



*Letters
to a
Congregation*

Louis Nel

**Letters
to a
Congregation
Devotions on Corinthians**

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Foreword

The question many theologians battle with, is how many letters did Paul actually write to the church in Corinth? The answer is quite simple: We don't know! What we do know however, is that there are definitely more than two letters written - probably four or even more. Now why would Paul spend so much time writing letters to this congregation? Just because there were so many problems, and they constantly needed his attention.

It all began, early in the year 50 AD, when Paul, Silas and Timothy worked in Corinth for eighteen months. Paul moved in with Priscilla and Aquila. They were tent makers just as himself. He worked with them while ministering the gospel to the people of Corinth. It was not easy: the Jews in the city refused to accept him, and insulted him, with the

result that he could no longer preach in the synagogue. Eventually, these Jews dragged him to court, but they got off second-best and the case was thrown out of court!

Paul and his team then worked mainly among the non-Jews, and persevered despite all the opposition they received from the Jews.

Today, every congregation can still learn from the letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Louis Nel

The Nightmare Congregation

Introduction to 1 Corinthians

Many years ago, the beautiful Karoo town, Graaff Reinet came to a cross road. The Dutch Reformed Church was torn in two over politics! There were two pastors in the church, one a fiery Nat and the other a SAP, which were two

opposing political parties. The animosities were so bad that they had to build a second church to accommodate both! Believe me, congregations often tear apart because some members prefer a certain pastor over another - I've personally experienced it many times.

Imagine walking into a church this morning as a stranger in the congregation, and somebody comes and grabs your sleeve: "Welcome here, Friend," says the guy, over-friendly. "I'm from Rev. Smith's group. Now, he is a man to whom you can listen, preaches to tears!" And then he carries on about the excellent characteristics of Rev. Smith. And while he is still chattering, someone taps you on the shoulder and whispers: "Come with me!" You don't have a choice, and he seduces you into the Rev. Jones' group. "You must stay away from that lot!" He warns. "We listen

only to the gentle Rev. Jones. We are the holiest bunch here in the congregation. Do you know that one of the guys from that crowd has a relationship with his mother-in-law, yet he's an elder!" You feel sick! "We here are in favour of the extended communion - we all enjoy the meal together." From the corner of your eye you see a huge table that is set, overloaded with food. There is even a whole roasted piglet, complete with apple in the mouth! "I see you're driving a BMW, you're probably very wealthy, right? I'll make sure you get a good place at the table." Soon you find out that the "regular" people eat aside while just the rich are privileged to sit at the table!

But again you are lured away by a third person. Very soon he explains to you about the hypocritical bunch at the table,

and that Rev. Nochurch's group is the genuine group. "We make no secret of our sins", he laughs. "We dance and gamble, booze and gambol, because you see: it's the spiritual side in you that is important. What your flesh is doing is totally unimportant." He continues to say that we are really a jolly lot. This bunch even secretly obtained the services of a brothel! in case you might be interested

You are looking for the first opportunity you can get to slip out of that church and escape. You don't want anything to do with this lot!

A story? Rather a nightmare? Perhaps, but this is exactly what Paul encountered in the Corinthian congregation, even the guy who had a relationship with his mother-in-law! The things this congregation struggled with, make your hair stand on end. But what does it have

to do with us today? It happened two thousand years ago, so should be irrelevant today! Really?

This sad letter from Paul to the rebellious congregation in Corinth is still relevant today, because these things are still happening in congregations! Perhaps in a different form, but we still hear of things happening in the church that make your hair stand on end. Every now and then there are reports in the newspapers of some elder who cheated his wife with his deacon's wife, or a pastor who came addicted to gambling. Or even a married pastor who goes around homosexually with other men. The church did not escape moral decay! Daily we read about the terrible things that happen, also to believers.

Our Western society is based on the moral values, established by the early church. Many of these values originate

from Paul, and so today we can certainly learn much more about what Paul said about these things. The congregation in Corinth was strongly under the influence of the heathen world in which they lived, and they needed guidance on how to live according to divine principles. The same guidelines still apply to us today as believers.

A study of 1 Corinthians can help us to understand ourselves better. What is the relationship between body and soul? How should our relationship be with other human beings? May I, as a believer, live a little wildly?

Paul explains what the Lord expects of me, and what rules we should live by. He explains why we are still the church and what our church should look like.

