 Corinthians 12

A biblical anthropology recognizes the necessity of ego boundaries as a precondition for true repentance – "Lord, I have sinned against You." The pathologies of soul and spirit are often diagnosed in part as a matter of failure to develop, failure to recognize and usefully operate conscious ego boundaries. Love is scripturally defined as opening the ego boundaries by an act of will, which tends to be rather exhilarating. Part of the reason for the joy is the very real risks involved. Sin is often a matter of wrongly keeping them closed, or opening them without good reason. It can't be proper unless it is a conscious act of the will surrendered to the Holy Spirit.

The whole point of worship is to bring healing to this essential human function. What separates a church from any other human organization is worship of Christ. A great many things constitute worship outside the formally organized worship service, and it requires no assistance for any individual to glorify His Name, but the act of true spiritual worship includes merging ego boundaries. This is how the Body of Christ unifies and shares the spiritual communion symbolized in the previous chapter by bread and wine. This chapter continues discussing the single identifying function of the Body, particularly how gifts and talents can be abused to destroy that unity.

A service of worship should not turn into a mere exhibition of talent. That serves only to reinforce one's ego boundaries at the cost of others. While Paul emphasizes a certain class of ecstatic gifts – charismatic gifts – he hardly discusses the gifts themselves, and we come away knowing next to nothing about them. Rather, the gifts were the focal point of a much larger issue, which can apply to almost any human activity within worship. Paul begins by warning the Corinthians that they cannot be mindless about these things. That would be typical of heathen worship. What distinguishes idolatry from Christian worship is who receives the glory.

If we fail to lift up Jesus, then our worship is from Satan. True spiritual worship lifts up Jesus, and must of necessity negate the human self, a justified surrender of the ego boundaries. God grants all

sorts of gifts, but none of them were meant to distinguish the recipients – Christ is the object of our devotion. Paul even goes so far as to delineate four different categories of gifts. There are ecstatic gifts (*charismata*) that are unique expressions of the Spirit moving in a miraculous way. Some people are given vocational callings (*diakonia*) as gifts, and some simply have certain effects from how they normally operate (*energema*). But whatever the manifestation (*phanerosis*) of God's divine presence in a human life, the whole point is bringing the Body together in unity of surrender of self to Christ.

As Paul lists the various *charismata*, the tone would indicate that this is not a closed list, but those gifts most easily recognized in how the Corinthian church operated. We know precious little from this text as to what he is actually describing, and we should hardly trust modern experiential teaching as definitive, particularly in the West. Dissecting the Greek text for minute shadings and assuming we know exactly what he means would miss the point: God puts what He wants where He wants it for His own glory. Sometimes it extends natural human capabilities, and sometimes it's a flat out miracle. Paul compares it with the various parts – members – of human anatomy. While people don't necessarily lose their humanity from birth defects or losses of parts, we all know that the basic model God designed comes with a certain set of features we can name. So, the Body of Christ must consist of varied bits and pieces that make up the whole. Think what a monstrosity it would be if a man were simply one huge eye floating around, for example. So, it is silly for the Corinthians to obsess over the gifts themselves, as if this one or that one were more ennobling.

It is typical group psychology to build up weaker members with appropriate recognition to encourage them. When members whose attachments are weak are built up, it helps them bond more tightly, seeing their importance. Those in charge hardly need accolades, provided they are as spiritually mature as we would expect of leaders. Spiritual leadership begins with self-effacing faith. The whole point is to progress to the point where ego boundaries are consciously handled with expertise. The end result is we together wrap them protectively around the whole Body.

Finally, Paul runs through the list again, though this time it's a list of the people God gives to the church body, people who bear the gifts, not the gifts themselves. The list implies a recognized ranking for organizational purposes. Contrast that with what you see today in the amount of noise made about various gifts and you can see a wealth of errors. Yet, barring that, the point remains that this is not about egos. In particular, we are encouraged to willfully lose them. There has to be differences between people, and no gift is universal, aside from the Spirit Himself. We can easily envision a mass of people obsessing over speaking in tongues pretty much as we do today. Paul says the Body has a greater need of spiritual leadership and depth, not ecstasy. Thus, it really all boils down to one thing, which he covers in the next chapter.

1 Corinthians 13

In every language to which the Bible has been translated, this chapter never fails to inspire. Yet we all know it is not the words, but the soaring call to Eternity. Picking over the accuracy of this or that translation misses the point. Picking over the precise meaning of this or that word or phrase shows we yet dearly need what this chapter demands of us.

Sacrifice for the welfare of another is the essence of Christ's central act. It was His choice even before incarnation and the only thing man can embrace that would undo the Fall. The stinging rebuke

against the obsession with ecstatic utterances simply for the thrill still rings in our ears from the previous chapter. Should such utterances even include the language of angelic beings, which typically are beyond human ability to bear, it would lack any power without the one Gift that cannot possibly be faked. It's just noise.

So it goes with all the various charismatic gifts. Without the power to sacrificially diminish the self, nothing has actually happened. Yes, the issue of ego boundaries remains front and center. The finest expressions of power in this world are merely tossed blindly over that ego boundary unless we properly open that boundary in the sacrifice of self to see where those gifts go.

Even if we mimic the power of love with the sacrificial outpouring of tangibles, or even life itself, but lack the actual power of Christ to join Him on the Cross, it's just theater. Paul says, "I have accomplished nothing!" God was not in it, He cannot bless it, and He does not count it as faithfulness.

What does love look like? You would see endless patience, genuine empathy, the absence of interest in what others have. It appears as giving no time for attracting attention to the self, either by parading finery or by perversely shocking the senses. It neither seeks mirrors to admire itself, nor carry a chip on the shoulder, nor does it seek excuses to castigate others. You won't see it celebrate injustice, but will see it glorify anything that reveals God. It won't bristle at the indignities of this life, won't be shocked by any human depravity. Meanwhile, it will hold forth the hope for better things and simply bear the common sorrows of this world.

When self is nailed to the Cross, nothing deflects us from the path of our calling. All these exciting gifts will eventually pass away, once they have served their purpose. They are but tools, useful during this time when we have our feet on the fallen earth and our hearts in the sky. It makes no sense, nor should it. But someday all this will change, and those things that excite the flesh will disappear with the flesh. We are children, born to the Spirit but not yet grown. We keep finding ourselves pulled back by the flesh of our old lives, but we must strive to leave it all behind.

What you can know of God now is never quite perfect, but someday you'll see Him face to face. This awful, maddening existence where we are caught between two realms will end when the lower realm is removed. The perfect understanding God has of us will be matched by our complete understanding of Him, something impossible here. We talk so much of the essentials: conviction of ultimate Truth, an undying expectation of redemption, and the humility of self-sacrifice. The first two mean nothing if we miss the last one. Give Christ the key that opens the gate of your heart, and give Him Lordship over your ego boundaries.

1 Corinthians 14

Try reading commentaries and other Bible study materials regarding what Paul calls here *glossa* and you'll be led in all directions. We know the word appears some 50 times in the New Testament, and it never means anything other than that organ in the mouth, or a known language used by folks as members of a nation. However, we have a distinct context here indicating that Paul offers some other meaning. This is wholly consistent with his mystical approach, and the parabolic use of language asserted by Jesus.

The point here is any manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Paul speaks of "spiritual things." This is

not merely ecstatic gifts alone, as some translations have it, but something mystical, something that defies human intellectual explanation. Trying to narrow down the meaning too tightly will have you missing the larger point. This mighty power of the Cross, which Paul labeled in Greek *agape*, is a talent granted from Heaven. It needs development and practice to bring it to maturity. So he begins this chapter saying that we should pursue it, apply ourselves with full effort and refuse to go away empty-handed. From there, it should be obvious that we would hunger for things of the Spirit. The ministry of prophecy has always been critical to the needs of the church.

Nobody is pretending to offer some precise definition of the word “prophecy” either. When someone speaks to others on behalf of the Kingdom, we call that prophecy. If the whole point so far has been to build up the Kingdom in the hearts of those gathered to celebrate the King, then we should hardly expect to play the Pharisee about the instructions. Apply the revelation of God to the circumstances and you have the effect of a prophet.

We discover what Paul means here by *glossa* by its effects: You have a conversation with God but not people. The assumption here is that you realize this stuff is fine for those private moments of spiritual ecstasy but it does little for your fellow believers. There is nothing in this that you can share directly. That’s the nature of a mystical religion in the first place; ours comes with a mandate to present it for mass consumption. That requires an empowerment from God to translate His ineffable truth into every context we encounter. Those who prophesy God’s revelation to people will bring His power to change others, not merely the self. About the only way *glossa* can approach the power of a prophecy is if someone interprets.

What would the story have been in Corinth if Paul had come and simply employed *glossa*? God has chosen human language as the vehicle for revelation, with some mental apprehension, a provocation and teaching of truth. That requires people who make sounds intelligible to human ears. There has to be some recognizable symbol, some transmission of imperative to the brain that opens the door to spiritual enlightenment. That’s how God works. Just making noise won’t accomplish much. Yes, there are countless native languages among humans, and they all mean something to somebody. Most of them serve to alienate folks from each other. We already have enough alienation in the church body, with everybody trying to do their own thing. Remember “ego boundaries”? Use your mouth and all the other activities and gifts to bring each other closer.

If all you have is *glossa*, always pray that you can interpret. Even you don’t really know what’s going on when your spirit prays without your mind. Sure, I can cut loose with my spirit, but the whole idea is to train my mind to follow along and serve the spirit/Spirit. People can’t say “Amen” – testify that you speak the truth – if they don’t have any idea what you’ve said. That’s good for you, but why do you take up the Body’s time for your personal benefit? Spiritual ecstasy without spiritual fruit is just noise, so I’d rather say five words you understand than talk all day in words you cannot understand.

Stop acting like children, Paul says. Childlike innocence is good when it comes to human depravity, but don’t be fools. Paul refers back to Isaiah 28, where the prophet spoke of the leadership mocking him and other prophets, calling it children’s prattle. The leaders were too wise in the ways of the world to simply obey the Covenant. Since they won’t listen to childish prattle, as they call it, perhaps they will listen when God speaks through the invading Assyrians? This is a parable, a symbolic mystical reference. The Word of God is a polarizing force. It confuses people who don’t believe, but

those who are spiritually alive absorb it in a way the dead cannot even imagine. Even if you speak in clear language, the dead will not hear. Use your *glossa* among the dead, because it won't make any difference, but in the Body of Christ folks need to understand what you say.

When God draws someone into your worship service who lacks the background of Scripture, having them find everyone jabbering in private spiritual ecstasy will serve them poorly. Change the picture. If they come in and everyone is prophesying, is it not more likely they'll repent? The Spirit of God will bare their hearts and they will tremble. Then they'll go away talking about how they found God in your meeting.

Worship is not a talent show wherein each builds up himself. Whatever it is you do, it must serve to bring a deeper communion with each other. Don't let more than three speak in tongues, each in turn; somebody must interpret. Otherwise, keep your *glossa* in your mouth. And while Paul encourages prophecy, he wants to make sure it does not become a new excuse for building up the ego boundaries. If several come with a prophecy, pick three of them, and the others can grade them. Should it be that someone is seized by a revelation in the Spirit, put the schedule aside. This is not permission to interrupt impetuously, but aimed at building sensitivity to the move of God. Let the immediate revelation be heard, then let the other prophets bring their messages. Everyone can take turns. The burning urgency a prophet feels does not mean everyone else is burning to listen, nor should they be compelled. There is no excuse for rowdy chaotic meetings. It should be quite obvious after just once or twice who is full of nonsense.

It is altogether likely that the early churches followed the pattern of synagogues, with the women sitting separate from the men. Men sat closer to the speaker, and could interact in good order, asking questions. Women were allowed to prophesy, but not to act like men asking questions from the floor. They could confer with the male head of household – their spiritual covering – later. Because we have no genuine descriptive narratives, we have a tough time abstracting how this applies today. Keep in mind, the Corinthian church was apparently quite large, so they couldn't have the cozy house church behavior in their large gatherings. Again, Paul is not legislating, but explaining how it works. We choke on this for pretty much the same reason he had to raise the issue with the Corinthians: They were too Western. Throughout the places Paul and the other Apostles had gone, they were bringing this Hebraic culture along with the Hebraic message. The two were inseparable. Did the revelation of God arise first in Corinth? Were they not instead rather late to the party? People who love Jesus will love His ways. Following Christ does not mean becoming a Jew, but it does mean shifting over to that Hebraic mystical way of life (which Jews had almost forgotten, anyway).

The Spirit of God leads His people to godly living. If people want to ignore that, let them be ignored. Godly living has a long-standing definition, and you can't dismiss it simply because it is foreign. Pray for people to prophesy, but don't be disappointed with *glossa*. You can be free and relaxed while maintaining dignity and decency.

1 Corinthians 15

One of the greatest heresies of our time has been the claim that if the facts did not support the gospel, and it was merely a myth, then the Christian life is still worth living. This directly contradicts Paul's teaching. The terms "death, burial and resurrection" refer to different specific events as humans see it,

but they are a single truth in Heaven. If any part is lost, then the whole is a lie. If it is a lie, then we are utterly deluded and there is no hope for redemption on any level. The mystical and unspeakable truth must of necessity have invaded space and time or there is no such thing as "truth."

Paul does not seem to indicate here what specifically was the reason the Corinthians had trouble with the resurrection. We know it was the primary issue in his disappointment in Athens. It should surprise no one that there would be an intellectual kinship between the rationalist and the idolatrous minds in rejecting something universally ridiculed as childish superstition. While there were various infamous heresies in the Early Church regarding the Resurrection of Christ, in the case of Corinth it is a simple broad rejection of any possible afterlife.

Paul finds it so disturbing that he spends not a few words on this issue alone. In no uncertain terms Paul had taken great pains to assert the basic gospel story in Corinth, as in every place he went. They heard it; they received it. Such is the entire identity of "Christian" as a unique calling and faith. If one does not keep this central in the mind, they will forget the whole point of leaving behind this fallen existence and seeking to draw close to the Father. Yet, simply embracing it with the mind will not suffice; it must become the very breath and heartbeat of your entire being. Otherwise, you might as well go back to the old ways, and stop pretending any of this matters.

Here are the historical facts: Jesus died and took away the power of our sins. He was buried, but rose again the third day. That's what the Old Testament had promised. Peter saw Him, as did the Twelve, then some five hundred more, most still alive at the time Paul wrote. He even visited with Jesus' brother, James, and one last conference with the Apostles. The Lord went out of His way to make sure Paul saw Him, too. Here Paul puts his own calling to apostleship into perspective, since it would appear that God had to chase him down. God went out of His way, so to speak, because Paul had worked so hard to avoid the divine touch, persecuting those who had received it. Only God's persistence stood between Paul and eternal loss. Thus, Paul ended up working quite a bit harder than the others to catch up. Even that was only by the grace of God.

But it matters not a whit who preached the gospel at Corinth, because the mere existence of a church showed that it was the power of that gospel, not of any man. Given that the gospel rests on the fact of Jesus' resurrection, how could anyone suggest that He would not give the same resurrection to those He saves? Resurrection of One requires the resurrection of His followers; it's all the same package. If there's no resurrection, there is no Christ, and everything preached is one big lie. That means the Jews were right to kill Him and the story ends back there in Jerusalem. All those who claim He arose would be liars, and everything they teach based on Christ's teaching is also a lie. Faith is reduced to wishful thinking, and your sins are not forgiven.

Worst of all, for every individual believer, this is worse than false. It means that the full investment of self in serving Christ amounts to nothing, and they'll die still in their sins. Apparently, this heresy included the notion that only those who live long enough to see Christ return would be redeemed. What a horrible notion! If faith is bound only to this fallen existence, then it means nothing. If there is no Eternity, there is no God and there is no faith.

Yes, Christ rose from death. He is the first spiritual harvest among humans who pass from this life. It was a man who brought death into the world, and it was by a man that eternal life was restored –

Adam versus Christ. The divine order of things is that Christ goes Home first, and then He returns to receive us into that Home. Right behind that would be the end of all things on this plane of existence, because His divine authority will conquer everything down here, and present it to the Father. So, the time between His resurrection and our resurrection is engaged in bringing all human authority under His. Some resist, and that resistance is what He seeks to defeat through us. Death itself is one of His enemies, and we must have victory over it as the final enemy to be defeated.

Obviously, we aren't there yet. And this business of putting all things under His feet does not mean the very Son by which they are put there. Jesus is not defeated, least of all by death. Rather, all things will be subjected to His authority, as a single package wrapped up and turned over to His Father. The Son surrenders these things willingly, as the One appointed to subdue all Creation under the Father.

Now, despite all the silly arguments over what the specific choice of words mean – “baptized over the dead” – it would have to be something which fits into the same train of thought. In the context of Paul's writing, we have little choice but to associate this figure of speech with the concept of repentance, as the ritual washing meant in the Old Testament. Similar language is used in Romans 6, where baptism is symbolic of dying with Christ. There is no reason to suppose this single passage heralds some new teaching otherwise unknown in Scripture. This ritual washing would mean nothing if our old life was not being put to death and if coming up out of the water would not mean walking in a new life made possible by repentance. But if we so walk in newness of life, which is surely the reason many face persecution, who would choose such a dramatic gesture if risking death meant never seeing Christ? Are we going to toss out the entire doctrine of mortification? Paul could rejoice over the church at Corinth only because his old man of flesh had died, leaving him facing life through the Spirit. Only by seeing things in the Spirit could he continue in the confidence that they would get it right.

So how about that awful incident in Ephesus? It was as if Paul were a gladiator in the fighting pit with ravenous beasts. What would be the point of facing such risks if there was no hope for better things beyond this life? If there is no resurrection, then the Epicureans would be right: “Party today, because there may be no tomorrow!” Such evil company would make life not worth living in the first place. The only reason Epicureans and other people with dead spirits hang out with you, even in church meetings feeling comfortable, is because you haven't repented. You haven't risen to the new life of Christ.

People like to use what they regard as penetrating questions of logic to attack the doctrine of resurrection. By what mechanism are the dead raised? It can't be the same dead and corroding body, so what sort of new body do they get? Such questioning by its very nature belongs to the flesh, which has to die in order for Christ to be raised in you. Paul uses parabolic language to point out the necessity of parables in explaining things that man cannot grasp with mere intellect. Seeds don't look anything like the plants that produce them and vice versa. We recognize in our minds the difference between various seeds and plants. We divide animals into different types, so why is it so hard to imagine a different kind of body altogether? The problem is that eternal bodies are so radically different from what we know here that it's like the difference between moon and sun, or between the various stars in the sky. This symbolizes the difference between fallen and eternal. This sorrowful life is replaced by something that is totally different. Stop choking over the concept and embrace it by

faith.

There is a fleshly body, and by extension, we should understand that there is a spiritual body. The first Adam was declared a living soul and the ultimate Adam was declared the Giver of Eternal Life. Adam has to die in order to grow the New Life. The first man was made from the earth, and the other man came down from heaven. We currently share in the nature of the first, but we must take on the nature of the other.

Mere fallen man cannot lay claim to divine inheritance, any more than death can own immortality. But let me place before your minds a divine mystery, says Paul. Not every believer faces death, but every believer does face a radical change. The Last Trumpet will sound, instantly the dead will rise to the New Life, and the dying will, too. What we know as life and death here is death in different forms, and it must be conquered with the real Life. This fulfills the prophecies of Death being defeated, as Paul quotes Isaiah and Hosea. It cannot keep us in its power, though it rules this world. Its authority to make this plane miserable is sin, and the power of sin arises from God's Laws. The only escape is Christ, the Master of God's Laws.

