

Relationships: The Faithfulness Factor
22 Corinthians 3 through 5
August 8,2010

I. Christ Provides Competency. II Cor. 3:1-6

Living Testimony: Sir George Burns, founder of the Cunard Steamship Company, was a living epistle. Biographer Edwin Hodder had this to say about him: "If the Bible were blotted out of existence.[and] if there were no visible church at all, I could not fail to believe in the doctrines of Christianity while the living epistle of Sir George Burns' life remained in my memory."

There are five images in verses 2 and 3 that show the absurdity of requiring Paul, and others who ministered with him, to bring letters of introduction whenever they visited:

The **first image** is the paper on which this divine letter is written is hearts. Paul calls their changed hearts "tablets of human hearts," a change that even affects Paul's heart: "You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men." It is important to note that "heart", used twice in the two verses, is used in a Semitic sense. It refers to the inmost self or the center of the personality in contrast to our popular English usage referring to the seat of emotion or feeling. Biblically, the heart is the core of our spiritual sensitivity, both rational and emotional. It is the place where God begins his work of transformation and renewal. For us, the test of any relationship or influence we might have is qualitative--whether our hearts and lives are spiritually transformed.

Second, Paul says the change of heart will be observed by a watching world. The second phrase in verse 2--"known and read by all men"--literally means to know something well enough that it is recognized, like reading words on a page. It is similar to our modern expression, "You read me like a book. You know what's going on in me." The changed lives of the Corinthian believers were as easy to read as a letter left open on a table. Their families, friends, and co-workers could see the difference in them since they came to Christ.

The **third image** is in the first phrase of verse 3 in which Paul says the writer of the letter is Christ. It is Jesus Christ who changes lives. He is the one who reaches into our loneliness, forgives our sinful past, and removes the burden of guilt. He is the one who heals our aching heart no matter what the wounding. Paul is clear that he did not write the letter, he is merely the one who delivered it.

The **fourth image** can be found in the middle of verse 3 in which he says the letter is "cared for by us." Other translations say "administered," or "delivered" by us. This living letter in Corinth was a result of Paul's faithfulness in preaching the gospel there.

It was difficult for Paul to carry the message to the people in Corinth. The Acts 18 record tells us that as soon as he arrived and started preaching, there was immediate opposition from Jewish religious leaders and the threat of violence. But Paul says the Lord Jesus himself appeared to him one night in a vision and said, "...do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking, and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9, 10). It gave Paul the courage and confidence to continue carrying the mail, to be a courageous postman in delivering the letter. He stayed a year and a half, teaching the Word of God and seeing many come to faith in Christ.

And, the **fifth image** in verse 3 is the ink with which the letter is written. Paul says it is "written not with ink, but with the [Holy] Spirit of the living God." Paul appeals to the indelible reality of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers. Any kind of ink on any kind of writing surface will blur and fade with time. But the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit inside a believer in Jesus Christ guarantees the indestructibility of the Christian life. In his letter to the Ephesians the apostle states, "It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free--signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life (Eph 1:13-14, as paraphrased in *The Message*).

II. Christ Provides Confidence. II Cor. 4:1-5

The famous preacher D.L. Moody told about a Christian woman who was always bright, cheerful, and optimistic, even though she was confined to her room because of illness. She lived in an attic apartment on the fifth floor of an old, rundown building. A friend decided to visit her one day and brought along another woman—a person of great wealth. Since there was no elevator, the two ladies began the long climb upward. When they reached the second floor, the well-to-do woman commented, "What a dark and filthy place!" Her friend replied, "It's better higher up." When they arrived at the third landing, the remark was made, "Things look even worse here." Again the reply, "It's better higher up."

The two women finally reached the attic level, where they found the bedridden saint of God. A smile on her face radiated the joy that filled her heart. Although the room was clean and flowers were on the window sill, the wealthy visitor could not get over the stark surroundings in which this woman lived.

She blurted out, "It must be very difficult for you to be here like this!" Without a moment's hesitation the shut-in responded, "It's better higher up."

She was not looking at temporal things. With the eye of faith fixed on the eternal, she had found the secret of true satisfaction and contentment.

The famous agnostic Thomas Huxley was once lovingly confronted by a very sincere Christian. This believer stressed to Huxley that he was not in any way impugning Huxley's sincerity. Nevertheless, might it not be possible that mentally the great scientist was color blind? That is, some people cannot see traces of green where other people cannot help but see it. Could it be that this was Huxley's problem—that he was simply blind to truth that was quite evident to others? Huxley, being a man of integrity, admitted that this was possible, and added that if it were, he himself, of course, could not know or recognize it.

III. Christ Provides Comfort. II Cor. 4:15-18, 5:9-10

Christ Christ my Saviour, Christ my friend; Christ my treasure without end: Christ when waves of sorrow roll; Christ, the comfort of my soul.

Hold Amy's Hair on Her Head One night my eleven-year-old daughter Eva noticed I was distracted as I tucked her in to bed. I told her about a friend's teenaged daughter whose hair was mysteriously falling out and I encouraged Eva to pray for Amy. Her simple words, "Jesus, please hold Amy's hair on her head," touched me. As the doctors experimented with different treatments, Amy continued to lose her hair. Eva continued to pray the same prayer. After six weeks the doctors determined Amy had alopecia, an extremely rare disorder where hair loss is unpredictable but can be complete and permanent. When I told Eva, she took my hand and closed her eyes. This time her prayer was different. "Dear Jesus, if you won't hold Amy's hair on her head, would you please hold Amy?" Tearfully, I realized how sometimes God doesn't move mountains; he moves us. —Elisa Morgan, *Christian Parenting Today* See: Luke 22:42; Romans 12:15; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4; 12:7-9

Reasons for Hope.

It's the sense that something more is coming, which is consistent throughout scripture. King Solomon wrote that God has placed eternity in our hearts. Our outer man, that Paul mentions in verse 16, corresponds to the earthen vessels that we looked at previously. Paul is talking about our physical bodies, the point being that living here and now we do experience difficulties, pressures, problems, pain in life, as well as joyful things such as being gifted with a godly wife. In reality, pleasure and pain go hand-in-hand; tears and laughter, joy and sorrow get all mixed up together. But there is more. What we are experiencing now, the good and the bad, is preparing us for something yet to come, something even greater, "beyond all comparison."

C.S. Lewis said that this human existence is only the title page to the real story, which has not yet begun to be told. That is the Christian hope. Everything that happens to us in this life is directly related to what is coming. Nothing in our present experience is futile, or without purpose.

Verses 16-18 suggest three aspects of our present experience that tell us, as believers in Jesus Christ, that something much greater is coming--three reasons for hope. First, Paul says we experience daily inner renewal. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way in *The Message*: *So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace.*

Paul was hopeful because he was able to experience the daily spiritual renewal of God within him. Even though Paul was confronted by the aging process and the possibility of death, he could still express that strong conviction. His strenuous schedule and the arduous way he lived his life had taken a toll on him both physically and emotionally. Yet he says that through the Holy Spirit of God he enjoys spiritual renewal regularly and on a daily basis. Literally, he is made afresh or made anew. He is provided the resources of God's grace whenever he needs them and whatever the circumstance. That is another way of describing the new covenant in action: everything coming from God, nothing coming from us. Christians who enjoy that kind of spiritual resource on a daily basis, people who really do live out of the grace of God, are adventurous people. Despite physical limitations and loss, they still hunger and thirst after righteousness, and they never stop growing in the scriptures.