Corinthians are essential for every believer to study thoroughly. Here again

we discover the call to live as redeemed children of God as believers in the midst of a sinful and broken world, so as to form the community of God in the world. It is, of course, of the utmost importance that we do not withdraw from the world and live in isolation, but that we should live out our faith in the midst of the sinful world, so that God's Kingdom can be expanded.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for Paul and this wonderful letter on how to guide our lives.

Grace and Peace!

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Spring blossoms conjure the world in a lovely array of colour as Paul looks out the window over the port city of Ephesus where he has been establishing a congregation for the past year or two. While having his worried thoughts about what is happening across the Aegean Sea, in another port city, Corinth, his secretary is ready to write his letter to the Corinthian congregation. This is the year 54AD. Paul has recently received all sorts of worrying reports from Corinth. The time has come for him to speak to them very seriously. It just can't carry on like that!

"From Paul," the old man began to dictate worriedly. The secretary dipped his sharpened goose feather into the pot of ink and began to write down the

words in ornamental writing. "Called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus."

Only the scratching sound of the goose-quill is audible, as Paul's thoughts wander back to that day outside Damascus, the day he met the Risen Jesus. What an indescribable influence that traumatic day had on his life! Jesus touched him personally and made him an apostle, somebody who is sent out to preach the gospel. "We must not forget Sostenes," Paul told the secretary, "after all, he also thought about this letter! Add that the letter also comes from the brother Sostenes. "

"Just how should I word the letter?" Paul wondered. It's a sensitive situation, and he doesn't want to put off the new believers from Corinth from Gospel by writing insensitively. On the other hand, horrible things happen in that

congregation, and he dares not leave it there! He shudders at the mere thought of the reports that have reached his ears. Whatever the case - that congregation still belongs to God! "To the congregation of God in Corinth," dictates Paul, and then he thinks again before adding the following: "to all who are called to be God's holy people, who belong to him in union with Christ Jesus."

"What a wonderful thought!" Paul says to his secretary, "Isn't it wonderful to know that you and I and the Corinthian congregation have been set apart for our Master? We are holy! He took us Himself, Personally from the sinful world, and made us holy! And this despite all our sin! But the things that are now going on in Corinth have become too troublesome. Many of them are gnosticism. It's a detestable thing! That

mystery cult is undoing all the work we've done there. Can you believe they would really think you could get immortality through some induction rite?" Paul was upset. "We must make it very clear that this so-called 'pneumatikos' they speak of is pure nonsense. They want to claim that you can do with your body just what you want, as long as you are a "pneumatico", a spiritually enlightened person, and free from the physical. In short, it means that as long as you are a believer, it doesn't matter how much you live in sin. No, it doesn't work like that! We must live holy lives!"

"I think you should add another sentence to the preamble: "Together with all people everywhere who worship our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours." Paul sees the question mark on the secretary's forehead. "This letter is going to cause a sensation! Perhaps many

more people other than merely the Corinthian congregation will read it!"

Paul smiles: "I still wonder how many people will ever read this letter? If a few hundred can see it, I will be a very happy man! Who knows, maybe this letter will still do it's rounds in congregations for the next year or three. Indeed, all the congregations can learn something from this!"

Yes, little did Paul know that for the next two thousand years, this letter would still do it's rounds and many millions would read and learn from it. Those few hundred he had in mind have outdone his wildest expectations! Could he have worded the letter differently if he knew it? I doubt it!

"Let us end the preamble with a blessing: May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and

peace."

Paul pondered deeply, "I feel so sorry for those poor people who are so deceived," he sighs. "The moral decline in Corinth is shocking! Then there's the terrible strife. There are even court cases between members of the congregation! It may not be? No matter how desperately they need this blessing right now. How terribly necessary for the poor people to have the peace of God. And of course His glorious grace! It is my heartfelt prayer that they will truly experience it, and that all the other people who read this letter will also experience it!"

Prayer:

Lord, my heart overflows with gratitude that this letter of Paul has been preserved for us today, and that we can still today draw power and wisdom from it.

The Great Gift

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

Christmas time everybody begins to scramble around to buy gifts. The kids make lists and send letters to Santa who lives somewhere in the North Pole, and even grown-ups excitedly start wondering what they will get for Christmas. What makes you so excited about gifts? Perhaps the mystery of a wrapped-up gift is the greatest reason for excitement, because what you get is a wonderful surprise until you have carefully undone the bow, pulled off the adhesive tape pulled off with difficulty without tearing the paper, carefully opened the beautiful, colourful gift wrap and then admired the gift you were given.