Instead of clinging to human logic, Paul encourages the Corinthians to become hardheads about the gospel. Don't let the brain get in the way of Life. Don't let nagging intellectual curiosity drag you back into death. Settle in your minds that some things make sense to God, and don't have to make sense to us. We don't have to understand it all; we have only to obey and walk in His ways. Struggle through this vale of sorrow with the unreasoning conviction and assurance that God will not abandon you simply because your obedience brings an end to this life.

1 Corinthians 16

If there is no resurrection, there can be no fruit of the Spirit. One of the primary fruits is a generous heart, matched by a generous hand. The church in Jerusalem had suffered much from persecution and now there was a drought, which had caused a famine. The odd weather patterns of the Mediterranean would see the Levant suffering droughts that affected no other regions. While it's not certain, we sense that the churches themselves in Asia and Macedonia had come up with the idea of raising an offering for relief of this famine. Paul comes to the end of his letter with some instructions regarding this offering.

First, Paul notes that the Corinthians are not being singled out on this. Every church involved gets the same message. There were plenty of wealthy members, but even more were of humble means. Holding a big fund-raiser with heavy emotional appeals is not the way God works. If you want to take part, you do so utterly without pressure, at your own pace, but especially according to the ancient biblical principle: "as the Lord prospers you." If He doesn't prosper you, He obviously does not intend for you to give much. For those moved to give, let them begin bringing whatever it is they have each week when the church gathers on Sunday. Thus, when Paul arrives, there won't be any hurried collections, but whatever has already been set aside is what will go.

We get the sense these people really did suffer delusions about Paul lording it over them. He is careful to keep his hands off the offering, instructing them to appoint whomever they wished to carry the money to Jerusalem and Paul would at most simply escort them. Meanwhile, he felt the need to see

the other churches in Greece on the way to them. Maybe he could winter at Corinth, but he did not want to simply pop in and then have to leave again. That would bless no one. In other words, he says they deserve more of his time than just a single day or two. And while he was hoping to stay at Ephesus until Pentecost, we know he was chased out before that (Acts 20). He notes opposition is a signal of an effective ministry.

Paul was planning to send this letter with Timothy. We know little of Timothy, only that he was rather young, and Paul encouraged him not to be intimidated. So, he tells the Corinthians to respect Timothy as they would himself, as fellow servants of the Lord. Further, we see Paul subtly point out that there was no rift between him and Apollos. The latter was asked to come along, but chose not to for his own reasons and Paul respected that. Thus, Paul was not setting himself up as anyone's master.

They were free in Christ, and Paul encouraged them all to stand up like real men of the Lord. Such manhood could afford to sacrifice as Christ did on the Cross. It seems Stephanus himself had been part of the messenger crew carrying these letters back and forth between Corinth and Paul at Ephesus. Paul baptized this man and his family himself, one of the few, because they were also the first in that region of Greece to commit to Christ. We gather they were well off, but not eager to take the limelight. Yet, it was clear that they had early adopted the changes in their lifestyle to accommodate the gospel, becoming more like a Hebraic household, including how they organized their affairs to serve their Lord. There was a very good reason they were a leading family in the church at Corinth, Paul points out. Along with Fortunatus and Achaicus, they were leading the way for the rest of the church with such fervor that they tended to make up for the general failures of the rest.

The last few lines are typical greetings, but they show Corinth is not alone. He pointedly asks them to adopt the Eastern style of greeting for each other. While Greeks would be familiar with that extravagant ritual greeting, they seldom used it themselves. Then he writes in his own hand, something few men in that time could do. Reading and writing were maintained as separate skills until recent history. Finally, he says something utterly foreign to Western culture. All mankind was divided before God into two camps: those who loved His Son as their Lord and those who were accursed. There was no other standard of goodness, no increments of acceptability. Paul offers a Hebrew cry for God to come soon and reveal His wrath against those who are accursed. Yet in this was the grace of Christ and Paul's own affection for them.

2 Corinthians 1

If we turn the gospel of Christ into a fortress of the mind, building emotional comforts, we have nothing more than what any skillful writer could have composed for his own entertainment. However, the gospel is much more than mere words. It is not mere knowledge and feeling, but a very Person, God Himself. The blessings of the gospel message pull us out of ourselves into a far higher realm; otherwise, we cannot hope to assimilate it.

Recall briefly the chronology of Paul's dealings with the Corinthian church. The first missive we do not have, in which Paul was seeking a confirmation from the church regarding bad news he heard from couriers. His second letter is more formal, preserved for us as 1 Corinthians. Paul was driven

from Ephesus shortly after he wrote these. As he makes his way around to Macedonia, he writes a third note we do not have, but finally gets a good report from the church prior to traveling farther. Thus, he writes this fourth, which we have in the New Testament as 2 Corinthians. It precedes his arrival in person by some days.

Paul begins this message speaking of God's comfort because he has found a fresh comfort in their progress. After the typical identification of the writer, he also notes Timothy is with him at the moment, helping him compose the message according to the facts. He then identifies the recipient as the church at Corinth, and everyone else in that Roman region of Achaia. The greeting is the grace of Christ, and the peace from receiving that grace. This is the ground for having comfort from God.

It seems unfortunate that we translate the Greek word *paraklesis* simply as "comfort" in English, because the typical associations with that word miss the point. The Greek word is both the invocation of someone's assistance, and the assistance delivered. The Holy Spirit, often called by the related term "Comforter" (*paraclete*), is One who by His nature draws you up out of yourself. When you call upon God, He calls you to Himself. That primary form of assistance and comfort is to make you see that you need not care about the sorrows that clamor your attention. Comfort in tribulation is rising above it mystically. We then offer that same blessing to others, helping them rise above their sorrow by climbing outside themselves. Such consolation is abundant in Christ.

Naturally, as we develop a stronger immunity to worldly sorrows, we should expect those sorrows to abound. What kind of reward is that? Wrong question. God sends more sorrows because that is how He executes His wrath on sin. If this drives you deeper into despair, it is because you cling too much to this life. If it drives you farther from your old self, you should expect more of it as the sorrows succeed in their mission. Our sorrows abound, but our "comfort" abounds the more, as we pull farther and farther away from the false and fallen world around us. Yes, the whole point is to make you even more otherworldly, more "out of touch" from things which only hinder His Kingdom. Paul sincerely hopes they understand this, so the same deep blessings can fall on them.

As for the sorrows Paul faced, he was hoping that the Corinthians already knew. This was no small burden of sorrow, because Paul was fairly sure the end had come. He had already embraced the death sentence on his flesh and this life back on the Damascus Road. It was an easy step, then, to trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. As it was, the divine plans were to allow Paul to escape that situation. The prayers of the church in Corinth on his behalf were not wasted. Those who joined in such prayers could now join in giving thanks.

Paul having seen first hand the power of God over death, it should be obvious he was not fearful of much else in this world. When you have dismissed your own importance in this world, you have nothing to lose by brutal honesty. Thus, Paul could boast of a clear conscience. If there were mistakes, he would own them quickly. When he was able to overcome the flesh and human intellect, he was able to operate by the wisdom of God Himself. Thus, his letters had not been self-contradictory if read from a proper spiritual understanding. That's the same frame of mind that would carry all disciples of Jesus to the very End. On that day, they would all stand before God able to rejoice in each other.

Thus, Paul arrives at the first issue he must clarify for the Corinthians: his plans get changed for very good reasons, often beyond his control. He had been looking forward to fellowshipping with them

when he proposed to visit Corinth before Macedonia, then loop back for a second visit before heading off to Jerusalem. He actually boasted about the sweet blessing of being with God's people, including being with those in Corinth. The change in plans was not something frivolous, no mere whim. His concerns all came from God, not whatever he dreamed up until the next change of wind. When he wrote about that plan, he was altogether serious, because it was from the heart of God. It ranked right up there with the gospel itself, as preached by Paul and others. God never fails on His promises, even when He works through fallible humans. If He can pull men from death into life in His Son, He can do whatever pleases Him on this earth.

Therefore, the God who was gracious in saving Paul, even while Paul was hostile to His Son, is the same God who would back up Paul's claims. The reason Paul did not come first to Corinth was to spare them. They weren't ready to see him. They had made too many complaints about his forceful and impassioned writing, as if he somehow was domineering and too demanding. Until they understood how that was not the case, it would only make things worse if he were to come before they got right with God. They needed to move closer to the truth and understand it properly so he could treat them as equals in faith.

They needed so desperately to climb up out of themselves.

2 Corinthians 2

All face death, but some will face it again. The world God had made died in the Garden, and all mankind with it. A select few are made alive again and must face their death squarely. They will die, but will never face the second death. While none of us can know whether any other is alive or dead in the Spirit, we know that our lives must exhibit the marks of Eternal Life. A critical element of that manifestation of Life is passing beyond death and not returning to its domain. The church is a collection of people manifesting Life and drawing others who need it. However, the leadership must embrace that manifestation, and not call "brother" one who manifests no part of that Life. Such a fellow need not leave the gathering, but cannot presume to be a true member if he remains to all appearances spiritually dead.

In this chapter, Paul clarifies the one issue that prevented him visiting the Corinthians. Some time during the previous letter of record and this one, he got word the church was unwilling to excommunicate the fellow who had married his dad's hand-me-down trophy bride. It's a good guess at least one elder in particular was fighting this, as it seems to make the best sense of what Paul writes here. It may be the guilty man was an elder, himself.

Had Paul gone to see them again before correcting this very embarrassing error, no one would have been happy. There would be no way to avoid the overwrought emotions and burnt bridges that would destroy their fellowship. Paul had no pleasure in coming down hard on them, as some had alleged.

He would much rather meet them while they were joyfully overcoming their own fleshly weaknesses. One weakness was the man desiring his father's cast off consort; the other weakness was the church unwilling to censure the man. Any such weakness is a cause for sorrow to Paul. When they hurt, he hurt. What lever he might have used to pry them loose we may never know, but it was likely a form of ostracism for the entire church. We can be sure the other Apostles would honor it, and thus many of

the leading lights of Christ in those days would avoid the one and only Christian church in Corinth, making them just another pagan cult group in a city full of them.

Paul didn't want to censure the whole church, because it was only that one faction – however many there were – that caused all the trouble. The church rightly isolated the sin and cut it out, and that's all they should have done. Once he put away his female toy, it was time to bring him back into equal fellowship. Further, it meant restoring him fully to his previous place, whatever that was. Otherwise, it did nothing to bring Life, but simply drove him back into the embrace of Death. They had always loved this man, and should remind him it was not that they had stopped loving him, but simply could not afford to let him do as he pleased while holding the prerogatives of membership. This was all Paul had hoped and expected of them in writing the previous messages.

They proved obedient to the Word of Life, which was the standard all along. By that same Word they could forgive, and Paul was duty bound to honor their choice. Indeed, the forgiveness stood ready for the man to repent and it was the forgiveness of God Himself, so who was Paul to argue? Thus, Paul had been praying the man would embrace that repentance and the forgiveness with it, hoping everyone would see and understand this all took place under the very eyes of the Risen Christ. Never mind what the eyes of the flesh can see, Christ is just as real as the Devil who always seeks to destroy. If we can detect the activity of Satan, we can also see the hand of God.

When Paul fled Ephesus, he stopped in Troas. There he had a rich opportunity to preach the gospel. How could he not obey God, who had opened this door? Nevertheless, he was antsy. When Titus did not meet him there with the good news that the Corinthians had done their duty, he crossed the sea to Macedonia, whence he wrote this letter. We see him constrained to move slowly in their direction, hoping against hope that he would run into Titus. He wanted to be as close as possible so he could quickly come and celebrate with them, as he was so sure they would do the right thing.

Paul frequently pictures Christians as those who march in the victory parade with Christ at their head, rather like the Roman generals parading through Rome with their troops after a successful campaign. Was it not always thus with Rome, which had not lost any war in human memory? They didn't accept defeat, but kept at it until they won. Everybody knew that by now. The Lord reveals to all Creation that He brooks no dissent from His Word, though the mechanism for enforcement from within the Spirit Realm is beyond understanding.

Instead of troops and parades, it is more subtle, like the smoke of incense drifting far on the winds. To God, we are a pleasing fragrance on the earth, the scent of Life. Those who participate in emitting that fragrance love it, too. That same smoke strikes those in the grip of Death as the stink of death. The message of Christ polarizes humanity. No mere man could do such things. There were plenty of folks out there preaching the gospel in the flesh, hucksters trying to keep from actually having to work for a living. Their preaching probably sounded the same to those who remained in Death, but those in Life easily picked out these fakes, because they just do not smell right. Paul preached regardless of what it brought him, either death or life. Either way, he would be in the Presence of Christ.

2 Corinthians 3

It is so easy to forget that the Kingdom of Heaven is heavenly in the sense of spiritual. Its nature is

otherworldly, and only manifests itself here, without actually being tied to this world. Nothing here is sacred, but all things can point to sacred truth. We cannot pretend to do business man's way. We hold only those precious few earthly things as is absolutely necessary for His glory, like a stick or stone we might use for some transitory purpose. Once we meet that purpose, we discard it without thought. We do not cling to the things of this world any more than we would cling to every stone we might have tossed since childhood and every stick we used for whatever purpose.

Did Paul need some kind of documentation, bits of paper inscribed with mere ink, to show off how successful his ministry had been in Corinth? The whole church recognized his face. Such documents would hardly aid him in the next mission to some new city, and no one he already knew needed them. What made a difference was the testimony that a church gathered for worship and fellowship in Corinth. The testimony of their living in Christ was sufficient reward for Paul. There was no need for plaques and such, since the only memorabilia that mattered were in Heaven.

Paul mentioned the stone tablets Moses carried down from Mount Sinai. The Law of Moses did not save, but repenting under that Law could put you in a place where salvation was possible. Paul trusted in Christ, who was no mere "Son of the Law" but the Law personified, and far more. What He spoke corrected the Law as men knew it. While the Law was necessary to kill the human flesh, only Christ could bring Life. Nothing man can perform would make a bit of difference in Heaven. What Heaven required could only come from God as a free gift of grace. Paul didn't look for a license, a degree, and some tangible thing that signified his competence as an Apostle. Those who were spiritually alive could figure it out from the Spirit of God and those spiritually dead had no power to care.

The ministry of that Law was to kill the flesh and its pride, to bring the conviction of sin. It was such a mighty gift from God that the whole thing was a series of miracles. Moses came down with a face that literally emitted light, because that is how anything truly from Heaven manifests in this world. Just spending time with God's powerful Presence on the mountain made his face glow that way. It caused such a disturbance with the people of Israel that Moses covered his face with a veil until that glow wore off. Given that the blessing of condemnation and death was so wonderful and miraculous, how much more wonderful was the eternal glory in the miracle of Life? By comparison, the glory of the Law becomes downright hideous. We pass through the Law to escape darkness, but the passage is death, and we escape that into eternal Life and Light.

Because of this glorious hope, the eagerness to pass from this plane of existence, Paul had no trouble speaking boldly. What could mere man do to him, when even that was a matter of what God permitted? Moses had to be rather embarrassed by the loss of that glow after a while, and it was something the Israelites constantly forgot. That veil he wore symbolized the Veil in the Temple, as well as the spiritual veil over the hearts of Israel. They read the words of the Law, and could not begin to comprehend what it required of them, because there was no life in their spirits. Christ alone could lift that veil, and they rejected Him. Yet, we know if anyone, Jew or Gentile, turns sincerely to the Lord, He lifts that veil of understanding, and they see Christ.

The glory of the Lord is blinding to the blinded, but gives light to those whose eyes He opens. Those He chooses are truly free, even as they are yet confined to this plane of existence. It's rather like seeing the glory of God through a polished metal surface, not entirely clear and precise, but altogether

obvious. We know He lives in us because we see with His eyes. Day by day, we gain fresh insights into His glory, His revelation, and the glow that only spiritual eyes can see shines bright as the sun. That's the result of His Spirit born in our spirits.

2 Corinthians 4

Paul continues the theme of mortification. This is no mere doctrine. While words can hardly express it, by wording his teaching in the language of paradox, Paul seeks to break up the reliance on human intellect. We do not grasp the Truth, but Truth knows us and owns us, and Truth lives. If we do not turn the things of this world upside down, human thoughts and controls, we cannot hope to see the free hand of God's grace.

Pulling off the veil is the nature of the gospel. Unlike the Jews who had veiled the Truth from themselves by placing human intelligence on the throne of the soul, Paul carries quite simply the message which seeks to dethrone reason and intellect. When you don't rely on human abilities, there is nothing to fear from being utterly transparent. All over the world, men hide information from those they lead and rule. Secrecy is a weapon of oppression and Paul did not withhold any part of the true understanding of Scriptures. There was no ruler's advantage in what he shared with the Corinthians, no cynical manipulation for fear they might not properly grasp things. Living Truth is hidden only from the dead unable to see. Satan relies greatly upon human intellect to prevent spiritual truth taking hold of people.

God alone can make any impact with such a message. In no way does Paul promote himself, but Christ. If Christ has called him as Apostle, then Paul needs but to fulfill the requirements of that role and Christ will back it up. In this, Paul renders himself a servant to Christ and a servant to the Corinthians for His sake. Paul is merely exposing what God has placed in him by divine power.

We are comparable to cheap expendable pottery containing the most precious jewelry. We are nothing, but if the Lord finds us useful, then we continue. Thus, as humans count things, the life of serving the Word is quite rough, even deadly. But as a spirit brought to life and set free in Christ, it is all just exposing the truth – He is all, and we are nothing. We bear in our very bodies the dying of Christ on the Cross, a living truth that we embrace, expiring moment by moment, so that we can share in His resurrection. Let Jesus arise afresh and live in each of us, use us up and get this over with, so we can go and be with Him. This dying as we live is the means to bringing His Life to places like Corinth.

It's the same faith from ancient times, as Paul quotes from Psalm 116, in which David asserts that the threats to his life mean nothing so long as he is faithful to God's Word. That Word never fails. It promises that we shall together see Jesus face to face, Paul tells the Corinthians. Everything Paul has done and said in reference to the Corinthian church was in their best interest, because it was in the Kingdom's best interest.

Paul had by no means run out of hope. His flesh was used up; his mind and sanity stretched to the breaking point. It was all in exchange for the rule of the Spirit. He found it a cheap price to pay; that's how spiritual people measure things. Whatever man can measure with his mind will never amount to much, but what the spirit of a man knows, unspeakable though it may be, is the treasure of Eternity.

2 Corinthians 5

Christians normally focus on the spiritual plane, dealing with the earthly plane only grudgingly. Rather early in Church History we completely lost that otherworldly orientation, seeking political advantage. Paul struggled to get the Corinthians to adopt such an orientation, too. The bane of faith is clinging to this life and its trappings, as if any part of it matters.

Recall that the issue that prompted this teaching was the accusation by one or more partisan groups in the Corinthian church that Paul was not a good man of God because he failed to keep his promise to come visit them. Their logic was, apparently, that an Apostle speaks for God and such speaking must be absolute propositional truth always. If the man says something that doesn't come true, then according to their perverted understanding of the Old Testament standard for prophets, Paul must not have been a true prophet of God. He said something that didn't work out.

This artificial, legalistic view of things is simply wrong, and is not what the Old Testament taught. Paul promised to visit based on his convictions and the situation at the time. It was not based on some word from God. We are bound by our convictions, but God is not. If anything binds Him, we cannot know. We can only symbolize His character and thoughts. Paul's promise to visit was not God's promise. We often fail to understand that we are still in fallen flesh, and all the problems, sorrows, and mistakes of our fallen nature do not reflect poorly on the gospel but on our fallen flesh, because the gospel demands leaving behind this fallen world.

We view our life below as temporary, rather like a tent. Once it has served its purpose, we get to move into an eternal mansion. We are exposed to sorrow in this world, but seek the protection of His righteousness. We can't wait! Throughout our days on this earthly plane, we keep begging the Lord to take us home. We want to exchange the tattered fabric of this pitiful half-existence for the rich robes of our Father's direct presence. Our Lord placed the burning desire in our hearts, and the source of the desire – the Holy Spirit – is also the vestment for a future inheritance of the privileges of Heaven.