Another element is the fact that it is something you didn't work for. It's free,

free, free! Someone gave it to you without you really earning it! That makes it special.

There is also a third element that makes such a gift special to you, and that is the fact that the person has given it to you because he or she loves you and cares for you. You don't give a gift to someone who doesn't mean anything to you, without reason!

But then there is something else when receiving a gift, and that is that you are grateful to the person who gave it to you. You might embrace the person and kiss him/her passionately. A young girl who gets a diamond ring from the man who is courting her, is going to dance around with joy and promise him with tears of joy that she will forever be his. And then she boastingly walks with her hand in the air so that each and every one, especially her friends, can see that shiny

stone. And to her friends boasts how wonderful that Adonis is!

In 1 Corinthians 1:4, Paul also speaks of a gift the congregation received in Corinth. This is a very special gift, the gift of grace that God has given them in Jesus. This gift was something absolutely breathtaking, as he tells of "gifts of word and knowledge" (v.5) that were part of the gift. But that meant much more, because there was not a single talent that was not included anywhere in the wonderful grace.

Oh, and the wonderful thing is that you and I get that same gift the day Jesus comes into your life. The question is: how do we handle that special gift? Actually, it works exactly the same as the gift you get from a loved one. It starts with the excitement and the wonder that it may entail. You are usually very cautious about embarking on this new

venture in your life (you carefully open the gift wrap). And then, once you see what Jesus' gift entails, you want to jump up and down with excitement.

However, if you look very closely at Jesus' gift and begin to realize what it cost and it's priceless value, you will be overwhelmed by gratitude. Yes, indeed, the unthinkable sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross at Calvary is already ample reason for gratitude, but the things Paul describes to the Corinthian congregation fill you with bubbling gratitude. The rich blessings, all the gifts, the acquittal He gives us "so that you will be faultless on the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 1:8). Just think: all our transgressions, however great they may be, are immediately removed from the charge sheet. Isn't this already enough reason for jubilant gratitude? It's like giving a prisoner, waiting for the day

of his execution, the news: "You're free! The president has decided to pardon you!" Despite the crime that you have committed that deserves the death penalty, you are being pardoned and leaving as a free man.

The question is: how do we show that gratitude in our lives? How do I say thank you for such a huge present? First of all, I just can't stop saying "thank you, thank you, thank you, Lord!" Verbally. Your whole being just wants to kiss Jesus' feet and keep on thanking Him. But that's not enough, because for someone who gives you a great gift, you'll do anything. It will become a lifestyle to do things that show exactly how grateful you are. Love is the highest form of living gratefully. First, a lively, practical love for God, where you will do everything in your power to live within His desire and so make Him happy. But

true gratitude also means living out your love to your fellow-man, because that's what Jesus asks of you.

There is, however, another aspect: As the girl wants to show her engagement ring to everyone, gratitude also gives you the need to want to tell everyone who will listen of your gift of life, and especially of Jesus who gave it to you. Question is: How grateful are you?

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, thank you for your great gift to me. Please help me to fully show my gratitude in every field.

Unity

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

One day a school teacher wanted to prove to us in a practical way that when people stand together, then they are strong. That morning he took a box of matches from his drawer and with a big gesture took one match from the box. "Who thinks he can break this match?" He asked us. I still remember how we laughed at his stupid question. One guy - the strongest of our bunch - was pushed forward, and he was tasked with breaking the match, under loud applause from his classmates. Then the teacher poured out the entire contents of the box in his hand; bundled the matches together and gave them to the guy. "Now try to break this bundle," comes his second command. On the face of it, it looks easy, but the poor guy was later red in the face from the effort, but he

could not break the bundle of matches. "It proves that if people stand together, then they have great power - in other words, unity gives strength," the teacher explains.

At that moment, one of the girls in the back of the class jumped up: "Oh, give it to me, then I'll show you how it's done," she laughed, grabbing the bundle of matches from the boy. Everybody hoots with laughter, because here a simple girl wants to try the impossible. They are new to the area, somewhere on a farm near Waterval Boven, so no one really knows her. She clutches the matches, and then we are speechless when she breaks the whole bundle. She gave a meaningful look in the embarrassed teacher's direction, and sat down again.

What nobody knew was that this girl was as strong as an ox. Through hard farm work she became strong - so strong that

she could pick up a bag of maize in each hand and walk with it. Our boys soon gained a lot of respect for her, and she earned the nickname "Bundle Breaker".

Unity among believers is something very strong on Paul's agenda. We also read this in his letter to the Philippians. In today's scripture, Paul is hammering into these thoughts, for he wanted to overcome the problems of divisions of Corinth.

Strife is usually caused by the fact that different people adhere to different leadership figures. Where there is more than one pastor in a congregation, then this problem is virtually inevitable. In a certain congregation there was a young, dynamic teacher who wanted to do everything the modern way. He wanted to break away from the old traditions. The second pastor was an elderly man who kept clinging to the old church

traditions. There was a lot of tension in the congregation, as half of the congregation stood behind the one, while the other half supported the other. The congregation simply couldn't stand together.

In Corinth there were three ministers involved: Paul, Apollos and Zephas, and each of these three had followers. Although Paul was no longer part of the congregation at the time of the letter, there were still those who wanted to support Paul only. It's not necessarily the pastors who caused the strife, but rather cultural, social or ethnic differences in the congregation that caused people to click together. Slaves were regarded as lower class, and rejected by some. And then there were the Jews who still didn't want to mix with "heathens", even though both were believers.

The problem did not lie in the fact that

people had a preference for the preaching of a particular pastor, but because there was strife among groups, and they simply could not unite and worship together. "Christ has been divided into groups!" Sighs Paul in verse 13.

It is so that preachers have different sermon styles. Perhaps it is more acceptable to you to listen to an old traditional preacher, and someone else prefers a dynamic preacher. However, we must remember that this is not about the person or the style of preaching. Both preach what the Holy Spirit has laid upon their hearts, and we dare not disdain it. We must be willing to listen to any preacher who preaches the pure Word. It is wrong to run behind someone just because we enjoy his style of preaching. It is to God we listen to, not to the preacher.

However, it is even more important that we do not dare allow cultural, ethnic or social differences to separate us as believers. A number of our congregation, together with a Zulu church, occasionally worshipped in a township near Stanger. They went out of their way to make us feel at home, and it was a wonderful experience. If we just try, believers can stand together despite differences. It strengthens our faith!

Prayer:

Lord, forgive me for being so intolerant to other believers who are different to me. Please help me to accept and stand together.

Simplicity of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Are there any obvious differences between the church and the world? "But of course!" You will probably want to respond. But don't be too quick with your answer! We must first have a very good look, and see if there really is a difference to take note of. If not, then the church is sinking!

The pastor walks into church on Sunday morning. Behind him, the deacons and elders follow after their morning session in the vestry where they discussed important issues, such as Saturday afternoon's rugby match, the Proteas' performance during the World Cup, and what they will do to improve the appearance of the entrance to the church building.

The church choir is seated right in the

front, neatly dressed in black and white. The pastor is proud of his congregation. As he ascends the pulpit, he thinks of all the preparations that had been made to make this service special. He spent his whole week working on his sermon, and he is satisfied that it is of high quality. He also knows that the choir practiced very hard for their performance of a complicated Latin song with heavenly harmonies.

At the back of the church, a person is sitting, very despondant. The burden of life has become too much for her. Her husband has left her and her children are a failure. For the last time she has come to seek comfort before committing suicide. Elsewhere is a man who is busy with a scheme to make millions out of other people's misery. He sits in the church to lull his conscience. No one knows his dark secret. At the far end of

the row, a woman sits alone. Her financial situation drove her to prostitution. She didn't want to be in that terrible situation, so she came looking for help at the church.

The choir delivered their performance excellently, to which the people even clapped spontaneously, even though they couldn't understand a single word of what was sung! The reverend's sermon was awesome, and the slideshow he presented left them awestruck. After a while no one could remember what he had said, but everyone knew that this pastor should be a very clever man to be able to deliver such an excellent sermon. He was satisfied!

The woman went home and committed suicide. The man's money-making scheme was exposed and he was jailed. The prostitute started her own business

and made many men happy. The choir did not make any difference to their lives, nor did the preacher's excellent sermon.