When you look at this human existence in that way, what can threaten you? Surely, we are familiar with this life below, but something inside us makes it seem alien. We are aliens because every decision we make is rooted in our commitment to Christ, not what makes sense to our human minds. For this cause, we boldly confess that we are looking forward to our release from the constraints of this fallen plane.

It's only natural that our reflex is to seek what pleases Our Lord, whether here or there with Him. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." There will come that Final Day of Judgment when each of us will stand before Him. The quality of our service to Him will be revealed once and for all, and He will treat us accordingly. Most men have no idea what is coming, but it will be terrifying to sinners. They don't understand because they don't have the Spirit to give life to their spirits, to grant a spiritual understanding. So, when Paul deals with sinners, he has to offer something fairly consistent and simple. He calls them to repentance based on God's Laws because that's what they can understand. His actions will be viewed through the lens of that lawful standard. To God we are utterly transparent, so it's not a matter of Laws, nor of what men can see with eyes of the flesh. He knows all things as they are on the spiritual plane. Paul says he trusts that the Lord will reveal to the Corinthians His grace in Paul's actions, that the core group of spiritual believers there won't need a legalistic explanation. Those

who need such explanations aren't spiritual.

The church at Corinth was nearly shredded with partisan squabbles. Each party evaluated Paul on a shifting scale, whether his actions matched their agenda and whether supporting or attacking him provided some political advantage for that day. The core group of spiritual folks who stayed out of such quarrels would not need an explanation from Paul why his plans to visit Corinth were countermanded by God. Rather, Paul was hoping to give them a way of silencing all the nit-picking attacks on him, and rejoice in the grace God had shown through Paul's teaching.

Did some suggest Paul was mentally unbalanced? That's because his zeal for God recognized no human limits. To the degree he was able to sound reasonable in answering these attacks, it was to help the spiritual group stay on track. But the language of Heaven is paradoxical; it sounds crazy even as it rings of truth. Jesus the sinless One died for sins. He opened the pathway of that death of the flesh so that others may receive His holiness and His drive to serve the Father. His perfect sacrifice gave them access to His resurrection, too.

So let us commit ourselves, once and for all, to seeing with the eyes of the Spirit. Let us blind ourselves to what mere flesh can see. Yes, even though Paul knew Jesus the man, it meant nothing if he couldn't see that man by the Spirit. Paul paid no heed to the memories of Jesus he gained during that time he was a Pharisee defending the system from Jesus' prophetic accusations. Paul nailed that old Pharisee and his memories to the Cross. Those of us who truly embrace Christ are new creatures, and all we were before has been tossed aside, dead. All the experiences of our daily lives will be reevaluated in the Spirit. Everything in this world is just a tool, property of God, given for His service. We are at peace with Him because of His choice. We are called and committed to one thing that matters above all: to make that peace available to others on the same terms.

It's our mission to recruit others for citizenship of Heaven, the Domain of Christ. God pleads with sinners through us. That's how folks at Corinth became believers. Christ was sinless and perfect, the only fit sacrifice for all our sins, because He claimed them as His own. That was the price He had to pay for claiming us as His own. He takes our sins, and we receive His righteousness; that's how His Father sees it. God's agenda is reconciliation, and our understanding of what He does must be seen in that light. So, when God breaks Paul's promises, without Paul knowing in advance, it's okay to remember that Paul was just a human and so are we all. Stuff happens and we can't let it get in the way of our calling to serve, even when someone who shares that service fails in some way. It has nothing to do with whether he sinned, but simply that he remains locked in this awful fallen world, and we can't wait to get out here.

2 Corinthians 6

Paul is like a man giving arm signals to people operating large vehicles. If they choose to observe his directions, they can proceed safely on the path God has laid. The Corinthians could as easily ignore his signals and go where they wish and even run him down in the process. It depends on whether they will heed that inner voice telling them to obey.

The grace of God is not a package, a discrete possession, but a connection, a living embrace. We are grafted into Eternity. It may well arrive in our consciousness at some historical moment, but the

change itself stands rooted outside the restraints of time. God reveals Himself as the Source, living eternally outside the bubble of our experience of time. It is always “now” where God is working. Paul quotes a portion of Isaiah that shows a nation rejecting their appointed destiny under the revelation of God, and so losing their identity as God’s People. Instead, the Messiah would come and finish their appointed task of taking the timeless truth to the world. In Heaven, the name “Israel” refers to a mission, not simply a political or ethnic identity. Paul was allowed to regain that identity by becoming a part of the True Israel, the incarnate Word. If there could be any man who understood the necessity of offering the Word purely, without any extra junk, it would be Paul.

So tightly does Paul cling to this gift of grace, calling him up out of himself, even while his flesh remained anchored in this world, that he was able to present a consistent image as one who served God. Thus, he rattled off a random list of nine things that could have pulled him off-course. Then he lists nine ways he has responded to them all with God’s power, followed by nine ways in which that very same grace at work has borne the full range of varying fruit, depending on things Paul could hardly control. Paul’s mission was consistency in the Spirit, bearing the eternal unchanging Word of God.

That consistency was manifested again as Paul fully opened to the Corinthians the revelation of Jesus Christ. As bearer of that boundless hope and grace, he was entirely vulnerable to them. He embraced them as wild children who had run free, lacking any care or supervision. Yes, such children can hurt you, but you cannot hope to reach them without absorbing their childish abuse, until they get it out of their system. There were limits on them receiving the full inheritance of Christ, but not because Paul held back, as if he had something to protect. The limits came from their own refusal to change, for grace brings demands. Paul pleaded with them to open all the hidden corners to the light of grace.

A primary demand of grace is leaving behind the old dead self of flesh, and the world to which it is attached. That includes recognizing a degree of separation from those who have not received grace. Paul paints the picture of yoking together wildly disparate draught animals, each with a different gait, pace, and response to conditions and load. We who are focused on things above cannot share the hopes and dreams of those who know nothing beyond this life. Christ and Satan are not partners, and anyone not of Christ is most certainly of Satan. There is no middle ground; every living human belongs to one or the other. Christ lives in us; the others are all dead.

Paul then summons several Old Testament quotes that together show an irrefutable demand to recognize no claim on us from this world. God has chosen us as His very real presence in this world; we are His utterly. Many will claim to be a part of His family, but the true mark of faith is responding to the demands of this world as those who belong to some other, higher realm.

2 Corinthians 7

Again, the true mark of faith is responding to the demands of God’s Word. Having made his way from Troas to Philippi, Paul was on pins and needles, hoping his communications were sufficient to open their hearts to a move of the Spirit and correct their primary failures. He could not rest, but neither could he visit them again until he got that message of confirmation. Titus headed the delegation that had come to meet Paul in Macedonia with the good news. Thus, this letter precedes his visit by just a short time.

So the Lord had left an ancient legacy of promising that He would reside personally with His people, symbolized by the story of the Pillar of Fire during Exodus, but in a much more personal way in His Son, by bringing to life our spirits with His Spirit. With that promise is the subtle reminder of a warning that He cannot abide idolatry any more than a husband would adultery. This idolatry seemed to hinge most on the Corinthian insistence in walking by human wisdom, assuming that surely God would be reasonable, since the legacy of Hellenist culture was so very grand, no? No. They must surrender any part of that deep past that does not fit the even deeper ancient past of God's revelation.

Paul encourages the Corinthians to renew daily the cleansing of repentance, nailing the flesh to the Cross afresh. This would include making room for Paul to be what God called him to be in their lives. If they received his affection, they should also receive his admonition. Demanding that everything be nice is demanding they be fake; they are infantile expectations. If there is one constant in the Kingdom, it is the change in us. We all together die to sin and live to Christ.

Wherever Paul went, he boasted of the Corinthians. Such a large congregation and how little they would permit him to be troubled during that first long stay! It was wholly unlike his passage from Ephesus, or his trials upon visiting Macedonia again. Corinth was one of the few cities where he was able to stay so freely. It was such good news to find his boasting about them was not an exaggeration. Titus brought a refreshing narrative into Paul's sorrowful journey. That consolation of self-death had taken hold in Corinth with his last message and Titus buoyed Paul's spirit with a fresh report, bringing back that same enduring joy of self-death to Paul. He piles up words to describe how vivid their spiritual response was.

On the one hand, Paul could not bear regret for the truth. On the other, he felt bad for how much it hurt them, since he surely knew himself the misery of conviction for sin. But the sorrow was brief compared to the eternal glory of truth being born in fallen men by grace. It is always better to suffer for sin's conviction than to live oblivious on the path to Hell. Again, Paul praises them to the skies for having overcome such a great barrier with such gusto.

Paul did not seek vengeance on the primary guilty party, nor was he focused on the loss of the wronged party. Either of those would be but man's excuse for pointless wrath. Rather, from beginning to end, it was always a matter of showing the Corinthians God's divine favor by how he connected with them. If they could understand what Paul was doing, they would understand more clearly how God works.

So the return of Titus with this wonderful confirmation of Corinthian obedience to the gospel was more than Paul could put into words. The encounter in Corinth making Titus so joyful didn't hurt either. Titus got to see for himself what Paul had been saying, how the Corinthians could be moved if they just understood where they were, and where they needed to be. Paul's confidence in the Word, and in those who had received the Word, was borne out. Indeed, Titus had now become a fan of the Corinthian church.

2 Corinthians 8

We recall here how part of Paul's final missionary journey through Asia Minor and Greece was collecting funds to take to Jerusalem, as the church there suffered under a famine. It was bad enough

that the Christians in Jerusalem had been cut off from so many things for embracing Jesus. Many were ostracized from their families, lost their jobs, and were generally treated worse than Gentiles. But a drought had struck Palestine and after just a couple of years, things were very bad for the church at Jerusalem. As word of this suffering came to the Christians in Asia Minor, Macedonia and Achaia, it was altogether natural they should want to help. Paul encouraged this project, and was rather sensitive to the risks of being accused of seeking to embezzle such a large amount of money.

Within this context, Paul notes that the Macedonians were beyond generous. For some decades, Rome had been rather harsh with this region, and while not starving to death, poverty was more common there than in most parts of the Empire. The three churches – Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea – manifested the power of grace in self-death. In their poverty, they celebrated the opportunity to repay in money some small token of the unspeakable riches of the gospel to the people who sent it, their Jewish brethren in Jerusalem. They had climbed up out of themselves, operating with heavenly disregard for the suffering of this world, grabbing everything that was not nailed down so that it could be liquidated for the sake of this collection. They were fully conscious that God owned every thing about them, so what was a bit of money?

So, when Paul sent Titus ahead of him with that note, he also asked Titus to mention this fund-raiser. If the Corinthians were obedient in other things, then it would be well to raise this issue, too. This was all from the same package of grace.

With Titus coming once more with this letter, Paul was not commanding anything about the collection. He related the example of the Macedonians to see if the Corinthians would match deeds with words. Jesus lived in poverty as men measured such things; He made Himself of no earthly significance, so that what He left behind in Heaven could be released at His death as the inheritance of His followers. Paul notes that the Corinthians had started this fund-raising a year ago, but all this messy business was probably a big distraction. So, with the coming of this letter, he wanted them to complete the actions behind the initial plan.

When the mind has been harnessed to the spirit, we assess no particular value for what we give up, but assess what is available to give. The Spirit also silences any embarrassment about what we cannot give. This is not to keep the Jerusalem church in luxury, but to raise them up to some hope of survival so that the message lived through them. The region of Achaia was quite prosperous at this time, and God gave this to the church at Corinth so they could store it up for this time of need. Paul reminds them of the manna Israel gathered during the Exodus. Those who wandered off into an area where there wasn't much on the ground didn't find much to harvest, while some seemed to find it all. God saw to it that nobody could take advantage of His provision to hoard up and become rich in manna. They could share voluntarily, or let God even things up by His own hand. Let the Corinthians embrace the lesson in that, along with everyone else.

It was the same sort of eagerness to share the burden that brought Titus down to Corinth with this letter. He was glad to see them again on his own account. With him was some unnamed brother commonly thought to be Luke, not only a master teacher of the gospel, but also the elected delegate of several churches to bear their portion of the collection. It would be hard for anyone to ever suggest Luke was involved in any fraud. Let the Corinthians not fear a swindle. Then Paul mentions yet another fellow servant of Christ just to make sure. Titus was Paul's personal assistant in this matter,

and the rest represented various other churches. It would be a significant delegation of honorable men, and Paul would hate for the Corinthians to embarrass themselves in front of this august company, after having boasted to them what fine Christians were there.

2 Corinthians 9

Paul wrote that he knew it really wasn't necessary to urge the Corinthians to give. The core of the church was always generous; it was only a bunch of partisans who were causing grief over money. Paul had been boasting among the Macedonian churches how those in Achaia, led by Corinth, had been working on it for a year already. He wanted Corinth to have every chance to live up to their reputation. Paul was planning to come down with the various delegates from Asian and Macedonian churches, and was sending his friends ahead with this letter to make sure they would be ready. This way no one would be embarrassed by clumsy hurried efforts to have some substantial gift ready.

It's the way of the world to put on a show. Were this any other sort of operation, we could envision leaders sending their cadre out to shake down everyone, and then putting on airs about bringing some huge collection. The spiritual version of that is to have it waiting and quietly hand it over without ceremony. Most importantly, no one is pressured to give. The Spirit of God operates on voluntary responses, moves that He empowers and supplies. Any other basis is accursed, regardless of how much it may bring in, since the point is not the physical gift, but the moral obedience.

Naturally, stingy hearts offer poor pickings in both spiritual fruit and in physical results. Christ gave all; His Spirit is bountiful through those who embrace Him. God has no trouble telling people how much He wants from them for such offerings if they desire to hear. So it is with everything else under His reign. The assumption that everyone has to act just alike is a worldly perversion. His Spirit moves each of us and it all works out wonderfully well. Paul quotes Psalm 112, where David rejoices in how truly righteous people wisely dispose of their material goods to reduce human suffering, because there are moral considerations far above such goods.

So Paul prays that God will speak to Corinthian hearts so they may have a clear vision of sowing and reaping on that spiritual level. People who serve Him are laden with all sorts of things He intends them to pass along to those in need, and money is but a tiny representative sample of this truth. It's not just putting food in a hungry mouth, but setting the tongue free to give thanks. On top of that, it sets them free to pray for the givers. Who doesn't need such prayer? Further, is there any price too high to purchase more glory for Christ? Of course, it's not the money, but the act of giving anything at all which brings Him glory.

We simply do not have words in any language of men to describe how rich is the life of spiritual interdependence!

2 Corinthians 10

Jesus once said that the traditions of humanity, specifically the Talmud, were a poor replacement for the Word of God. Those who regard His Word as mere traditions of men prove they are spiritually dead, for no one in the Spirit can think that way. The one indicator we have of spiritual birth in someone is how they respond to the Word. A spiritual message brings a spiritual power to bear; the

mind and flesh must obey, however poorly. Human traditions of scholarship could only apply to the level of the fleshly intellect and have no place in the Spirit Realm.

While Paul's scholarship was easily the match of any other, and his ability to understand politics deeply seasoned by experience and his knowledge of God's Laws, he never relied on these things when it came to matters of the Spirit. Since it seems he lacked some sort of natural charisma or oratorical talent, those were dead issues from the start. Such abilities were fine for mundane matters where the Spirit is silent, but utterly outclassed against the imperatives of the Kingdom.

Thus, moving the hearts of the Corinthians would necessarily be a matter of spiritual power through gentleness, not political power or scholarly argument. Paul jokingly noted that some who operated by fleshly authority found this sort of approach wimpy, inconsistent with his forceful letter writing ability. He much preferred the gentle and friendly approach, but some who operate purely on the level of the flesh were going to see his other side, which he reserved for those who didn't appear to have a clue about the Spirit. He may have been confined to a fleshly form, but his friendly demeanor was effective spiritual warfare, overwhelming fleshly powers.

Perhaps they would recall the Battle of Jericho? It was won by God's power, pulling down that imposing great wall without a single human hand involved, only human voices to praise His name. It's the same whenever we are confronted by all sorts of human reasoning against God's will. Yes, the demands of the Spirit are wholly unreasonable, but they are righteous. The ability of humans to make sense of things will have to take a subservient place behind the imperatives of following Christ. The Cross makes no sense at all, but that is where God poured out His grace, and also where He poured out His wrath on sin. Paul was willing to march around the walls of their trust in human capacities until it all collapsed and they were walking with him in the Spirit.

Anyone who still relied on human abilities for Kingdom business should realize that is not the way Christ did things. If anyone was convinced that they belonged to Christ, they should have no trouble recognizing Paul did, too. Yes, to mere men it would appear that Paul in his harsh letters made too much of the authority God gave him. But the primary purpose of his authority was not to break down barriers of fleshly pride, but to build up spiritual faith. He was not ashamed of God's authority, terrorizing though it may be, Paul says sarcastically. He mocks the silly complaint against him about being some kind of idiot who was all boldness as long as he didn't have to actually face anybody in the flesh. Would those fools prefer him to prove that he could be as bold in the flesh as in his letters? This was the man who led an armed company to Damascus once.

Paul wanted no part of the elitists who argued that they should be granted authority by their own standards, using circular reasoning. He was more than happy with the commission from God, which happened to include authority over the Corinthian church. If nothing else, it should be obvious that his work in establishing this church, as the first Christian to bring the gospel there, gave him some sort of authority. It was not derived as a hand-me-down ministry from someone else. Paul's authority grew honestly, derived from churches he planted himself.

As in the first Corinthian letter we have, Paul quotes from Jeremiah 9:24, the passage where the prophet warns that a man's wealth and intellect don't count for much against knowing God. When trials and sorrows come, which one will carry you through? Which cannot be taken from you

regardless? The man of God will be known not by his words, but by his power in the face of challenges.

2 Corinthians 11

If Paul were living today, precious few churches would have him as their pastor. He admitted he was not a great speaker by the standards of his day. Nor did he follow the businessman's logic of citing high fees to ensure he drew a high-paying clientele. That meant he didn't bother with the best of fancy suits. In general, he just didn't impress folks.

It is contrary to the nature of a humble man to boast, but Paul was willing to play that game, if it was necessary to answer his critics. There is a mocking sarcasm against his detractors, who sound very much like Judaizers. Surely, the Corinthians will suffer him to play the same silly game they do? Meddlesome, was he? Yes, like a Jewish matchmaker, he was quite sure that he sold Christ a virgin bride, but now he's nagging them to make sure they remain chaste, not distracted by other interests before the wedding. What does that make his opponents? They were less honest matchmakers trying to contract them to imaginary husbands, another Jesus and some other gospel, as it were. If the Corinthians will put up with a fake gospel, would they not also put up the original preacher?

Paul admits to no inferiority to these other emissaries of the gospel, though he probably lacks their stage presence. His knowledge of the gospel easily matches theirs, and he had been utterly open and honest with Corinthians from the start. Was it a sin that he didn't milk them for high living expenses, but chose to work for his own keep as their equal? Eventually he accepted support from the Macedonian churches for the work in Corinth, as if the Corinthians were too important to pay their own way. How could anyone imagine Paul was taking advantage of the Corinthians? Paul boasted about taking no material support anywhere in Achaia, so how could they complain that they didn't get what they paid for, as if Paul didn't love them?

Paul established in Corinth the policy of not paying the ministers, and would continue pressing that policy to ensure that no one could expect to make a living off manipulating them. If he took no pay, any other presumed leaders have to renounce their pay to be in his class. If Satan manifests himself as an angel of light, we should hardly be surprised when his servants put on airs of apostleship. But the proof is in how it all ends when they stand before God.