There is a saying that you can be so heavenly-bound that you have no earthly value. As believers, we must be very careful not to rise above the world. There are two things we as believers need to realize very well: The first is that we are no longer part of the world. We must therefore do everything in our power to leave behind the sinful life in which we were previously trapped, and to live holy. Equally important is the fact that we cannot live with our heads in the clouds. We still have to live in the world amongst unbelievers. How will the unbelievers ever come to repent if there are no believers between them and with them to teach them God's love and grace and His plan of salvation? Jesus

set the example when He mixed with tax collectors and sinful people.

It is also of utmost importance that we make sure of what is happening in the world so that we can have empathy with the problems of unbelievers. If we do not understand their circumstances, we cannot preach to them. Some believers never read a newspaper and never watch TV because it can “pollute” their lives. I can sympathise with that, because in that way you can live closer to God, but it is still important not to cut yourself off from the whole world totally.

The pastor above could have touched the hearts of the three people with their problems, had he preached the simple gospel message and set aside his worldly wisdom. The choir might have penetrated their hearts by singing a simple song about God's grace. The problem is that we often consider the

simple Scriptural truths as unimportant and rather quote the great philosophical issues.

This is one of the great differences between the church and the world, that the world seeks the higher wisdom, and rejects the simple. Believers' entire existence revolves around the simplest concepts. "Believe in Jesus and you have eternal life," is far too simple for many people. For the believer, however, it is the most beautiful concept you could ever dream of. "For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and what seems to be God's weakness is stronger than human strength," Paul writes (1 Corinthians 1:25).

Turn for once, back to the simple things!

Prayer:

Lord, I myself am very guilty, because so

often I try to prove my own wisdom, and I forget about the simplicity of your wonderful Gospel.

He Uses Ordinary People

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

In the "good old days" we owned a bush cottage in Marloth Park. With great zeal I planted a lawn, and it was lush green. But then one year there was a drought, and in the midst of the food scarcity the warthogs discovered this tiny oasis in the dry bush. It was the end of my beautiful lawn, and all that was left was the bare ground.

The next spring I planted a lawn with great zeal, but this time I used wild grass that I took out everywhere in the feldt. It was a very clever idea, or at least I thought so. The warthogs also thought that I had planted specially for them, and a few weeks later there was not even a sign that had ever grass had been planted! Then I bought grass seed, the

best, toughest and most expensive on the market. I carefully prepared the soil, gave compost and strew fertilizer. I covered the grass with thorny branches so that no warthog could ever get near it. In addition, I installed an irrigation system to give the grass a good chance in life.

The warthogs dug out the nozzles of the sprinklers to get to the water, gaffed the branches of the greenery and uprooted my lawn until only a plowed land was left! All my carefully-made plans were of no use at all!

In stark contrast, I watched with amazement at how a barren field where only rocks and red soil after a drought dominated the landscape after a drought, after only one good bout rain is converted in a grassy carpet, without fertilizer, without protection, without care! Where did I go wrong?

Paul talks about a very different kind of lawn, but yet there are remarkable similarities.

The world is trying to practice a trade with "religion" according to their own standards. The smartest people may be employed to work out, plan and devise with their abundance of wisdom. Influential rich people are appointed to run things. On the face of it, it often looks as if they are doing a lot, and that their plans are successful. But the first "drought" or plague that hits them, wipes out all their clever plans, and it collapses.

God works differently, totally otherwise! He often uses ordinary people to act as His workers and envoys. Simple fishermen and farmers are empowered, and the results are amazing. The Bible tells us of many such cases. Not only was there a Peter (a simple fisherman)

and an Amos (a farmer) who did wonders as workers of the Lord, but there were even totally uneducated people like the Samaritan woman with the bad reputation that Jesus met at the well. She led a large number of people to Jesus. And what about the crazy man who wandered naked in the cemetery? After Jesus drove out the devils, he preached the word in the Decapolis and did a great job.

From a worldly point of view, these things are impossible, pure madness. "God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful." Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:27.

Now what's the secret then? The big secret is that God is involved. Without Him, man's best efforts are a total

disaster. With Him anything is possible. And that brings us to the meaning of this thought for me and you today. He still works in exactly the same way. He still uses ordinary people to carry out the gospel.

The Dutch Reformed Church has now begun to train ordinary members as preachers over the Internet. It makes me very excited! To preach the Word is not the privilege of only a few highly educated men. It is every believer's duty, and we as believers must be willing to be trained to do it effectively. There is a wealth of learning material available that gives the uninformed believer the skill to do it.

However, there is one very great condition: God must be the point of departure, the center of your ministry. Everything has to be centered around Him alone, and your power for this can

be taken from Him alone. Oh, the Holy Spirit equips you with as much power as you can handle, as long as you allow Him to do so. It is also of utmost importance that you be led by Him. We also need to remember that you and I are only tools in His capable hands, and that at the end of the day we can only give Him all the glory. It is not through my own cunning, but God who does the work through me. "Whoever wants to boast must boast of what the Lord has done."

Prayer:

Lord, I'm available - You can use me wherever you want. Thank you for making me an instrument in Your hand. All the honour I bring to You.

Simple Message

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

I have experienced preachers who speak with such pomposity and great words, that they eventually lose you completely. And I've been trying to listen to men who preach with so much "wisdom" that you don't understand a single word. And then you also get the preachers who want to show how holy they are, by the way they pronounce their words. The well-known Prof. Attie Barnard once said that a clergyman's holiness is often measured by how beautiful and pompous he can pronounce "Mesopotahmia". Likewise, I have often started to read a spiritual book written in the same manner, before abandoning it after the third or fourth page. I'm just a simple being, so for me an author has to keep it simple, otherwise I'm lost!

On the other hand, I have listened to highly-educated preachers who preach in such simple language with such down-to-earth thoughts that I drink in every word and still remember it for years to come. And the same goes for books. The simpler and more down-to-earth it is written, the easier I read it and the deeper the impact is.

Paul was a man with a great education. He knew the Scriptures inside-out, and he had his training with the very best teachers. He mentions somewhere that the famous Gamaliel taught him. He must have been one of the very best of his time. In addition, we can clearly see from Paul's letters that he was a brilliant orator who could respond promptly on the spur of the moment. He could literally charm with words.

Paul, however, realized very well that great words and complicated reasoning

would not bring him very far if he wanted to bring the gospel to often simple people. In simplicity, he conveyed the message of Jesus' salvation to the gentiles, who have often never heard of Jesus.

When we think of Paul, we see this fearless figure who is not afraid of the prison or the authorities or even being stoned. Yet, in this passage, we see a totally different Paul who is very well aware of his own weaknesses, and who, with great fear and hesitation, comes to people to preach to them the gospel. Ten years ago, in 2009, I experienced something of Paul's anxiety when I first stood on the pulpit to preach to a congregation. Well, I'm not a minister, just an ordinary elder. I prepared very well for that sermon, many hours of blood-sweat. Suddenly I came to the realization of the huge responsibility that

lies on a preacher's shoulders. Standing in front of the congregation that day, it dawned on me that I stand there as the messenger of God. I had to convey to the congregation what the Holy Spirit had laid upon me. I had to create an atmosphere of worship for the congregation. I, the preacher, had to disappear so that the congregation could see God, so that there could really be a two-way conversation between Him and the congregation.

Every seasoned preacher stands in fear and trembling on that pulpit every Sunday, because no matter how educated you are, and how many times you have preached, you still carry that responsibility on your shoulders. Every time you ascend the pulpit, you need to be deeply aware of exactly what the Lord expects of you. Exactly the same applies to me, every morning as I write a

devotional of paper. I dare not do it out of my own strength or wisdom, because then it will just be meaningless. This is a huge responsibility for me, because thousands of people read these daily devotionals every day, and it goes to people from many different denominations. Therefore, I have to be more careful about exactly what I write. Dear reader, therefore, I would ask you to pray continually for me, that I will never lose perspective, and that all my power, wisdom, and inspiration will only come from the Holy Spirit.

What made Paul's preaching so successful, except for the fact that he took it so seriously? His message! It was a very simple message that spoke of Jesus Christ being crucified. For many, this simple message is too simple today! They want something exalted. Yet this simple message is one that is actually

incomprehensibly complex, one that transcends all human minds. To try to explain it's full extent is impossible for even the smartest preacher. Yet it's so simple that even a child can understand it. Jesus Christ died on the cross and thus paid for all our sins. All that I have to do as a sinner is to accept the righteousness that He gives me by believing in Him as my Saviour. Have you done this?

Prayer:

Lord, please help me keep my message simple so that everyone can understand it.