So as long as it was necessary to play the fool in order to answer fools, perhaps they would allow him to discuss his own accomplishments in the flesh. Were they unimpressed by such things, seeing they were so wise to entertain men who boasted in that fashion? Corinth was willing to entertain big talking men, men who bound the church under false laws, emptied the treasury, treated the members with contempt, and generally abused them in every way. Paul mockingly apologized for lacking the boldness to treat them so. However, he would play the silly games of such men and boast like a fool in his fleshly accomplishments.

So these scholars were Hebrew, sons of Israel and Abraham? Paul could match that. Oh, were they also followers of Jesus? Just how closely did they follow Him? Paul took beatings like Christ; did they? How long did any of them spend in prison? Had any faced death? How about Jewish beatings and Roman beatings? Paul was stoned, shipwrecked, and spent a whole day swimming in the sea. He

faced so many perils that he lost count. And for Christ he faced just about every sorrow Jesus did. Could those false apostles match that?

But those things didn't matter to Paul, compared to his deep aching concern for the spiritual welfare of the churches. Paul sympathizes with anyone's agony in facing temptation. If anyone stumbles, he burns with embarrassment. Were any of those false apostles sensitive to the common human lot of believers? More likely, they pretended to be too holy for such mundane things. If Paul were going to boast, it would be of how God's grace overcame his own weaknesses. Indeed, when a garrison of troops stood watching the gates of Damascus to arrest him, Paul didn't fight or perform a miracle to escape, but like some common sneak, he was let down over the wall in a basket by night. Oh, what a proud moment that was! That was the grace of God.

2 Corinthians 12

God deals in paradoxes. Paul was a man who escaped Damascus like a helpless child, let down in a basket at night over the wall of the city. This same man had experienced things for which there were no words, in the very presence of God Almighty in Heaven. It's pointless to boast, so Paul spoke of himself in the third person. He did not know whether he was in his body or not, nor did it matter, but was transported to God's very literal Presence outside the known universe. What he heard were not really words, but utterances that cannot be put into human language. What he experienced was ineffable; it could not be told. But he refused to brag about such a thing and spoke of it as from a distance. (This took place sometime around 41 or 42 AD, between his conversion and his first missionary journey.)

Rather, he was proud of how God overcame his weaknesses. Boasting of human achievement is pure folly. God's truth is often quite the opposite of human wisdom. If it always made sense, where would be the need for faith? No, Paul was driven to avoid boasting of things that would force people to be in awe of him. The Spirit of God should move people, not earthshaking stories that can't be proved on human terms. Paul was no different from any other man, except in the difference made by the power of God.

To this end, Paul suffered some particular sorrow that he compared to a thorn stuck in his flesh. It was an affliction that kept him humble, even depressed. It would be typical human reasoning to think this was some physical malady, but it makes better sense spiritually to view this as Paul's complete lack of charisma. He had begged God to remove this weakness, but God insisted Paul must work through it to manifest the power of God. What thrills us in the flesh is seldom the work of the Spirit, because the Spirit works on a totally different level.

So Paul made a fool of himself in silly boasting because the Corinthians demanded that he match the strutting of the fake apostles. The church should have been happy with him for operating on the spiritual level, and he certainly could match any apostle, real or fake, with genuine miracles and Christian work. Indeed, Corinth saw the miracles, no less than any other church Paul founded. The only difference was his refusal to take their money. Sarcastically, he begged forgiveness for overlooking that.

Now on the threshold of coming for a third visit, he had no intention of repenting from his refusal to

take their money. As their spiritual father, his duty was to unload his spiritual treasures on them, not take their earthly ones. Indeed, he would spend his own life on their behalf. How odd it was; the more he loved them, the less they seemed to love him. Still, he refused to change the way he dealt with them. Indeed, he was so crafty that he sent others to do the plundering for him, right? No. Not one of his messengers received an offering from them, particularly Titus.

There was no need to exculpate himself or his assistants. They stood before God with a clean conscience because they did all things to build up the body of Christ. He was concerned he would find them still in the bitterness of partisan wrangling. If so, he would have to embarrass them again by falling humbly on his face in their presence, pleading with God to convict them of their sins. Weren't they looking forward to that?

2 Corinthians 13

Paul notes that this letter precedes shortly his third visit to Corinth. With each visit, he has fully and honestly testified God's truth. Thus, each visit constitutes a lawful testimony in the presence of God. Because the third visit will be consistent with the other two, it will establish the facts so clearly that there can be no dispute in the Court of Heaven. No more Mister Nice Guy. God's judgment has already been pronounced; the sentence will follow shortly. Sin must be judged.

All this nagging about proof, as if Paul had somehow pulled up short of being fully honest with them, will be answered with finality. Yet we must bear in mind: The whole of Paul's authority is in the Spirit. He's not coming to Corinth as he did to Damascus, with warrants, swords and chains, but in the authority of the Risen Christ. In every church, one would always find some who do not notice much because their spirits are dead. So it would have been in Corinth. But a critical mass was spiritual, particularly among the leadership. When Paul comes with a divine commission to manifest God's power, you can be sure whatever miracle of grace is needed to correct things, it will happen. Their minds may be confused about some things, but their spirits will not let them continue in sin. The tormenting conviction of sin is a power no man can define, nor defy.

So they had best examine themselves, as they could surely do if they chose. They should examine by the Spirit whether they are on the right track, which would surely include recognizing the spiritual authority of Paul. Modern Western churches today share much with Corinth of that day, in that people rely on reason, education, and emotion – anything except the real Presence of God Almighty and how He works. While the power of the Spirit may well include those other things, He is by no means dependent on such.

Thus, Paul counsels them to avoid evil, not so he can make himself look good, but that they should manifest truth regardless how Paul might appear in the eyes of the flesh. When he comes, those in the truth will stand unscathed. He would rather be mild among them, and focus on their strength against evil. Paul's only real concern is for them to find that hard narrow path and see it as the road home and that they are fully equipped to discern what matters in the Spirit. As long as they are clinging to the ways of the flesh, they can't use that equipment and such a state would require Paul to be even harsher in person than in his letters.

So, Paul closes this letter with a few final reminders. Each is but a slender suggestion of things he has

taught from the beginning. They should keep striving to pull themselves together as a single force against evil, reaching out to each other for support in the spiritual struggle, learning to adapt themselves to the spiritual mind, not that of the flesh. This guarantees the power and presence of God Himself, so keep seeking that sense of peace that only He can give.

The few final verses are the standard goodbye. Of all the churches for which we have letters, this one church sounds a warning about reliance on human intellect as the path to truth. Paul's forceful repudiation of Western intellectual culture is something often missed in modern times.

Introduction to Galatians

Paul's missionary travels forged into new territory for the gospel message. The effects of such work were undeniable to those who knew the Holy Spirit. It didn't matter whether Paul received a commission from the original Twelve Apostles; his work stood as sufficient testimony of authority.

If we understand correctly, the Twelve spent three years with Jesus before His death. Apparently, Paul had his three years with Christ, as well (Galatians 1:15-18; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4). However, his experience came after Pentecost, and he had the advantage of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Further, he had the human advantage of a PhD equivalent in Judaism. Jesus taught that Judaism was far, far off the path of Old Testament religion. Paul understood it instinctively, but the substance of his comments indicates it didn't matter much to him that Judaism was no longer Hebraic in outlook. The Covenant of Moses was no longer active, anyway.

We stand amazed today at the massive effort to bury this implication from Paul's writings. In this letter, Paul bluntly declares the abrogation of Moses, first because the Jews rejected it, and second because God allowed it to expire in His Son.

His letter to the Galatians is probably his oldest writing and is loaded with sharp criticism for his readers having adopted Judaism-flavored Christianity. Repenting from his zealous persecution of Christians, he was equally zealous in fighting Talmudism. He knew all too well exactly what sort of slimy, corrupt thinking was behind these Judaizers. It would hardly have mattered that these teachers insulted Paul personally; he took the insult to Christ far more seriously. The Lord who went to such great lengths to reach Paul, to turn him around to the truth, brought a message worth defending at all costs.

This was easily the one battle Paul fought hardest early in his ministry. I take the view that he wrote his letter shortly before he attended the Jerusalem Conference in about 48 AD. He came to that meeting with a powerful vehemence regarding the attack on justification by faith. It was a hideous category error to confuse matters of Law with grace. Because this battle continued for some years, showing up in other letters he wrote, it would be easy to mistake his teaching for the cerebral distinction between faith and works so popular today. That such a distinction arose in the debate testifies to the falseness of the Hellenist mindset of the day. Things have only gotten worse over time in Western Christianity. From our distance today we so easily miss the places where Paul demands conduct befitting a true commitment to Christ as Lord. What he was combating was not the importance of works, but works of the Talmud and rote observance of the Law of Moses.

While the writer of Hebrews argues that the Old Covenant is inferior to the New, Paul in Galatians pointedly says the Old is dead. The Talmudic perversion of it is even dead. Being into the old Nation of Israel has absolutely no meaning any longer in God's plans. As a man born Jewish, having lived as the ultimate zealot of Judaism, he was in a unique position to make that claim.

Galatians 1

Paul follows the conventions of correspondence of his day. First, he identifies himself as the sender. In this case, he notes that he is an apostle by God's calling, having received no credentials from any human agency. Further, he identifies whose apostle he is and mentions that there are with him others who believe in the same Savior. He writes to the churches he started in Lystra, Derbe, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. His greeting is graceful, if terse. Observing good form, Paul invokes the One for whom he lives.

Without any niceties, he plunges immediately into the cause of this letter: their turning away from Christ. This is not about Paul, but about Christ and His teaching. The message Paul first brought to them was the truth (Acts 13-14), as testified by the works of power making it possible for a lame man to walk and for Paul to arise after a stoning. He had stayed in that area quite some time, long enough for them to learn the very basic truths of salvation in the Spirit Realm by grace and faith. Once established in this faith, how foolish would it be that these new believers suddenly change the essential teachings? A different teaching would hardly be "good news;" it would be slavery. Let such a teacher be accursed, regardless who it might be, including Paul himself. He emphatically says it twice. Surely, Paul cares nothing at all for making any other human happy, but courts God's favor alone. Should it be that he cared at all about his advancement in this world among men, then he would have stayed in his former life.

That original message came from no human source, unlike the Talmudic trash the Judaizers brought to Galatia. Paul was a disciple of Christ directly. What Paul had from men was the signal honor of the Sanhedrin membership of some sort, far younger than anyone before. It was all a lie, for the same God who gave Paul human life also gave him eternal life. The Lord revealed His Son to Paul. The reason was that he might carry that grace message to the Gentiles. His discipleship was not second-hand from any mere human, not even the Apostles in Jerusalem. With his background in Judaism, it was necessary that his training in Christ come first hand. This occurred during three years in the Syrian wilderness, which Paul says elsewhere included leaving this plane for the Spirit Realm (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). We hardly understand what that means, but it's just the same as saying Paul studied with Christ face to face during those three years.

Thus, Paul needed no further training from the other Apostles, because that was all the time they had with Jesus. Yet, he did meet Peter and was received as an equal (Acts 9:26-30). He also met with James, the brother of Jesus. Anyone doubting this could easily query the Apostles and find out. Though he spent so little time in Jerusalem, just long enough to infuriate a Hellenist synagogue, no one with greater authority questioned his calling and apostleship. Instead, they praised God and gave thanks that their number one persecutor had been turned to the light.

From these comments, we deduce that the Judaizers who had invaded Galatia right behind Paul's mission (Acts 15:1) had slandered him. They called into question his apostleship and his teaching.

They made it sound as if Paul were not a real Jew because he didn't teach the Law of Moses. Of course, what they meant was Paul didn't teach the Talmud. What Paul seems to be fighting here is the false, Hellenized brand of Judaism that Jesus Himself fought. Had they actually brought the true Mosaic teaching, there would have been no real conflict. As Jesus said, the Law and Prophets spoke of Him. Moses was the original Hebrew of Hebrews, fully immersed in the ancient Semite culture, despite his Egyptian upbringing. The greatest teacher after him, Samuel the Prophet, made it clear that the only thing that really mattered was obedience from the heart (1 Samuel 15:22-23). Clearly, these Judaizers were pressing the observance of a long corrupted Hellenized Judaism, a mass of empty and pointless rituals. This destroyed the ancient faith of the Old Testament, and would destroy even more so the New Testament in Christ's blood.

Galatians 2

Paul knew he was nothing. He never forgot his foul sin in persecuting the Messiah through His followers. However, his message took a backseat to no one else's ministry. Had the Twelve died with Christ, Paul knew it would not have changed the outcome for the gospel. The Church would have been born regardless, for the power of the gospel was too great to contain. That his own calling came later did not hinder his apostleship in the least. Paul was God's chosen instrument to bring the message out of Jewish obscurity into a global faith including all humanity. Paul defended his calling and his message, not himself.

To ensure he was not working against the surviving disciples in Jerusalem, Paul returned for a visit with the leaders some fourteen years after his first visit. While it is difficult to match this visit with the narrative in Acts, we assume this private meeting was after Acts 11 and before Acts 15. He went primarily because the Lord commanded it. There, he shared the substance of his gospel preaching. With him were Barnabas and Titus, a Gentile convert.

Titus was an exemplary fruit of Paul's Gentile outreach; none of the Jerusalem leadership pressured Titus to observe any part of the Mosaic ritual requirements. He was accepted as an equal fellow servant of Christ. The issue arose only because the Judaizers had already troubled the Galatian churches. These men felt it was their mission from God to demand everyone claiming Christ must observe Talmudic Law. Anyone who knew Jesus knew He fought this very thing. Christ made it clear time and time again; the Law of Moses was fulfilled in Him. With standard Hebrew ambiguity, this meant that following His teaching was following Moses, but it also meant His death closed the Covenant. Not simply adequately covered, but the Law was complete, closed and finished. What the Judaizers demanded was hardly anything different from Pharisaism with a few extra requirements, a hideous form of bondage Jesus bluntly condemned (Matthew 23). Paul refuted the Judaizers stoutly.

For their part, the pillars of the Jerusalem Church could add nothing to what Paul had already. They recognized his having been with Jesus, too. They understood that God had appointed Paul to take the message to Gentiles, just as Peter had been charged to shepherd the sheep of Israel. Peter, James and John, as the primary trio of the church leadership, gave Paul their seal of approval, for what it was worth. Again, Paul warns the Galatians this was all verifiable. Indeed, their only request was for Paul to remember the poor, something already typical of Paul's work.

Following Paul's interview with the Three Pillars, they came down to Syrian Antioch to see what he

had accomplished and to establish a stronger bond with the church. A later group came down, sent by James (Jesus' brother). At the arrival of this later bunch, Peter and some other Jewish Christians were somehow taken by a silly embarrassment over eating with Gentiles. This idiocy grew until it was scandalous. Paul rebuked them in front of a gathering. He reminded them that they had come out of the Law of Moses to follow Christ. How were they then serving Christ by going back into it? If Jews were the first to hear that observing Mosaic rituals could not save souls, how could they lay upon Gentiles those rituals from a covenant that had never included them?

Paul lays the theological foundation for declaring the Law of Moses dead. This is not about good deeds in general, but specifically about the Law of Moses and particularly as expressed in Pharisaical teachings. While we might find that the original Law of Moses symbolized a path to spiritual truth, the Law code itself was not that truth. To further remove the Law by making it an empty ritualistic observance as practiced by the Pharisees was utterly pointless. That sort of religion was wholly an effort by man to please a false god, a perverted image blasphemously labeled "Jehovah."

The Law was a gateway, awakening the need for spiritual redemption. Observing Moses had nothing to do directly with saving souls from eternal damnation. It was a system by which deeper truth could be discovered, but the system required a nation to live it. Israel failed miserably, losing it for herself and for everyone who should have looked to them for answers. Pharisaism only deepened their loss. For that reason, God sent His Son to pay the price for our sins, to make a path to come before Him and receive His holiness as a grant of grace. A new standard of holiness would arise from a completely new covenant. Every element of the Old Covenant was under review; the Talmud was rejected flatly before that process began. Pharisaical Jews doing their best according to the Talmud stand doubly condemned. If God requires they find their salvation by faith in Christ, how could returning to the Pharisaical Law bring any hope to Gentiles? For a Christian to cling to the Talmud was saying that Jesus sponsored sin.

The Law was confined to this world – a certain people, in a certain place, during a limited period of time. By joining Christ on the Cross, we leave this world behind. That means also leaving the Law behind, as we pass into the higher Realm of the Spirit, into the Kingdom of Heaven. We are dead to the old life, dead to the Law. Christ, having fulfilled every requirement of the Law, left no unfinished business. He now lives in the bodies of His followers. Whether Jewish or Gentile, that body is free from any ties to the Law, for they have escaped its reach. Now these bodies are living by faith, a much higher Law of God in the Heavens. It is not possible by any human means to live that Law of Heaven. However, by the power of Christ, by His overpowering love and sacrifice on the Cross, we live that eternal Law. If Moses had been sufficient to bring the holiness that God demands, then Christ need not have come.

Obviously, Peter and the others accepted this rebuke, and returned to good sense. However, the Judaizers were having none of it. Once Peter had departed again, these men kept the fight going. Thus, we have the conference in Acts 15.

Galatians 3

When Paul established the churches in Galatia, the sole foundation was Jesus Christ. He didn't teach them the distinction of Jewish Talmudic Law versus Moses; they needed no part of that. Surely, the

Law of Moses has its place in redemptive history, but that place had nothing to do with spiritual rebirth among Gentiles. Paul explains why he didn't teach Moses. At the same time, he dismisses the Judaizers, who were simply Pharisees claiming to be Christians. Let them claim that the Talmud is the Law of Moses; the Covenant of Moses was closed and Judaism is dead.

You can almost hear Paul's anguish as he cries out in sorrow at the folly of the Galatians. The very foundation is Christ crucified. Paul's initial message was to draw clearly the picture of Jesus on the Cross. They heard that message. In that hearing, the Spirit of God awakened their dead souls, and they received new spirits. Having crossed over from the death of the flesh, into the life of the Spirit, were they going to desert Heaven? Having nailed their old lives to the Cross, having left behind all their worldly desires and plans, and suffering the pain of that transition, how could anyone want to go back to death? The Realm of the Spirit is Reality; this Realm of the Flesh is a lie.

The Jews made much of being "Children of Abraham." It was a lie they told themselves, since Abraham was saved by faith, several centuries before Moses was even born. The only way to be a child of Abraham was to adopt his faith. The Covenant of Abraham included promises that no man could see with human eyes; only spiritual eyes of faith could embrace and claim it. It called for absolute trust in the God who promised things only spiritual eyes could see in the Spirit Realm. God had promised to extend this covenant to the entire world, not just Jews. Being born of Abraham's DNA was no basis for any claim to his covenant. That covenant was available only by faith, not as a physical birthright. Did we not see where Isaac was required to have faith, and could not pass it on to his firstborn in the flesh? Only the son who had faith could claim it. Thus, all Jews must also come by faith, or they are excluded from covenant kinship with Abraham.

Indeed, clinging to the Law itself guarantees only one thing: You stand before God accursed. The Law demands full compliance that no man can do. Even if a man could keep the whole Law perfectly, it would not save his soul, only his earthly life. The Law was wholly rooted in this world, and to pass into the Spirit Realm is possible only by spiritual power, the power of faith. Jesus Christ absorbed the full curse of the Law into His Person, breaking its power to bind the conscience. At the same time, he renewed the old Covenant of Abraham, the old original covenant of faith. All covenants in Scripture terminate in Christ in one sense or another. God closed the Covenant of Moses as fulfilled, but gave fresh life to the spiritual covenant. For Gentiles, the only path has always been the path of Abrahamic faith, since the Law of Moses applied only to Jews in Canaan during that limited time period.

Even when a covenant is between mere men, it is sworn before some deity. It rests on an authority outside this world; no one on earth has authority to set it aside. The Covenant of Abraham was a singular covenant and could only be passed down a single line of descent. That line terminated in Christ. In times past, only those looking forward to the Final Revelation in faith could be included; its provisions were spiritual, not worldly. Standing today on the other side of Christ, we must join directly to Him to be included in these spiritual provisions. The Law of Moses came after the Covenant of Abraham, and applied on a different plane. Abraham's was eternal, not of this world. This spiritual inheritance cannot possibly depend on a law of human performance. The spiritual provisions of Abraham's Covenant were based on a promise of something that could never be touched by human hands, versus that of Moses, which was entirely a matter of human performance for an earthly reward.

If the Law was so powerless, why did God command these laws for Israel? The world is fallen, and

that includes Israel. Had there been no law requiring a human performance, people would not have realized that they were powerless to please God. The Law of Moses provided a concrete example of what faith in God would bring under that situation, in that nation. It was given by a God too holy even to tell the Law to humans, requiring angels to pass it along. From there, it had to come through a human mediator. It was not a law originating with Moses; he was merely the mediator between a holy God and sinful men. The Law scarcely restrained Israel's sinful nature. Even her failure emphasized the need for a faith like Abraham's fulfilled in Christ. The Law was a mere makeshift, a temporary hold, providing the requisite context for the Son of God. While the Law of Noah bound even Gentiles, God had a special plan for Israel, requiring a more specific covenant of law.

The Jews never seemed to understand that the Law was merely a passing phase. When they conjured up the Talmud, they were utterly lost to the Law and its purpose. They were unable to see that they had to leave the Law behind to embrace Christ. Did the Law hinder Israel embracing the Messiah? No, the Talmud kept them from the Law, and thus from Christ. However, nothing in the Law delivered eternal life. It did not create righteousness, merely exemplified it within limited circumstances. The Law and the Prophets were written to ensure a revelation of God's holiness and His demands for all humanity. Without a consciousness of sin, no one can receive the forgiveness in Christ. Abraham was uniquely ready for such faith in his day. It required a more universal revelation to make it available to the rest of the world, the gospel of Christ. Spreading His message made faith open to all. The path to Him led through Israel and the Law of Moses. Jesus was the Teacher of Truth; the Law was like the school bus, or the escort who made sure the students got to school. Once under the School Master's care, the escort and the bus were dismissed. His one lesson was faith as the only approach to God.

The ritual law in particular was dead, as there can be no valid sacrifice in the Temple after the Cross. God no longer accepts any other sacrifice according to Moses. God has no special people outside His Son. The only way to be a child of God is through the One Son of God, by means of the spiritual embrace of faith. If you have immersed yourself in Christ, you bear His identity before God. In His presence, this is the only identity that matters. No other variation that marks human existence matters. Either you are in Christ or you are damned. Only in Christ can anyone claim to be Children of Abraham, to inherit the spiritual blessings of a spiritual promise.

Thus, Paul paints a stark contrast between spirit and flesh. The Law was all about the flesh and about the things of this world. It was but a shadow of the higher reality of God's holiness. Abraham never gained anything promised as measured by worldly standards. Yet Abraham was the wealthiest of all humans in his time, for his possession was spiritual, a promissory note written on his eternal soul. Only by spiritual means can one measure the value of such a note. Only faith can pass it to another soul. Its meaning was discernible only in the spirit; it promised a final redemption of souls by faith in Christ.

Galatians 4

Having clarified that only those who walked in faith could claim to be children of Abraham, because his covenant was a spiritual covenant of faith, Paul shows how the Law played a part in this spiritual adoption into Abraham.

Under civil laws going back to ancient times in many countries, a man making a will can decide when

and under what conditions his heir is allowed to take full possession of the estate. Until he meets those conditions, the heir remains legally a minor regardless of local custom. That is, in his own household the heir was hardly better off than a servant, required to obey the will of those appointed as his managers until he reached majority status under the will. The terms Paul uses describes the typical will, which would nominate an executor or trustee, and house-parent or manager. The equivalent of such appointees in the Kingdom was the Law of Moses and its earthly custodians. The inheritance was the full revelation of God.

Paul describes the Law in terms of elements or principles of this world. They came from God and applied here as an expression of things in Heaven. This serves to remind his readers that the Law never affected one's spiritual status, only ritual purity. The promise of that Law was no more than a material or worldly blessing. To be under Moses was to be under guardianship as a child, not yet capable of grappling with the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. It should serve as a warning that the spiritual truth about commitment to God cannot be reduced to mere legal code.

Yet, Israel was only ever an adopted child. He who made the will appointed a time to send His natural born heir, born in the flesh and under the Law, to take full possession of His inheritance. This was so He could close up the period of minority for the adoptees by fulfilling all its conditions. This opened the door to His own ascension to the Throne of Heaven, and gave Him power to bring us all in as His brothers and sisters, as a part of His inheritance.

But you cannot make a parable walk on hands and knees; it is not a long-winded allegory that applies in every detail. The one who died was not the Father, but the Son, and by His death and resurrection, He made it possible to grant the Holy Spirit to humans, to enter their lives and make them able to cling to the Father as their own Daddy. Christ ends the slavery, the bondage of the Law, the period of minority. The Law restrained sin externally, much as children respond only to external restraints. Mature people need no such restraints, because they understand the Father's will, loving to please Him from the heart.

Worse, Gentiles did not know the God of Moses. They worshiped all sorts of things that were not genuine deities. How is submitting to the Law any better than that, when both require stepping away from the maturity and freedom granted by Christ? It's like going back into bondage as fools. Was Paul's mission work so pointless? If Paul, arguably the most Jewish of Jews, had forsaken his Jewish identity to become like a Gentile, surely they could leave Judaism behind, since it wasn't their heritage in the first place.

Paul spent a lot of time in the Galatian churches because physical limitations forced him to avoid travel for a while. They took full advantage of their time with him, as if it were a gift from God, an angel, or His own Son. Obviously, it served them well, for they displayed the same sacrificial love that marks followers of Christ. How did they ascend such heights? Paul implies without stating that they came to this change by the power of the message, not by a powerful and thrilling presentation of that truth. Suddenly, they seem to have decided that the miracle power of the Word was not enough and Paul was despicable for his boring presentation. By contrast, the Judaizers really had to make their sales pitch appealing, largely by stroking the egos of the Galatian Christians. Yet the sales pitch essentially excluded them as "dirty Gentiles" – how flattering.

This is cheap reverse psychology; deny your marks something to make them want it more. What happened to the strong desire from the Spirit, which seemed to maintain its power even with Paul gone? Paul longed to be with them again to show them once again how that boring and quiet presentation could change their lives, making them freshly aware of their direct sonship in Christ. Unlike the smooth-talking Judaizers who flatter and insult at the same time, just so they can sell their false religion and make a profit, Paul would gladly pay his own way to be with them as a mother for their souls. He worried over them as a mother over a sick child.

The Judaizers were not their friends, much less family. Even the Law of Moses made that plain. Of the many sons born to Abraham, two played large parts in the Bible narrative. One represented the efforts of the flesh. The first was born to Hagar, a slave who could not consent to the covenant. The other was the result of God's promise, a gift born outside of servitude. These two are major figures in the Scripture because of what they symbolize. One represents the path to Mount Sinai, the bondage of childhood, which makes one no better than a servant in the household. Hagar represents the earthly Jerusalem, chained to the earth and all the limits of this world. The other child was born of freedom and spirit, representing the spiritual Jerusalem, the one not tied to any fallen earthly location. That Jerusalem is Sarah, the spiritual mother of all who follow Christ. Paul bluntly says that the Judaizers were the bastard sons of the flesh, sons of Hagar.

The spiritual realm is the antithesis of this world. The woman who had no hope of children gave birth to a spiritual nation larger than any earthly nation. Death and desolation on this earth for the sake of Christ brings a far greater life and joy above. As Ishmael persecuted Isaac, so we who are free in Christ, full heirs to the promise of grace, should hardly be surprised at meeting the disapproval of those tied to this world. That's especially true with the Judaizers. They cling to this world, and are the spiritual descendants of Ishmael. Therefore, as Abraham was commanded to cast out Hagar and her son of bondage, so you should realize that the Lord has cast Judaizers out of His Kingdom, and you should reject their message. They have come to steal your freedom in Christ.

Galatians 5

The fundamental definition of sin is arguing with God. Therefore, the concept of liberty is not a logical absolute. As with all things, liberty on a spiritual level is whatever God says it is. If God says serving Him is true liberty, only a blasphemer would argue. From God's viewpoint, the best we could possibly hope for is serving Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. Having just established the difference between spiritual liberty and bondage in the parable of Sarah and Hagar in the previous chapter, Paul makes the obvious request that the Galatians choose to remain in Sarah's line, and not fall for the lies of Hagar's bondage.

The Jewish ritual of circumcision means nothing. As the primary symbol of Judaism, it represents slavery. To accept ritual circumcision under the Law – to become a convert to Judaism – comes with a requirement to keep the entire Law of Moses. Attempting to find peace with God through the Law is a major downfall, for the path of grace cannot be confined inside the boundaries of the Law. God gave the Law as the means to indicating His demand for personal commitment. The Law is mere behavior; any sinner can obey the ritual requirements without ever changing his heart. Following Christ is only possible through the Spirit of Christ. Had the Covenant of Moses worked out as God proposed, it

would have driven Israel to Christ. In the process, they would have called the Gentiles to Christ, not to the Law. Christ drives no one to the Law. It's a one-way dependence because Christ trumps the Law; they operate on different planes. Only in Christ can anyone have hope of eternity.

It's likely Paul knew the names of the Judaizers who swarmed the Galatian churches. His question is rather rhetorical: "What sort of person would do this?" This stuff is from neither Christ nor His servants. Having started so strongly in the way of faith, it was certainly not Christ who turned them off the path. Using the parabolic figure of leaven as sin, Paul shows that it takes only a tiny bit of falsehood to corrupt genuine faith. Once you admit any element of non-faith into the gospel, it will eventually twist the whole thing around to something humans must do by their own power. Faith is another word for a power of commitment not possible in the flesh, power that breeds divine confidence. Paul gave them faith and confidence, which could pull them out of this mud pit of falsehood. Judaizers didn't even understand faith, so they were doomed.

Part of the Judaizer's lie was telling the Galatians that Paul surely supported the ritual of circumcision. If circumcising Timothy lets one suppose Paul still promoted the ritual law as a part of Christian faith, why do the Jews and Judaizers still oppress him? Surely, they would have no excuse for taking offense at the Cross! Let them go the whole way and emasculate themselves. Won't that please God even more?

The Judaizers made the fatal error of equating spiritual liberty with being a moral libertine. Liberty is not about giving the flesh what it wants, but cuts off the flesh in the spiritual sense of nailing it to the Cross. Why would you waste time detailing the various aspects of sexual purity if you could answer the whole question with agape? What does your fellow human actually need from you to see Christ? What they need surely includes your sexual purity. In pursuing His teaching of sacrificing the flesh for the higher good of the gospel message, we satisfy all the just rules anyone could dream up. You cannot possibly do your brother or sister harm by walking in the Spirit. If you let yourself become entangled in the Judaizers' endless partisan debates over ritual details and rankings and empty gestures of respect and chasing titles, you'll end up destroying one another as your earthly standing becomes paramount over Christ's love.

By walking in the Spirit, you conquer the desires of the flesh. Those desires include all the silly rankings and rules of the Judaizers. The desires of the Spirit are at war with the desires of the flesh. If you embrace the Law the way the Judaizers do, you embrace the flesh and cannot obey the demands of the Spirit in your higher nature. Walk in the Spirit and you are far above the detailed nit picking of the Law, because you are obeying God Himself. If you follow the way of the Law, which is the way of the flesh, you must contend with all the evil that inevitably overpowers the flesh. Paul offers a sample list of those evils. From the beginning, Paul warned those things did not reflect the new Life in Christ. If you embrace Christ and His Spirit, the focus of your life is not avoiding evil, but gaining holiness. Paul paints a picture of holiness with a matching list of righteous character traits, the traits of Christ's presence in the soul.

Again, Paul emphasizes that the power of the flesh is dead for those in Christ. It is not for nothing that the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us. He is not simply a passenger, but the driver. His Presence is meant to permeate our whole existence, manifesting in our daily conduct. A primary feature of this is humility, giving grace and preference to others. That's what Christ looks like in people. His servants

don't demand preference; they don't wave their ranks and credentials all around. Only the flesh needs that. The Spirit is living Truth, and presents His own credentials. There's no place for envy in His power, because people and their status in the flesh won't matter at all.

Galatians 6

While it is true that Paul often declares basic principles in passing, to assume that is all he means by them is to miss so very much. Having established so very clearly that the Covenant of the Law is now dead, it is time to restore the truth of the gospel to churches nearly torn apart by the Judaizer heresy.

Some in the Galatian churches did not fall for the Judaizers heresy. These continued to exhibit the humble spirit Paul noted was missing from the Pharisaical Judaizers. To these humble ones, Paul appeals that they correct the errors, showing the same gentle spirit and patience so uncharacteristic of those taken with the false interpretation of Moses. If anything, the severity of the Law should always humble one before God, not promote arrogance. One look in the spiritual mirror should warn us that we could all be so easily deceived by one thing or another.

The only Law that matters is the Law of Christ, and that Law trumps all others. It calls for us to bear peacefully with those who become combative in their heresies. Indeed, a lack of grace is the first warning that someone is not quite right with the Word. A mark of the Spirit is taking the time regularly to see ourselves in the mirror of the Cross. No one can be holy for you, but his sins can suck you in quickly.

A particularly nasty part of this corrupt rabbinical teaching that the Judaizers brought was regarding material goods. This is what prompted Jesus to make comments about Mammon in His Sermon on the Mount. Pharisees taught that material wealth was the primary mark of God's favor, so why would anyone give it away without a specific command? Paul showed this was wrong. Passing them on was precisely the whole purpose for material blessings. To the degree possible, we should set gifted teachers of the Word free from the cares of making a living. Those who benefited from that gift should willingly contribute to their support. In the Kingdom gift economy, we have earthly blessings only for the purpose of sharing them. If you invest in worldly gain, it will be all you ever have and it will eat your soul alive. If you invest in spiritual growth, you have eternal returns.

We don't allow the Lord's sense of timing to throw us off this path of righteousness. While you can watch with your eyes the workings and yield of material investments, what God does with your sacrifice often escapes our human perception until sometime much later, or maybe never. We can't afford to measure Kingdom business with human accounting principles. Give of your time, your talents and your material goods. Commit yourself for the sake of Christ and measure your return in spiritual truth. You obey; you are rich beyond measure. Be ready to give to anyone on earth as if it were Christ Himself, but even more so to those you know are serving Him.

Paul was literate, but in ancient times, the exacting demands of penmanship were not so cheaply learned. Writing materials in that world cost too much, and there was a premium on precise and compact penmanship. Scribal clerks were professionals with expensive training. Still, in all his studies, Paul managed to learn a rough bit of handwriting. Thus, he ends this letter in his own hand, rather large and clumsy compared to the neat script of a scribe. Let no one question whether these are Paul's

own words here. Yet, the Galatian Christians were his letter to Galatia, and his hand was easily recognized in the teaching he gave them, the exact same message everywhere Paul had gone.

People who had a stake in human reputation would compel them to pass through ritual circumcision. To whom would they show that? Funny how Jews never bothered to evangelize heathens much, but they could sure make a pass at the established churches behind Christians. They wanted to tone down the emphasis on the Cross, which continued burning in the guilty conscience of Jews everywhere. Jesus was crucified publicly and a life filled with the Spirit was so obvious that no one missed it. The Judaizers themselves proved that no man could truly keep the Law of Moses, but their corrupt Hellenistic version of Moses was more Gentile than Hebrew. If appearances had mattered, Paul would never have started preaching and traveling the Gentile world. When Jesus died on the Cross, God tore open the veil of separation in the Temple. In Paul's heart, joining Christ on the Cross tore the veil from his soul, the veil which made so much of ritual circumcision, so much of being a Jew in the flesh. The barrier is gone; it means nothing in the Kingdom. Only grace has meaning.

Making one last stab in the heart of a dead Judaism, Paul notes that only those who walk by the Law of the Spirit, leaving the old man on the Cross, can claim to be God's Israel. Israel is the name of a mission, not a privilege; only those carrying that mission can wear it. In His eyes, there was no longer any other Israel. Criticism of Paul was a waste of time, for he bore in his flesh the irreversible marks of walking with Jesus. Criticizing a dead man is a waste of time, because he cannot hear you. So it should be when the likes of Judaizers pick over the lack of ritual observance in Gentile churches. God no longer recognized the old Israel. These Gentiles walking in the grace of Christ were already God's true Israel.

Introduction to Ephesians

At the end of Acts, we find Paul under house arrest in Rome. He was there for at least two years. We have reason to believe he was released after no more than yet another year, which would be around 63 AD. Though he was not actually in a prison, we refer to the letters he wrote from his rented quarters as the Prison Epistles, which includes this one to the Ephesians.

Unlike many of his earlier epistles, here we do not find Paul attacking peculiar issues directly. There is a subtle hint of distrust between the Gentile and Jewish members, which seemed to afflict virtually every church that included Jewish Christians. Too often Jewish believers still boasted about their former status as "God's Nation" and the attendant Pharisaical habits. The Gentiles typically found the Jews unnecessarily fussy over insignificant details and standoffish. The Gentiles, on the other hand, suffered from their own cultural arrogance. It seemed a great many had to be dragged kicking and screaming into a holy life. Both suffered a great deal from clinging too hard to the intellectual abilities of the human mind, the accomplishments of human activity and insensitivity to the Spirit.

Thus, the letter aims to weave a strong basis for working in unity, by first understanding the sharp separation between the realm of the Spirit versus that of the Flesh. This points to our place in Eternity, and then how it should cause us to act. This is the ultimate guide in spiritual human relations.

Ephesians 1

The world you perceive through your senses, and analyze with your mind, is a massive lie. The truth is not within the reach of mere men; it requires a living Presence of God Almighty to awaken some other faculty in the soul, the ability to discern reality through His divine spiritual perception. The truth of things was not what the Ephesians saw with their eyes, and experienced in their fleshly bodies. The truth was a divine declaration so vastly exceeding human language that we are not surprised that Paul struggles to write it. This first chapter features overly long sentences with phrases and made-up words piled upon each other, and it is not easily translated into English. There is a good bit of debate about where the punctuation should be. There is, however, broad agreement on just how unspeakably rich is our gift of grace from the Lord. If we get hung up on the words, we will miss the message.

Our modern nation-state was unknown in Paul's day. The most common political arrangement was some sort of Eastern Feudal Monarchy, a rather minor petty king or even a desert sheikh, one who owned the people, and simply exercised temporal control over whatever lands were occupied by his people. Jehovah painted Himself most often in such terms, though His domain was all Creation. The point was to bring the believer into this dominion, to indicate that it was entirely personal, even familial. In a world where any particular parcel of ground could be under multiple jurisdictions, imperial governments commonly worked through the royal and noble houses of the lands they conquered. Citizens of these petty kingdoms might remain somewhat under their king's jurisdiction outside his legal borders, throughout the whole empire. Just so, when one becomes a servant of Christ, he takes on a whole new identity, a citizenship without borders, exceeding the universe itself. Thus, we see Paul is painting an image of this when he begins using repeatedly the phrase, "in Christ."