Divine Wisdom

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

The world-famous astrophysician, Prof. Steven Hawking was widely regarded as one of the world's most brilliant people, the Einstein of our time. He was totally paralyzed by motor-neuron disease, a paraplegic, and he could only communicate by moving his eyes, and thus controlling a computer to speak and write. He was once asked the question, what happens to man when he dies. His answer was that man is like a computer, the day when the plug is pulled out is the day the computer switches off. Then he's dead!

How tragic that a man with so much wisdom could not grasp the simple message of the Gospel. According to this clever man, therefore, man is without soul or spirit, merely a robot that

works only until his time is over and then turns to dust.

Paul, on the other hand, maintains a dualistic view. This means in short that there are usually two sides to each case. For example, space is dualistic, with a visible world as well as an invisible world. The harsh reality with which we are dealing every day also has a counterpart of an invisible spirit world. The body is the tangible part of man, but he also has an invisible spiritual side. In the spiritual world there is once again God on the one hand and His angelic powers, and on the other hand the devil and his demons. People are also divided dually: there are those who have been acquitted and those who have been condemned. There is no golden midway!

We have heard the word "simplicity" time and again over the past few days. Still, there is a treasure chest of wisdom

trapped in that simplicity. But there is a huge difference between worldly and divine wisdom. Because we live in a dualistic world, we tend to see and experience only the visible, tangible, as the only reality. Therefore, worldly wisdom is so important to us. So we often forget about the invisible, intangible Divine wisdom that is so much greater than the worldly.

The rulers of this world have reached heights because of their worldly "wisdom". It is nothing new, they were already there in Paul's time. The wisdom they proclaim is often very beautiful and noble. Humanitarian wisdom they advocate is often even acceptable according to Biblical standards. The man on the street rejoices over human rights, because "love" is shown to him, and he is cared for. However, politicians who are so fighting for human rights usually do

this for one single reason: to enrich themselves and become well-known. There are exceptions, but are rare. Humanism is a love for people without God being involved, and it is not wisdom but folly. People are cared for on a temporary basis, but the real important need, the spiritual, is not only neglected but completely absent.

At another level, worldly wisdom is the pursuit of scientific development. In itself it is not wrong, but often the Creator of all things is totally ignored in this. Prof. Louw Alberts has shown that worldly wisdom and divine wisdom can go hand in hand if the scientist is only willing to see the creative hand of God in science. He was Professor in Physics, Vice-President of the Atomic Energy Council, President of Mintek and Director-General of the Department of Mineral and Energy Affairs. But in spite of all his

achievements, he is remembered rather for the divine wisdom that, despite what he has accomplished in science, he still has time to spread the Word of God especially to the youth. This is true wisdom!

But where does this kind of wisdom come from?

Paul answers this question in 1 Corinthians 2:10: "But it was to us that God made known his secret by means of his Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, even the hidden depths of God's purposes."

Are there just a few chosen people to whom the Holy Spirit gives that wisdom and reveals the mysteries of God?

No! It is to all who have "the Spirit". It is not just a few chosen ones who receive the Spirit. Whoever is in Jesus, who is in other words a believer, has the Holy

Spirit in him. The great secret, however, is that a believer must learn to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit. We learn this by walking close with God. The more I focus on living according to God's will, the clearer I hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in my life. We have already said that true wisdom comes only from God, so we can say that you get true wisdom the closer you live to Him.

Prayer:

“Who knows the mind of the Lord? Who is able to give him advice? We, however, have the mind of Christ.”(v. 16). Lord, thank you for that!

Do Grow up!

1 Corinthians 3:1-4

Jesus once said that we should become like children again in our faith. We must therefore unconditionally believe as children. This is very true, and that is exactly where your faith should begin. We don't want to question everything first and try to understand the universe before we believe. However, this is not where your faith remains. You have to grow up!

A child goes through different stages of growing up. First it is the baby that is totally dependent and cannot do anything for himself. He also can't drink anything other than milk, because he simply can't handle solid food. As he grows up, his body begins to withstand solid foods, and soon he eats anything. Even the dogs' food bowls are regularly

cleaned out! And when he gets into the garden, he eats soil, crickets and any creepy crawlies that come within his reach.

Overall irresponsibility is usually the teenager's characteristic. In addition, his total lack of knowledge, while thinking that he has all the knowledge in the world. He and his friends are the best friends the one day, and the next they want to kill each other. Love and jealousy are commonplace. Terrible uncertainty but at the same time an excess of self-assurance.