After a cursory opening to identify the sender and recipient, Paul launches into this powerful and dramatic description of not so much who they were but whose they were. How blessed is our own Sheikh of Heaven, a Lord who knows each of us by name. He is not some political ruler on earth, but the Lord of Heaven, the Domain of the Spirit. Everything that matters to us is in that realm, not here on this lower plane. Our citizenship is no accident of history, but His divine plan from the beginning. He planned to make each of us together into one mighty empire based on the conquest of love and purity, not weapons and armies of flesh. Our citizenship is family-ship; we are adopted as kin. It was predestined, which makes no sense at all to us, but is quite reasonable to God. His divine logic finds all the reason He needs in His own glory – the best answer to any question mankind might have.

This business of Christ and the Cross was the price of our kinship, wiping away the vast ocean of our sins. Can there be any sheikh rich enough to blow off such an insurmountable debt? God found the price easy to pay; He had set aside the price even before He began building His realm. That realm was to be His gift to His Son, and it was His Son who paid that unspeakable price. The result is that His Son is authorized to liberate whomever the Father chose from among those living in this prison realm below. Again, the only reason we need is to realize that all this makes His glory more apparent to every living being.

By the word of this good news message, all of us were set free. It set us free to turn to Him and commit our whole beings into His care. He brought our dead spirits to life by invading our beings with the presence of His own Spirit, and this new inner life marks us eternally. Even as we continue

existing on this prison plane of death, our spirit witnesses to our minds that this higher reality is ours. We longingly await His call to bring an end to this life so we can graduate to His full Presence, to see His glory directly.

Given this understanding of things, Paul thanks God for including those in Ephesus who were in Christ, citizens of that Domain of the Spirit, belonging to the Sheikh of Heaven. As a man perceiving with spiritual eyes, Paul sees them as a rich harvest of souls, treasures of that Kingdom. He prays that they apprehend the meaning of all this. How sad to be given spiritual life and not allow that Spirit to rule! The awful penalty is to remain in the weakness of the flesh, unable to walk in His limitless power over the dark dungeon of this dead world. They would then deny themselves access to the vast riches of His grace, who now sits enthroned beside His Father. Does anyone really want to confine his life to what worldly governments can offer? Why not step fully into the freedom of Him who rules all others? Jesus wipes His feet on every human authority in existence, past, present and future. If you are in Christ, you are a full member of His royal family in Heaven, operating by your living spirit and not your mind. This makes your church an outpost, a colony of love and grace by which He asserts His rule. You are His personal representative, an envoy wielding His full authority.

Ephesians 2

The difference between a Christian and everyone else is not mere conduct, since anyone can decide they want to act differently. The difference is between death and life. We could not raise ourselves from spiritual death; it was a miracle of God. Our divine Sheikh of Heaven doesn't simply call us into His service; He remakes us so we are capable of serving Him.

When you are spiritually dead, your conduct makes no spiritual difference, because sin owns you. Everything you do remains under sin's control, even if the action itself is ostensibly good and just. Satan would still own you in the end. Simply breathing the air of this fallen world stains our souls, because this plane of existence is falsehood and death. Paul was under it himself at one time, so being a Jew was no escape. The only possible solution was God's boundless free grace. He breathed life into us by His own initiative through His Son. To us has been granted the full revelation of what God had originally desired to make of us humans. Our existence is rooted now on another plane, a higher realm.

Paul hammers home the inescapable truth that there is nothing any human can do to trigger the change. We have no grounds for the slenderest thread of pride in making some wise choice. It remains entirely and utterly in God's hands. Our commitment to God comes as a gift from Him. We are new creatures, a thing apart from the rest of humanity. We enter an invisible world, a separate dimension even while here on earth, where He blesses and guides our actions to manifest His glory. This was the original plan, our destiny from before creation.

The Jews called the Gentiles "uncircumcised" and themselves "circumcised" – something entirely a matter of human performance. You can obey the Law and gain the promises of the Law, but those promises do not include eternal life. Gentiles didn't even have that Law; most lived in a world that had long rejected even the Covenant of Noah. It could hardly have been any worse for them. However, the Jewish Messiah is actually all of Creation's Messiah; His sacrifice applies to every human.

Surely, to this day Jews imagine that there remains a distinction, but there is none in Christ. His fulfillment of all revelation removed the difference between the failed mission of the Jews and the ignorance of the Gentiles. The Law was a barrier, but is now gone, meaningless. In God's eyes, there are only those in Christ at peace with Him, and those dead. The separation between Jew and Gentile died on the Cross. The same message applies to Paul's nation and all the rest of the world. The only way to stand before the Father is next to His Son.

There is no longer any excuse for alienation between Jew and Gentile in Christ. The household of our Heavenly Sheikh recognizes no such distinction. Pulling together the true meaning of all Scripture as our foundation, we lean entirely on the Cornerstone of Christ. Without Him nothing can stand. So, we are added as stones to God's Temple by resting on Him. In this, we are a fit habitation for the Spirit.

In this chapter we sense that Paul was seeking to heal the one persistent wound afflicting all the churches arising from his ministry. How one lives by custom and habit for the most part is of no consequence; the important issues were already settled in previous teaching. Take people as they come and allow the Spirit to remake them in His image, not yours.

Ephesians 3

Paul uses the word "mystery" (*musterion*) to refer to those things that can be known only in the spirit, something defying intellectual grasp. The mystery of the ages can be told; it is the gospel message of Jesus Christ. The words make sense, of course, but the message is not received in the mind, only in the spirit that He gives life. The rebirth from above is part of the mystery. It unites all of us who share in this life from above.

Paul could never have chosen to believe the gospel. Christ captured him first, so confinement at the hands of humans meant little to him. Were it not a part of God's mission for Paul, no human could hold him. Paul had explained in the previous chapters, using the parable of a sheikhdom and the mystery of spiritual communion, how we must not let our hearts be trapped on this plane of existence. If our spirits are alive, the symbolic explanations have meaning that our hearts recognize. While there were people spiritually aware in ages past, they struggled without the full revelation that Christ brought. Through Him, even the simplest men, as some of the Apostles were, could carry the full depth of this unspeakable truth. Among them, Paul was called to carry that truth to the Gentiles. It was incomprehensible on a human level, but for those touched by grace, it makes perfect sense.

Nor could Paul have chosen this mission. He had been the worst enemy of the gospel until the gospel conquered him. After the change, he was spreading that same gospel to Gentiles that he used to despise. It was his duty to reveal to them things even the Jews had refused to acknowledge. They had the mission of manifesting God's revelation to the whole world, but refused to live by it, much less share it. So, the revelation remained hidden in plain sight, until Christ came and made it plain. Instead of Israel, the churches now are taking this revelation to the world. Even more so were the angels watching and seeing it come to fruition. Christ had been chosen and vested as the Lamb of God in their sight before the start of Creation. Because of His mighty work, no one should hesitate to take this message throughout the world. The Ephesians now stand before God as property of His Lamb. How could they be worried about Paul's confinement?

So every time Paul prayed, it was with a full awareness of this very powerful assurance, and it humbled him to consider it. This Christ united the entire human race, placing His family name on His chosen. Paul prayed that they would be equally awed by this vision as he was, thrilled by the power it gave them, centered in their resurrected spirits. Let them consider the vast ocean of God's love revealed on the Cross, something which boggles the human mind. Only the spirit can handle such things. May their spirits compel their minds to kneel before God Almighty, who has more power and abundance than any mind can imagine, and offer Him praise and glory without end, generation upon generation of those who come to Christ until that Final Day.

Ephesians 4

Ancient Eastern monarchs were recognized as the rulers of their people, maintaining some jurisdiction over the persons outside their nominal borders. So it is with the Kingdom of Heaven – wherever we go, He is our Lord. He is our national sovereign; our nationality is Christian, regardless of which earthly realm claims us. The coin of Christ's Realm is sacrificial love, absorbing all kinds of loss in this realm. This chapter is all about valuing people, your fellow Christians, more than any earthly thing, more than your own human wants and needs.

Paul was the captive citizen of this Lord, yet confined by some earthly authority because of his service to that Lord. Having just laid out the theology of unity under the reign of Christ, Paul now urges his fellow citizens to walk as he does, facing sorrow and oppression as an insignificant loss against the vast spiritual riches of His People. You find it easy to put up with a host of inconveniences and human miscalculations when you consider what a precious gift people are. Are you really any better? God's Apostle Paul did not claim to be that special, exempt from the toil of dealing with humanity. What matters is the invisible reality of oneness in the Spirit.

Yet, we remain individually unique. No two of us can serve God in precisely the same way. His grace is too rich and full to work like a cookie cutter. Paul draws a picture of Christ the Conqueror, riding into His mountaintop capital city with vast hordes of captured treasures. Those treasures are what He values most – people. Paul makes sure to note this climbing chariot ride comes after surely appearing here among us in the grave-world of fallen existence. Thus, he includes the symbolism of this false world as death, and notes Christ rose from more than one kind of grave. As He rose, He tossed out these gifts to the adoring, cheering crowd, His church. Those gifts were the various officers of the Body, and the purpose for giving them was to enrich His domain. Those officers would ensure all the citizens would be well armed for helping to capture yet more souls that are precious. These in turn would build and grow more, so that the church becomes a mighty Body of Christ. He is the measure of all things in discerning what greatness means, so it was critical that He become the subject of all teaching and ministry.

Such a strong and fit Body would possess the gravity to stand firm against winds of intellectual fashion and hucksters trying to sell lies. Rather, we realize that the only real truth is Christ's sacrificial love that paid the price for our resurrection. We emulate that love to become altogether as strong as He intends, connected to Him who is the Head of this grand Body. We are each vital parts of that Body and when we individually operate as He intended, love is not lacking.

So, let the Gentiles of many nations stop being mere Gentiles, since being Jews means nothing, as well.

Rather, let us be citizens of Heaven. We do not let our minds rule, leading to a senseless end. Raising the intellect to the throne means being at war with God and blinds the will to reality. Intellect can neither understand nor even aspire to living right. Reason alone breeds apathy about higher things, a fatalism in pursuing selfish hedonistic pleasures. You don't get that from Christ. People who see Him as Truth Revealed will dismiss their old life and this old world as false and evil. Instead, they seek a new life in the Spirit Realm, which Christ shows only to His people.

So, the last thing you'll do is use any form of deception. Deception is part of your old deathly existence. Being honest with your fellow Christians is being honest to yourself. Honesty teaches us that anger and disappointment are merely emotions, not meant to rule us as the Devil's proxy. We stop trying to get this world's goods by any form of deception because we know our God will supply every need for His service by honest means alone. What kind of sacrifice is it giving away something you don't rightly own? Stop talking like the dead souls around you, using words to gain advantages. Use your mouth as God's property, for His purpose of building up His domain.

Don't forget that the Holy Spirit is there inside you and knows the very darkest corners of your soul. You can't hide sin from Him, so always confess your weakness and remain humble, lest you create a barrier and stop hearing from Him. Would you have God feel pangs of regret for saving you from sin? How will you face Him on That Day of Reckoning? Don't get caught up in fallen passions against your brother when he will surely fail, too. Rather, face his sins with the same patience you want God to have with yours.

Ephesians 5

As the previous chapter lays out the concept of placing a high value on your fellow believers, so this chapter discusses how that concept appears in action. The imagery is that of a big happy family.

Children first model themselves after their own parents. So should we model ourselves as children of our Lord. Christ willingly sacrificed Himself to include us in this family. His sacrifice made God smile; we should want the same thing by walking in that sacrifice, by fulfilling the implications of it in how we love. Obviously, this is not love in the flesh or sexual promiscuity; it's not even gossiping about it. Don't talk about sex the way this fallen world does. Reserve your mouth for other uses, such as blessing others in spiritual communion. What's the difference between an unclean mouth and an unclean life? If all you want is what you see with the eyes of your flesh, you are an idolater, spiritually dead, not someone who belongs in eternity. We love people, not our self-gratification. Filthy living is simply a way of building up a big wrath account for yourself for when God judges this world. You don't want any part of that.

Your life was darkness in the past, but now you are children of light, so live accordingly. The Spirit of God living in you produces good and righteous fruit. He builds a burning desire in you to please the Father. The only thing we have to do with darkness now is exposing what it hides, making it apparent what is shameful. Your repentance from those things is a call for others to repent. Repentance is a shining light of truth. By this, we join Him in calling forth the dead spirits into a new life in Christ.

This can't happen if we don't walk a clean path. Buy back the years of death by wiping away its memory, its hold over you. Seize upon His wisdom in living. Be filled with the Spirit, not spirits. We

have enough mad drunken words and songs in this world; drink the New Wine of Scripture. Talk it; sing it. Let the music of your new souls leak out through your mouths with grateful praise. The one thing all men need to see is how you submit to each other as close kin, as someone who bears the fearful presence of your God.

For example, how do spiritual people relate within their households? A wife will have a reflex to submit to her husband's spiritual leadership, just as she does to the Lord Himself. It's a symbol of how Christ relates to His Bride, the church; He is the head of His Body. He became that head by virtue of His sacrifice, so husbands must love in that way. Such sacrificial love purifies her, as Christ's love purifies His Body and Bride. Her perfection is in His sacrifice. A man who truly loves his wife loves himself, for she is a part of him. Even so, we are the very real body of Christ, His hands and feet in this world. It goes all the way back to Genesis, where God declared that a man shall elevate his wife, making her his closest kin, taking precedence over his parents. Only the spirit, not the intellect, can understand this symbol of indescribable oneness properly. But it means nothing if a Christian husband cannot exert himself for his wife's welfare, and also not if she fails to revere him.

Ephesians 6

The role you play in each context is the foundation for all human relations. The foundation of all roles is the calling and will of God. Paul made much of the necessity of valuing one's fellow believers as the treasure of the Kingdom. The roles of husband and wife in particular are a parable of how we as the church relate to Christ. Every other role in human society can be instructed by how we relate to our Savior.

If your role is dependent, as with children, you must obey whoever fills the role of parent. This seems obvious. Yet, as a major problem in fallen human nature, it was one of the Ten Commandments, the first one in which God offered a specific promise. The proper observance of roles guarantees a stable society, which in turn brings a good and sane life. By the same token, one does not take the parental role without due consideration for the divine model of sacrificial covering. God does not provoke us to fury by arbitrary painful commands, but makes clear His motive is sacrificial love, with an aim to making life worth living.

The role of slave, servant and employee all share in the moral order of the universe. It presumes honest obedience, seeking the welfare of the master, as if serving God Himself. Bond or free, the role of service is a holy calling. So it is with the master, who must commit himself to the welfare of his servants as family, since God is watching over all men's hearts.

We do well to remember this entire letter has been an examination of human relations from the viewpoint of the Spirit. We can't do any of this by our own power; it is a living miracle of grace. It requires God's strength, God's provision for struggling against the onslaught of Hell's hordes. It's all about people, but people are not the enemy; Satan is. Let no one doubt what evil the Devil wishes for us, nor doubt his power in both the spiritual and worldly planes.

God has provided everything we need to defeat dark spiritual influences woven into human relations. It is popular to get lost in the precise wording Paul uses in his parable of the Christian Soldier. It is much more important that we get a sense of how critical the whole issue is of refusing to side with

Satan in how we respond to people. Paul blends imagery from both his Hebrew and Roman cultural experience. Keeping our eyes on the ultimate truth of things will keep us from getting tripped up in petty lies. We can afford to absorb treachery from those closest to us because God knows our hearts. We need His approval, not man's approval. The good news of His adoption of us into His eternal realm gives us confidence to operate boldly. Our commitment to Him in return keeps human foibles from burning us. Knowing He is on our side blocks fear and confusion. Able to love as Jesus loved, particularly in how we speak, we have the one weapon against which evil has no defense.

Every encounter with another human is our warfare against Satan's Kingdom of Darkness. We must remain in constant communion with God's Spirit, not only for ourselves but also for every other soldier in God's Army of Heaven. That would include Paul, too, whose role in the Kingdom put him in chains. He intended that those chains should not hinder his warfare.

Paul ends his letter with some notes about the courier, Tychicus. If they had any questions, this man could speak on Paul's behalf. He offers them a hearty spiritual farewell.

Introduction to Philippians

Another of the Prison Epistles, this letter to the church at Philippi was also written from Rome. The church had sent a messenger, Epaphroditus, with an offering and a letter inquiring of Paul's condition and prospects. After a bit, the man became sick and the church heard about it, sending yet another inquiry. Paul responded by sending the recovered Epaphroditus back with an entirely personal note responding to their questions by describing his state of mind. Thus, he models for them the proper Christian response to life and death on this plane of existence. He then goes on to mention that they had bigger problems than his possible death.

We note that Philippi was his first Macedonian mission. It also began with a stay in jail and he writes to them again from Roman custody. It seems Paul is near the end of his trial, because he writes as one who expects to hear soon of Caesar's judgment, perhaps during the winter of 62-63 AD. There is no heavy theology here, only a look inside Paul's heart.

Philippians 1

Paul notes in the opening lines that Timothy was with him, someone they surely knew quite well from his long labor among them. The whole mood is passionate warmth among close kin. He is honestly grateful for this one congregation that has troubled him so little and praises them eloquently. Considering how many miracles were involved in founding this church, it is obvious God has special plans for them. That's because this one church is most famous for their ability to love and to give freely of themselves and their possessions for the Kingdom. They were so winsomely open and honest, so transparently holy that it would be like a vacation to come back and visit with them.

Paul knows they would rejoice to learn his confinement made not a bit of difference in his ministry there in Rome. If anything, it worked out even better. Paul's faith had become famous with the Praetorian Guard. All his associates were free to preach and he was allowed to spend more time in prayer and study. Even the preachers who didn't like Paul, flaunting their freedom to preach in Rome

in order to mock him, were doing him no harm. Indeed, if being in chains encouraged the gospel preaching, he'd be happy to stay that way.

He then nails down one critical issue: The only reason he yet lives is to serve the revelation of Jesus Christ. Whether he is freed from the chains or from this prison of flesh, he was quite happy with his prospects. While we live, we have yet one more day to bless the name of Jesus. When we die, it's time to go Home and see Him face to face. Every day is a good day to die. It's a very good thing God retains the prerogative, because we are all incompetent to choose wisely between serving Him in this world or the next. Paul realizes that the Philippians would rather he lived and he could still do them some good. In his spirit, he was confident that was what God was planning, that they should spend time together again.

Paul encourages them to keep walking in the power of the Spirit, honoring the revelation in Christ. Whether he came to see them or moved on to other mission fields, he wanted to continue hearing what a powerful witness the Philippians offered. By no means should they let fear slip into their minds, because persecution was the norm. Their lack of fear was a witness to the evil of their oppressors and proof they didn't belong in this world. It's not enough that we should celebrate the awakening of our spirits in Christ, but that we should also celebrate the opportunity to suffer as He did, to die His death. Paul suffered for Christ when he first came to Philippi and suffered again for Him in the same way when he wrote this letter. Wasn't it glorious?

Philippians 2

The essence of Kingdom living is sacrifice. If we scramble to build and preserve even the common value of self-respect, we are not in the center of the Kingdom's cause. We cannot hold in ourselves any greater value to anyone, particularly to Christ Himself, than we do in following Him to the Cross.

Paul does not question whether there is consolation in the Savior, comfort in His love, communion in His Spirit, or tenderness for other people. He questions whether anyone has experienced that divine Presence, if they can't walk in unity of commitment, as if all his work meant nothing. Should there be any church anywhere on this earth during any point in history suffering but a single weakness, this would be it: disunity in commitment. We can use all the nice language we like, but when conflict arises, it can only be that someone fails to offer themselves fully in sacrifice on the Cross. Someone must be walking in selfish ambition. So Paul says we cannot move forward on any matter of church administration until everyone has fully abased himself before the Lord. Everyone must be willing to fade into the background, letting the power of the Holy Spirit rule, because they cannot claim ownership of anything the Body of Christ does.

Then Paul waxes eloquent in painting the image of Christ Himself, the One who embarrassed the Twelve by washing their feet to restore them to unity after a silly dispute on the very night before He was to die. They called Him "Master," as we do and as the Philippians did, but He led in a direction that was not obvious to all of them. We must think with the mind of Christ. Jesus knew He was the Son of God, but willingly and purposely avoided any semblance of human authority. The only way you could sense at all anything special about Him was simply by observing His actions and words. He would rather that you ignore Him unless the Holy Spirit drew you through His message, because the winds of human affection were wholly untrustworthy. He didn't resist when the winds of politics took

Him to the Cross, but voluntarily embraced the penalty of fallen mankind on our behalf.

As men measure things, Christ gained nothing. He became an odd footnote in Roman Imperial archives, just another member of a difficult nation executed for nothing in particular, except to calm a riot. But His Father, who ruled the Divine Empire of Heaven, raised Jesus to His own right hand. You want a piece of eternal glory? Take up your cross. When He calls all Creation to account and judges every soul having lived since the beginning of time, you will be welcomed as His own.

No one can do this for you. There is no club, no movement, and no membership. Paul told the Philippians that each of them must come to Christ and face their own Cross alone, one to one. It didn't matter if Paul was there or not; the commitment to follow Christ and obey Him was eternal in itself. It was either the mighty miracle hand of God, or it didn't exist. By its nature, it made you the sort of person who didn't whine over any indignity or imposition. That's what marks the Children of God and makes them stand out as a witness among fallen mankind. This was what Paul was hoping to see. He was willing to become the drink offering poured over the meat of their commitment and service, considering it a high honor. Were they eager to be that whole burnt offering?

Paul held them in such high esteem that he was planning to send Timothy to them shortly after they received this letter. They knew Timothy was as much like Paul as any man on earth, particularly in terms of his commitment to their spiritual welfare. In contrast, it seemed as if everyone else he might send had at least some trouble letting their personal agenda and needs get in the way. Timothy was the son that Paul truly wished he could have sired in the flesh, but was surely his image in the Spirit. So, Paul was planning to send him first to Philippi just as soon as Caesar rendered judgment on Paul's case, which would be rather soon.

In the case of Epaphroditus, Paul would gladly have kept him there, such a fine helper. But he was also Philippi's messenger and they needed to be reassured of his welfare. And Epaphroditus himself, though nearly dead at one point in his illness, was frankly more worried about their worrying. God had mercy on him and on Paul for that matter, by restoring his health. Paul had enough on his plate and sent him back to give the Philippians some peace of mind. It was not merely the things he carried, or the things he did to bless Paul's human needs, but his willingness to face death for the gospel that made Epaphroditus such a worthy man. This is an example for anyone who claims the Lord.

Philippians 3

What is the opposite of sacrificial living? A good example was the rapacious mauling of the churches by the Judaizers. Did they never tire of their evil? It was sure Paul never tired of warning about them, so long as they continued.

He refers to them as dogs, something they would have found extremely insulting. Jews hated dogs, since the only dogs in their part of the world were nasty carrion eaters as well as predators. He uses the Greek term *katatome* to further mock them for their infamous demand that Christians be circumcised. The word means "cut off, mutilated," signifying with intentional ambiguity that they were spiritual mutilators, spiritually cut off from the God they claimed. The true *peritome* – those spiritually circumcised and purified – were those who followed Christ. Christ did not come to lead on human terms; He refused such a role. So, when people demanded fleshly performance and fleshly

measures of success, they were not teaching Christ. Christ and His followers put no confidence in anything that arose from human flesh and its powers.

For that matter, if anyone had a claim to fleshly measures of purity, it would be Paul. A Benjamite who could trace his lineage back name by name to Abraham, his whole life was performed according to the strictest standards of Pharisaism and hard charging zeal for the Torah. Been there, done that and it got him thrown to the earth before God as a guilty criminal.

So, he threw it all away. Paul believed he came out on the long end of the exchange. Knowing Christ was worth more than the entire world, more than all human power. He tossed Judaism aside and now drove hard after His Savior, never satisfied with anything he might have accomplished, because it was never finished until life itself was done. Even the very worst of his suffering and sorrow after Damascus was better than anything he had experienced up until that time. It was Christ who seized him and he was forever after seeking to seize Christ, clinging with an ardor greater than any human love.

Did the Philippians need a human model they could see and touch? Let them model Paul in his zeal for Christ. They didn't need any Judaizing hucksters to disciple them into some secret teachings, as if Christ somehow failed or came up short. Anyone who claims such a thing is the enemy of Christ. They have it all upside down. Their god is their gnawing hunger and emptiness, never satisfied, a bottomless pit. Their home is the bottom pits of Hell; they rejoice and strut in the most shameful pride in evil. Their highest understanding is mere human intellect, knowing nothing of eternal things. Who wants to follow that?

No, we are heavenly minded. Our minds are trained to obey the Spirit of God living in our spirits. We are rooted in Heaven, citizens of His Kingdom. From such a high plane, we gaze upon the earth seeking glimmers of His hand at work and we want to be there to watch. We ache for the transformation of our fleshly existence into His heavenly spiritual Presence, an existence beyond human imagination. We cry out for Him to overpower our flesh and turn us into His servants, even as He has conquered and become Lord of all things created.

What do the Judaizers have to offer? Paul could never tire of praising the greatness of sharing in Christ's sufferings and divine eternal rewards. Compare that to the transient rewards of the silly legalism of men.

Philippians 4

Let us remind ourselves once more: Suffering and sorrows are the marks of God's eternal favor, His intention to strip from us the cares and anxieties of this passing valley of shadow. If we cling to this life and its comforts, we simply cannot claim to understand the Kingdom. Our imperative is separating ourselves from this plane of existence, not in the sense that we stop caring for others in sorrow, but we stop caring about our own. This is clearly on Paul's mind as he writes to the Philippian Christians.

Of all the churches Paul planted, the Philippians suffered the most in terms of poverty. They were singularly famous for embracing this as a blessing, a special gift that kept them from loving this life too much. It was a very endearing quality and Paul really missed that atmosphere. They were his

proof of the Gospel in this, a fellowship so very otherworldly that no one could deny there was a great power behind it all. He encouraged them to stay that way.

Given this, why would we have two deaconesses stirring strife against each other? Paul begged them to surrender their self-willed battle and restrain their human minds, to occupy their thoughts on service for Christ. The mind was not meant to rule and evaluate, but to implement the imperatives and evaluations of the Spirit speaking to the human spirit His ineffable will. They had previously managed to do this when serving while Paul was there, as had some others that we can guess probably paid with their lives. Paul refers to them as written in the Lamb's Book of Life. In this, we rejoice, because ours is there, too. The point is that this eternal truth of our destiny should bring us to peace and gentleness in our conduct. Jesus Himself is watching and could return suddenly any day. There was no excuse for this carping and jockeying to prove one person or method as the right way to do things. Let these women and everyone else pray with passionate abandon for God to win all the arguments. Let them seek that peace which the mind cannot grasp, the peace of having moved one's commitments to another plane above. Nothing can touch you or provoke you in that serenity!

Paul rattles off a list of virtues that exemplify a mind relieved of command, obeying the dictates of the spiritual plane. While such virtues echo some of the human moralizing common in Greek writings, he is actually using them in their spiritual sense. We are committed against all costs to Truth in the Person of God. We are completely open because our minds do not sink to lesser concerns, as if they mattered. We struggle to realize God's Justice and have cast aside all the lusts of the flesh and mere human reason. We embrace something worthy of sacrifice, seeking things that have that ineffable ring of Heaven's song, things too good for words, yet calling forth a torrent of praise. Paul asks them to meditate on such things, because this was what he taught them and showed them. They knew they had it if they would stay with it. God brought his power close to such desires.

Finally, Paul mentions how thrilled he was with the love gift they sent with Epaphroditus. Yet again, they poured themselves into providing for his material needs and it was akin to the fresh flowering of spring. They always cared, of course, but he enjoyed the reminder. It was not a matter of his need; as surely as his heart was beating, he knew God would supply every material tool for His service. Circumstances of poverty or wealth had no bearing on anything that mattered. Paul embraced what came as God's divine plan. What mattered most was the endless supply of Christ's own strength, which carried Him to the Cross. But it was a good thing for them to send what they could gather, simply because it demonstrated their willingness to suffer along with him.

This the Philippians had done from the start. No other church even attempted to send him money. Yet, since his hasty flight from Macedonia, Philippi had never ceased trying to scrape up support for his work. The point was not the material gifts; God owned all Creation. What mattered was their faithfulness in recognizing His ownership and it was the heavy fruit crop of God's working in them. Thus, it was a gift to God, a sweet sacrifice He savored, more than it was money in Paul's purse. By the same token, the Savior who was there at Creation would richly supply whatever they needed in serving the Kingdom. This was all for His own glory and nothing could be better than to share in that glory.

Paul ends with a personal greeting from those with him. In particular, he notes rather joyfully that the Christians among Caesar's palace staff were also sending their love. Grace abounding, indeed!

Introduction to Colossians

It's quite likely Paul passed through Colossae more than once, as it lay on one of the major routes between Antioch and Ephesus. Nearby was the much larger and richer Laodocia, and farther north was Hierapolis. All of them nestled in the upper Maeander Valley; Paul apparently did not stop to preach in any of those cities. The Lord saw fit to use one of their own, Epaphras, a prominent man who came to Christ in Ephesus. He went back home and spread the gospel in all three cities. Paul naturally viewed this as an extension of his ministry, though, and provided apostolic guidance to them.

We gather from the scattered details that Paul wrote this letter rather early in his confinement in Rome. It seems he sent several letters at once, this one along with Ephesians and Philemon. The courier delegation included Epaphras and Onesimus, a runaway slave returning to Philemon.

Though this letter is rather terse, we note he seems concerned with attacks on their faith from the Judaizers, as usual, along with some more localized threats. The intellectual culture of the region was a mixture of old Phrygian, Greek colonists, and a longstanding, less than orthodox Jewish population. While this was a very strange brew of religious and philosophical backgrounds, we sense here the earliest stirrings of Gnosticism and Western Mysticism. Thus, there were issues with accommodations to heathen mythology, Hellenism, asceticism, and all sorts of wild nonsense. Paul's answer to them all is Christ. Jesus the man was God incarnate, the single mediator with God and the sole truth in flesh. By calling the Colossians back to Christ, Paul leaves no room for substitutes.

Colossians 1

Jesus Christ was a real human, knowable as all men are. He was also the very God of Creation incarnate. To know Jesus is to know God, insofar as He is knowable. To obey Jesus is to obey God. Further, Jesus left a rather full body of teaching with other men and gave them His divine Spirit, His Own Presence to breathe life into that teaching. In the ultimate paradox of truth, God refuses to be known by any other means than knowing Him through the people who carry His divine Presence in this way. It does not perfect them among men, but makes them nonetheless His Son's Body, the fresh incarnation of His revelation to mankind.

Paul gives his usual greeting, including Timothy as his right hand. As was common in Greek correspondence in those days, Paul gives thanks and praise to some deity, but adapts the custom to the gospel message. He thanked God that there were Christians in Colossae, believers with a testimony worth hearing. Paul notes that the message came to them through Epaphras, who then told Paul of them. Paul affirms Epaphras was a faithful representative of his ministry.

Paul spells out in some detail his prayers for them. It all points to the otherworldly orientation of those who serve the God of Heaven. It was God's idea, His initiative alone, which called us into this heavenly life. The whole thing centers on His Son, Jesus Christ. No one could imagine such a thing as this without Him. Whatever humans can know of God is wrapped up in knowing Christ, who remains God's heir. This heir was present at Creation and was the agent of Creation. Every authority

in the Cosmos yields to Him and nothing stands without His permit. Creation itself holds together by His active attention. He is fully God and head of the whole body of those who can be called “touched by the divine.” Through them, the Lord asserts His authority upon the earth.

There is no other mediation between Creation and the Creator, no other way God will deal with mankind. Without the Cross, there is absolutely no approach to God. Christ’s death was the sole sacrifice acceptable to God; all must embrace that sacrifice or remain unacceptable. This Cross became the distribution point for all God’s dealings with humanity and every good blessing is there only. You cannot afford to wander from that place. This is the gospel Paul was given by God Almighty Himself.

For this message, Paul willingly suffered and risked his life. Whatever man must do to conquer his flesh comes naturally by living at the foot of the Cross. Anything less than being crucified with Him is taking a shortcut, so with grace Paul bears anything God puts him through. It was a rich and abundant reward to see that message take root in communities like Colossae, more than enough compensation. He would eagerly suffer to take the heat off them if he could, because such was his mission from God. Whatever it took for them to stay faithful, he would do it without hesitation.

This gospel truth was around since Creation, but was much harder to get at until the final revelation in Christ and the subsequent revelation in His followers. Everything God could offer to mankind is bound up in His Son. We cannot begin to speak of such riches, such glory, and such deep and boundless enlightenment. It is this Jesus whom Paul preached, calling every human to heed the message of repentance in Him, since there is no other hope. God Himself drove Paul, with a power only God could have, because Paul would have given up and died long ago without it.

Colossians 2

What everyone living in this world seeks is found in the Laws of God. In Christ, we find what everyone seeks above that level of existence. Indeed, whatever Christ says about the Laws of God is also binding on all. By any other name, the Talmud was still a pile of manmade lies against God.

With all the adventure and labor Paul faced in life, it was nothing compared to his mighty struggle in the Spirit. His life would be burned out, never giving it much thought, because of his single-minded commitment to affairs in the Spirit Realm. This was the struggle he referred to in the first verse. The Colossians had never seen his face; it mattered not. He still agonized over the many threats to their spiritual development. Though it’s hard to put into words what he sought from God on their behalf, his description mocks the religious language of the various proto-Gnostic and Talmudic speculations so dominant in that area. All the hidden knowledge and wisdom any man could use were bound up in Christ.

That was the whole point: preventing the religious hucksters from deceiving them with sweet sounding words. He didn’t need to appeal to their minds, but to their newborn spirits. He wanted them to know that the human intellect was given by God, not to rule the heart, but as the servant of the spirit-Spirit communion informing the heart, the communion with Christ. The ecstasy of discovery in the mind was nothing compared to the humble gratitude learned from spiritual birth. He cautioned them not to trade the Cross and this new spiritual life for something that appealed merely to the intellect. Ignore the claims of deep ancient secrets kept away from the majority of humanity, for Christ

came in the full daylight of open and honest revelation.

Christ was all they could ever want or need. Whatever man could know of God and things eternal was in Christ, for God Himself was in that fleshly body. Do you want circumcision? Try cutting off of the flesh itself, exposing a vital living spirit, newly born from the dead. Do you want ritual cleansing from sins? Try the baptism of the Spirit, washing you clean by changing all your desires into holiness. It's a discipline the flesh cannot understand, much less keep. His blood takes care of the writ of condemnation Judaizers keep waving in your face. If you walk in Christ, you fulfill all valid applicable Law Covenants. There is no authority under any Law that can overrule His divine power in your life.

Don't let others condemn you because your daily habits don't conform to their peculiar national culture. Kosher is nothing; dividing days and seasons is arbitrary unless you understand what they symbolize. If the symbol is all you have, then it means nothing. Why would you revere angels when you can face God Himself in the Son? Don't surrender His liberty for lying chains of human inventions and bogus purity of fleshly observances. The people pushing this pile of nonsense don't know Christ. Indeed, they rejected Him and murdered Him because of such idiocy. Christ pulls together everything that matters into His Body and He is the head of reality. Progress in pleasing God is simply a matter of obeying His Son. His Son did not bring a long list of prohibitions about touching and tasting. If your senses can detect it, it can't be important, because God has already promised to destroy all of it. Not a particle of it will follow you into eternity; all those silly rules were made up by people who didn't know God.

We call those rules the "Talmud" and Jesus called them manmade oppression. Those rules, dreamed up by people using mere human intelligence, cannot hope to set you free from the sins of the flesh, because those rules arise from the very same flesh. You defeat the flesh by using the power of the Spirit Realm.

Colossians 3

In rejecting the things we can accomplish in the flesh, we have nowhere else to turn but Christ. Raised with Him, we live for His heavenly realm above. We are dead to this world; the flesh belongs to it. We cling to Him, seeking His face and His business above. When He returns, this world will pass away and our flesh with it. So let us in our own commitments regard the flesh as dead – a prison – and regard its desires as torment. To give in to them is to worship another god. God's wrath is reserved for such and it was once our destiny. So, peel it off like filthy rags, all the urges of the weak and fallen flesh. Cease from dishonesty, because it has no part in us. Let us put on God's robe of the New Man of the Spirit, the robe of Christ, so that all fleshly distinction disappears. We know only living or dead in the Spirit.

There is no excuse for being difficult with anyone. What is there in this world that justifies struggling with others? There is nothing to save, so treat your human existence with the contempt it deserves. If someone has done you wrong in terms of the flesh, toss it into the grave where the flesh itself belongs. Bury it and forgive, just as Jesus has forgiven us. We correct the world's bad behavior by refusing to participate. We have too much spiritual wealth to haggle over pitiful human dignity. Live His peace with others and pursue what makes that peace more apparent. We admonish one another, not for our personal losses at their hands, but for losses to the Kingdom witness. The objective in all things, the

only one that matters to you, is His revelation.

With such a concern ruling our lives, we should expect wives to serve their husbands, but as is fitting in the Spirit, not in the flesh. Husbands will treasure their wives as the better part of their earthly existence, not carping constantly over her natural human imperfections. Children would naturally seek to fulfill their parents' wishes as the wishes of God Himself. Fathers won't demand more of their children than children can or should do. Slaves and servants will be solicitous of their masters' genuine welfare, as a service appointed from God.

Everyone in Christ, perform the task that lies before you as your divine calling from God. Recognize the limits of your authority to choose and give yourself with delight to serving, since your life continues only that it may be poured out as a sacrifice. If you act unjustly, God will not shield you from the wrathful consequences reserved for children of death.

Colossians 4

The last actual instruction Paul gives is something so fundamental that it justifies standing alone at the head of the final chapter. If we suggest this second half of Paul's epistle is more pragmatic than spiritual, it falls under God's Laws. The underlying theme of all the Law Covenants in Scripture is justice – justice as God defines it.

Thus, in broad terms Paul reminds everyone in the position of lordship or mastery over any other that they must be just. They must deal with their subordinates in God's justice, in particular what is equitable or appropriate for the servant's position. Household slaves are family members; value them and treat them accordingly. Laborers are valuable productive assets. Management staff are the ones who know your business better than you. Humans are above animals and must be treated better. Power over another does not remove accountability, but adds to it. Such authority makes you accountable to God for their welfare. Everyone who leads, in any way at all, becomes accountable in God's eyes, for those following are actually His.

Indeed, leading or not, every encounter with another human brings the burden of accountability before the Lord. Therefore, we ought to bathe every hour of every day in prayer, giving thanks for God's grace in each moment. If nothing else, the Colossians could pray for Paul as he sought to present the gospel, even as he wore chains. They should be fully aware that they represent the gospel to a lost world, seeking to purchase every moment from Hell's grasp by graceful wisdom. Every word is a payment, a tribute to God or Satan. There is no middle ground.

Paul ends with the mention of those who bore this letter for him to Colossae. He mentions Tychicus and Onesimus, which ties this letter with Philemon and Ephesians. These two would be able to handle matters not addressed in the letter. Aristarchus was there with Paul, and had been with him in the riot at Ephesus. Mark has long been rehabilitated in Paul's estimation. Epaphras we know, as well as Luke. Sadly, Demas eventually deserts Paul.

He instructs the Colossians to exchange this letter with the Laodiceans, reading also the one he sent them (which we do not have). They were to encourage Archippus, likely a minister in Laodicea. Paul signs the letter with his own hand.

Introduction to Thessalonians

In Acts 17 we find Paul freshly departed from Philippi and traveling west along the Egnatian Way to Thessalonica. This was late 49 or early 50 AD. He managed to speak in the synagogue three Sabbaths, gaining quite a following, particularly among the Gentile believers. The Jews were persuaded only of the need to have Paul arrested. Hiring thugs, they stirred up a riot. In the end, Paul's host, Jason, was forced to post a bond, while Paul and his friends slipped away.

This left the church growing on their own with but three weeks of teaching. Paul traveled on, stopping in Berea long enough to be driven out yet again. From there, he went to Athens, then back to Corinth. He sent Timothy back to check on the Thessalonian church, and then met Timothy again sometime later in Corinth. He wrote the two letters we have to the Thessalonians from there.

These were among the first of his many letters. They are not weighty in theology, but more personal. The only issue he addresses squarely is the matter of Christ's Return.

1 Thessalonians 1

Paul notes that he writes this letter in the company of Silvanus (often shortened to Silas) and Timothy, those who traveled with Paul when he passed through Thessalonica. He could hardly be less than grateful that there even was a church there, since his time was so brief and Timothy could not have been there very long when he went back. It was a miracle the congregation stayed together and active. Even more so was it a miracle when the same persecution that drove Paul out of town was still hounding the new church. This is what's behind his mention of their patience and hard work. Were they not God's Elect, they could not have lasted even these few months.

Such power to transform them could not come from mere human persuasion, but the power of God's own divine truth. It was the awakening of their dead spirits that made them able to sense that truth living in Paul and his helpers. They absorbed the necessity of mortification immediately, becoming an example for other churches in that region. So thoroughly did the gospel take them that they were eager to spread the word. Nobody had to brag on the Thessalonian Church; it was a shining example in itself. They were eagerly awaiting the return of Christ.

Such living would not be the wild abandon of mere adventurers, but full abandonment of self to holiness. They were practicing for what they expected to come any day.

1 Thessalonians 2

It seems in every letter Paul wrote that he was compelled to defend his apostleship. A significant element in the persecution he and the churches faced was the spiteful questioning of Paul's character and motives. As with the prophets of old, he presented himself to the judgment of his flock. Could any man step forward with evidence of his sin?

First, there was the matter of whether his message was true. Paul lacked any significant talent for oratory. When he spoke, his presentation was anything but impressive, either in speech or in his

personal appearance. That anyone listened at all was a matter of divine grace. Thus, his ministry in Thessalonica was not wasted, because God brought the harvest. Still bearing the wounds of the beating in Philippi, he stood boldly against similar threats in this town and spoke the hard truth. There was no attempt to sucker anyone so that they might be willing to listen, no attempt to justify or cover up immorality and no attempt to weave a complicated and confusing narrative that simply sounded good.

Paul didn't care what people wanted; he cared only what His Lord wanted, the One who called him. His conscience was clean. No one was flattered and Paul never asked for anything, even though he could have demanded quite a lot as God's emissary. He wasn't seeking attention for himself from anyone. Rather, he gently shared the truth with a commitment equal to any nursing mother. Paul would have gladly sacrificed anything for their souls, even his own life. Indeed, he and his assistants paid their own way, working for their keep. Could anyone present evidence of any actual wrong Paul and his friends committed there? Paul was committed to their spiritual welfare, as a spiritual father should be. It was worth any price to see them walking in holiness.

So, Paul's greatest joy was seeing them turn to Christ. The Thessalonians recognized the truth when they heard it, that it was not some blather dreamed up by human talent and intelligence, but the very word of God. That word brought them to spiritual life. They embraced the persecution as the mark of their favor with God, the same as the churches in Judea. As Paul and the other Christians suffered the persecution of their own fellow Jews, so the Thessalonians faced the wrath of their countrymen. The Jews killed their own Messiah, as they had the prophets before Him. They were at war with God and man, seeking to crush the gospel message. They were particularly anxious that no Gentiles should embrace Christ. The wrath of God was already upon them. No one should listen to them spouting about what God requires.

God saw fit to move Paul's body out of Thessalonica, but Paul's heart was still there. He longed to go back, but Satan was permitted to frustrate this desire repeatedly. It was heartbreaking; Paul bore it as best he could. There should be no question whether he would pay any price to see them, but the Lord had other plans. For Paul, there was no boasting in his apostleship, only humility that God chose someone so unworthy. There was no great accomplishment in the flesh, no proud intellect, and no great wealth and power. There was only the fellowship of the Spirit. The one thing Paul knew he could begin rejoicing about even in this time of separation was the assurance he would see them all again when Christ returned, as their redemption was all the glory and joy he needed.

1 Thessalonians 3

Love can be defined as the sacrificial exertion of self in seeking the true welfare of another. It is active in the sense of a commitment that is limited only by the source from which that love springs. Paul dearly loved the new believers in Thessalonica, just as any parent becomes deeply wrapped in any number of their own children.

Athens was not really on God's itinerary for Paul, but he was stuck there. As best we can reconstruct, the timeline goes thus: Paul left Thessalonica for Berea, somewhat off the beaten path. We can assume he had more than a mere three weeks and ministered there long enough to build another body of converts before the Pharisees from Thessalonica caught up with him again. His hosts hastily put him

aboard the first ship at the nearest port, which was bound for Athens. This would make him hard to track down by his enemies, while Timothy and Silas remained behind. From Athens, Paul sent back word via his escort for his two associates to join him immediately. Apparently they did. After hearing their report, he sent Timothy back up at least to Thessalonica and Silas perhaps elsewhere, to make sure the new believers were holding steady. From there, he traveled on to Corinth and waited on pins and needles for word from Timothy, whence he wrote this letter.

The harsh reaction of the Pharisees in the Thessalonian synagogue was hardly going to dissipate quickly. They had lost a large number of Jewish converts, taking a big bite out of their offerings and prestige. If they were willing to use pagan thugs to stir up a riot, they would surely be willing to corrupt the local government to give the persecution the force of law. We should hardly be surprised if they didn't also use any other subterfuge available, including the slimiest tactics of tempting the Christians to sin so as to question their new faith. Paul would surely know of such things as the former chief persecutor of Palestine. Paul makes note one of the first things he taught any new convert was to expect persecution as the natural condition of serving Christ.

Thus, when Timothy reported to Paul in Corinth how the Thessalonians were standing strong, Paul refers symbolically to having life breathed back into him. This reaffirms the depth of his love and commitment to them. It caused him to break out in ecstatic thanksgiving; for quite some time it sustained his confidence in the troublesome ministry at Corinth. It also built up a longing ache to see them again.

It would be too easy to miss in the final verses of this chapter how he sincerely hoped they shared such a depth of sacrificial love. Not simply returning it to him, but Paul hoped they loved each other and the world around them. This desperate longing for others to share what we have is the burning fire of the gospel, its power to move the dead to rise in new spiritual life. He carefully links love and holiness. The Law of Christ is agape, that sacrificial love Christ had for all of us. How hard is it to understand that the definition of holiness is devoted commitment to the same sinners for whom Christ died?

1 Thessalonians 4

It is all too easy to substitute a human sham for divine grace. The logic of this world is ill equipped to lay a just and holy path of action drawn from divine truth. Such an attempt will always fall short because of the inherent lack of comprehension, denying the ruling power of the Spirit-spirit union in those spiritually alive. Those spiritually dead cannot even comprehend, are completely unable to credit the vast shift in priorities that arise from spiritual birth.

That Paul has taught sacrificial love as the definition of holiness cannot be processed on the level of mere human intellect. Fallen assumptions of what love compels men to do cannot make it past the Cross, cannot survive the grave. So Paul points out some of the more obvious differences he had already taught the Thessalonians. The sacrifice of love means self-restraint in human sexuality. The dominant culture in that part of the world knew no such restraints, and was utterly shameless. The shift from Gentile heathen sexuality to the ancient biblical standards came as a culture shock to most converts. Even worse was when someone manipulated a new believer because of ignorance of such things. God knows all secrets and His justice does not fail. Rejecting any part of the ancient Hebraic

view of human sexuality was not simply rejecting a foreign culture or Paul, but was rejecting God and His clear revelation on such matters. The implanting of a new living spirit in your life is not for nothing.

Of course, brotherly affection was not hard to grasp even from the human viewpoint. All the more so would Thessalonian Christians understand this, since it is the very nature of the Spirit Himself breathing in our souls. Thus, Paul praises the Thessalonians for getting this right. He urges them to continue exploring it and to realize that such love also expresses itself in other changes. Macedonians were not particularly industrious and a fake brotherly affection could lend itself to sponging off others, to being rowdy and overly demonstrative in public displays of affection as a means to manipulate people into taking care of their worldly needs. Paul set the example himself in Thessalonica during that short three weeks, working for his own keep. That was brotherly love. What kind of testimony was it for Christ if everyone became panhandlers?

Apparently, Timothy reported that the Thessalonians suffered some confusion over the Lord's Return. Typical pagan mythology and human logic left the dead as simply dead; there was little recognition of a separate Spirit Realm outside the Ancient Near East. We who serve Christ have a living hope, because of His example. He rose from the dead, in part to show His plans for us. After spiritual birth, it is only the flesh that expires; the spirit rests in the arms of the risen Savior. God Himself said that we who remain when His Son returns will see first those who died rise to meet Him, and then we will follow. Jesus will drop down through the clouds with a grand announcement that the entire world will hear. Those whose bodies died will be raised in new bodies first, and then we will be transformed and join them in the sky. There was no need to sorrow over someone who died before His coming again.

1 Thessalonians 5

People throughout the ages have always asked the same two questions about the Second Coming of Christ. They want to know when it will happen and how to be sure they are included. Having covered the second, Paul now addresses the first.

Jesus warned flatly not to attempt tying signs and events to setting dates. For all this, a great many ignore His warning, merely pretending not to set dates and times, yet always discussing how this or that event simply must fulfill certain prophetic statements about His Return. No doubt, Jesus and the Apostles saw this kind of speculation coming; Paul warns the Thessalonians that they shouldn't need reminding on this point. He had told them bluntly when among them that there is absolutely no way to know before the event comes. You surely know what you have in your home that is worth stealing, but you can't possibly predict the behavior and decisions of the burglar. Jesus is coming to steal us away from this fallen plane of existence. When human wisdom feels so sure things are safe and secure, Jesus will turn everything upside down. The point of associating it with birthing is not the pain, but how sudden and relentless is the birth when it arrives.

The domain of Death and Hell is spiritual darkness. We do not belong to darkness; we have already escaped Death and Hell. His coming will not surprise us one bit, because we are not taken in by all the human wisdom of those spiritually dead. When That Day comes, we will be waiting in eager anticipation. We belong to the Dawn of Eternity and spiritual enlightenment is ours. We carry the

daylight within us. Spiritual slumber violates our new divine nature. When others around us seem unconcerned with spiritual things, we live for nothing else. Our rest is in the work of the Spirit; our peace is in the battle against sin. The spiritually dead can't comprehend such things. Frivolity and spiritual stasis are for those who live in Darkness.

Paul mentions putting on the spiritual armor as one who stands watch at all hours. Our commitment prevents inside attacks like a breastplate; our assurance of His mark on us is like a helmet that deflects unexpected blows. These are provided because His election is immutable. It all rests upon His death, His ultimate sacrifice that bought us, so it won't matter what time of day or night He comes. We embrace His death and already hold His life in us. We share this and support each other. Thus, the Thessalonians should not suffer the good spiritual habits already at work in their community slipping away.

A part of those habits is not making trouble for the leadership of their church. Leadership is hard work; someone must do it. Don't hold leaders in contempt simply because you aren't one of them. It's not a question of who does what, but what they are doing as a whole. A significant element of the witness and nature of the Body of Christ is peace. If you are at peace within yourself, it should hardly be a problem to live at peace with others. You can easily be peaceful even in the correction of those who act inappropriately. You can be peaceful with those who easily lose their grip on peace and keep them strong. You can afford to suffer discomfort from everyone because peace is your nature.

Don't take the sins of others as an excuse to meet them on that lower level, wallowing in worldliness. Keep yourself disentangled from their moral failures and keep acting justly, even when it seems pointless. Never lose your peaceful joy, because you can be a walking prayer meeting. Keep your grip on thanksgiving regardless of circumstances; that's the way Jesus operated as a man. Don't put a damper on things outside your understanding, because the Spirit remains aloof from mere intellectual grasp. Don't discount prophecies simply because their purpose isn't obvious to your mind. Rather, give both the ancient and current prophetic words time to change you. Test them against the imperatives of the Spirit, not the logic of your mind. Thus, you accumulate a great store of reliable lessons as your mind learns to subject itself to the Spirit. This makes it easy to dismiss quickly both old and newfangled ideas that contradict His Word, which are unjust by His standards.

Paul's closing is a prayer for the Thessalonians. He prays that God will drive them through to the very end of the change into holiness, preventing them from slipping back into sin, whether sins of the body, the mind or the spirit, until His Return. They can be confident that this is within reach, because it rests on God, not any of us. Upon this foundation, he asks them to pray for his ministry. Corinth, whence he writes this letter, presented no small challenge for Paul. He admonishes them to offer a genuine formal greeting to everyone in Christ. They are to read this letter to everyone in Christ who crosses their path. Finally, he commends them to the grace of Jesus Christ.

2 Thessalonians 1

It's not hard to get into trouble in this world. If you go out of your way to make things difficult for others, they will eventually be difficult with you. If you go out of your way to do good things for them, the only problem might be whether they realize it is for their benefit. Most people will at least refrain from harassing someone trying to be nice. But if you simply mind your own business and

interact with others in kindness because you have a gospel to demonstrate, only evil people will attack you.

Paul opens his second letter to the Thessalonian church with the usual greetings. He reaffirms how relieved he is to know they are still in the grip of grace, that his prayers from the previous letter are being answered, as their faith grows and their love washes over everything and everyone they encounter. This gives Paul the excuse he seeks to brag on them. Here is a church that knows how to handle persecution. It doesn't hinder them; it only makes them stronger. This is the way it should work.

That's because God is in the business of revelation. He seeks to reveal His nature through His Son, revealing His expectations for humanity. He does this by using those who embrace His expectations in His Son. This separates them from this world, shifting their focus onto His realm. Finding yourself on the outs with those still clinging to this world is expected and desirable. It reveals who is His and who is not. It reveals how just His justice is. In the paradoxical realm of God, it is justice that His people suffer in a world that is hostile to Him.

Therefore, in some future time, it will be justice for Him to turn the tables. When He comes back and reclaims all Creation, those who remain His enemies will then be on the receiving end of tribulation and wrath, while His servants will rule in His rest. We can scarcely picture how the angels will carry out His final Day of Wrath. Paul describes it simply in terms of being driven from His Presence. On That Day, the only place not in His Presence will be unspeakable torment.

We who are His will stand in His glory. Everyone will have crowns to cast at His feet; some crowns will be truly admirable, representing obedience under the most trying conditions. The Thessalonian Christians will have such crowns. It is a high and worthy calling to face tribulation for His Word. Few are able to fulfill it. His power is available, but too many cling to what they thought they had in this life. Those who abandon this fallen plane of existence will stand before Him with a powerful testimony of His glory.

2 Thessalonians 2

Now we come to the point of this second letter to Thessalonica. Someone was trying to convince the church there that the Day of the Lord had come, as if that would explain their persecution. Paul warned them not to believe any such notion, whether it comes via spiritual revelation, a report of teaching or a bogus letter from Paul himself. During those three short weeks with them, he warned that there would have to be certain conditions fulfilled before the Lord's Return.

Paul runs through a brief summary of what he had taught them in more detail, which detail is no longer available to us. However, the outline is not hard to follow. First, there must be a general apostasy, but it is paired directly with the rise of an Antichrist. This draws a picture of the church drifting far, so very far that it mistakes some satanic deceiver for Christ. In other words, the genuine Return of Christ would be preceded by a fake one. This someone will eventually claim to be God. In his previous letter, Paul draws a picture of Christ coming in the air, we rise to meet Him, He changes and redeems all Creation, and then comes Eternity in Paradise. The qualitative difference is indescribable, so anything short of that means Christ has not come. Signs and miracles are not

evidence of any new revelation from God that contradicts plain teaching and Scripture.

We realize that the deep mystery of such a preposterous presumption is already at work in this world. Satan began the day Christ ascended, planning and preparing the way for his fake Messiah to displace the truth of Christ. The only thing stopping him is the restraining hand of God, working through some force Paul does not declare here. Nor does it matter, because the point is that we have not yet seen any such global deception focused through a single individual just yet. The Antichrist's day has not yet come, and it precedes the Final Day of the Lord. When this Son of Perdition does come, he won't last long. God will obliterate him with just a puff of His breath.

There is a clear distinction between those who embrace the Cross and those only pretending. The Cross is death and those who don't quite grasp the nature of mortification aren't there yet. The Antichrist will come with an easy gospel, signs and wonders; a solid majority of humanity will embrace whatever he's selling. It's not as if this hasn't been offered in numerous packages already, but it has never gained a universal following in any sense. The final revelation of the Antichrist will provide the context that will so clearly separate those who willingly give all for Christ versus those who seek something else, because the reign of Antichrist will seek to destroy those who really do know the truth and recognize him.

This is the whole point, which Paul implies but does not state plainly. The Great Tribulation will bring a truly different level of persecution, something that would make the situation in Thessalonica pale in comparison. The False Messiah who fools those on the path to Hell is the same one who will make it Hell on earth for the redeemed. Paul reminds them that they haven't seen that yet, nor have they seen someone manifesting as an earthly fake Messiah.

So, Paul gives thanks that the Thessalonian Christians are not so easily fooled by such things. From the very first, they embraced the truth of Christ and took up the Cross. People don't come to that by simple persuasion, but by a mighty miracle of God calling them to life. Paul warns them not to depart from what he first taught them, because his message had not changed since that first encounter there. For the sake of this truth, they embraced the suffering of this world's rejection and found the consolation of His love and power.

2 Thessalonians 3

It seems Paul never fails to end his letters asking for prayer. In this case, he had specific problems with the synagogue in Corinth. The Jews there were not simply unreasonable; they tried to assassinate him more than once. Evil was everywhere, but Paul was sure the Thessalonian Christians were strong enough to face that, because their God was strong enough to defeat Satan's schemes. So, he prayed that they would remain faithful to the spirit of mortification.

God's patience working through them meant they should not indulge those in the church who sin by rejecting that portion of Hebrew traditions Paul taught as belonging to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul used the Greek word commonly referring to Jewish customs and traditions. They weren't burdensome, but were quite different from the typical Thessalonian lifestyle. Paul and his associates made sure to demonstrate just what those traditions were. In particular, they clung to the ethic of self-support. While Paul surely had the authority as an apostle to request full-time support for his work,

he and his companions chose to set the example by working at least part of the day for their own keep. In so many words, no loaf for the loafer – don't break bread with the busybodies.

Perhaps it was their exaggerated emphasis on the Second Coming of Christ that caused some in the church to become loafers. Paul makes a play on words in the Greek. Instead of working (*ergazomai*), some were working around it (*periergazomai*). That is, they put a great deal of effort into not getting anything useful done. It doesn't matter when Christ returns; let Him find us faithfully keeping His Word. So, Paul warned the church not to fellowship with them. Not as though they were enemies, but treat them as brothers in sin. Give them room to repent. True fellow believers would eventually come to their senses, as the Lord would convict them of sin. It wasn't necessary to make a lot of noise about it; just be consistent.

Finally, Paul prayed that they would always be peaceful in every way, consciously, as in the Lord's Presence. Then he took the trouble to sign with his own hand, despite a lack of good training in penmanship. Most educated men in those days could read, but writing was a profession, and the materials were expensive. Paul always signed his own letters to ensure no one could argue whether it was from him.