The one thing of a child that is of utmost importance is that he does not dare stagnate. There must always be a growth process, otherwise there is something very wrong. A little baby drinks milk, and that is natural. However, if he doesn't start eating solid food soon, his body won't get the

necessary strength, muscle and bone formation. I knew a mom who was still breastfeeding her 5-year-old boy. It is unnatural, and that child should have been weaned long ago!

Paul uses this image of a child who grows up very effectively, because only so does your spiritual life. When someone comes to faith that day, you can't give him complicated philosophical books to read and bombard him with all sorts of doctrines and concerns. No, he must get the simplest of scriptural truths, something that will give him a firm foundation for building his faith. As a young believer's faith begins to grow stronger and take shape, he must soon begin to get firm spiritual food. Although he cannot process everything, this food begins to build his spiritual muscles and bones.

I recently heard a very interesting

explanation of why there are so many young children today with type 1 diabetes: this is because they are raised too hygienically. They don't get the chance to eat dog food, garden soil and crickets! Those "bad" things build a child's immune system, and teach the body which germs are dangerous. If he is not exposed to it, it may happen that the body sees it's own organs, especially the pancreas as "germs" and attacks and destroys them. He then becomes a diabetic!

Likewise, young believers must also get exposure to the "wrong" things so that he can learn to discern. Temptations that come your way teach you to make the right choices, and sometimes you may also need to burn your fingers to learn what can hurt.

There must be a continuous growth in a believer's life. If you are still on the "milk

bottle" after years, then there is a lot of mistake. Likewise, the stage of experimenting with all sorts of things must also pass, and you have to decide for yourself what is right and wrong. Also, the childish things like jealousy, strife, envy and backbiting, which are so often part of a growing believer's life, must disappear and make room for spiritual maturity.

"You still live as the people of this world live", Paul accuses the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:3). The problem is that the day when you experience rebirth, you still carry a lot of luggage with you from your old worldly life. The sooner you get rid of it, the better. But many believers are clinging to the old life, just as a child sometimes clings to his pet blanket until the thing is only shreds. Mom usually has to take it away from him by force and even burn it, otherwise he will dig it

out again!

The question is: what happens when you have reached spiritual maturity? Do you then sit back comfortably and say, "I have arrived?" No certainly not, because only then life begins. Someone who doesn't eat neglects his body. Likewise, as an adult believer, I often need to get good, healthy, spiritual food to keep me spiritually healthy. And as your body needs regular exercise to stay fit, you also need regular spiritual exercise, otherwise you stagnate and your spiritual muscles become weak. But we can write endlessly about this!

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to live healthy and keep growing spiritually.

Gardener for the Lord

1 Corinthians 3:4-9

I love a nursery. To wander aimlessly between the rows of plants, that fascinates me. It is especially the sumptuous shade plants that totally enchant me. No, I don't even know one of their botanical names. I leave that knowledge to the extremely capable botanists working in the nursery. I am amazed at how they know all the complicated botanical names.

I'm not really someone who has the greenest of fingers. I have often bought seed in my life to try and grow my own flowers. Why should the nurseries now make money out of me? And again and again it is a total FLOP, with a capital F. Now I leave the sowing in their capable hands - they still know better, and when their plants are strong, I buy the

seedlings and plant them my garden. If I look after them carefully and remember to water them regularly, I get lots of joy from my garden.

But actually it's not me, and even less the nursery that has to be honoured for the flower. And no, it's not even the scientists who have put in so many hours of love and invented ingenuity to nourish some nonsensical old field flower to an exotic splendour. It grows much deeper. The big wonder happens when the tiny seed lands in the right conditions and germinates. At first glance, it is a lifeless pellet, and suddenly it comes to life, and it begins to grow and grow, till eventually it is a mature plant and it carries colourful flowers. Not only does it fill the world with colour, but the delicious perfume fills the air. Insects are captivated by the colours and flavours and come to look

for delicious, heavenly nectar in the flower and pollinate it in the process. A fruit forms, and seeds.....

The one element in this which no scientist could ever imitate is the life that is contained in every seed. No one can give life except God. And this is where the greatest wonder of a flower garden lies!

Paul was very upset. He learned that in Corinth there was fierce strife, and he was, very innocently involved in it. I can imagine how a conversation would go: "The famous Paul led me to Jesus. What a wonderful evangelist!"

"Oh no man, where is Paul? In prison! Apollos, he is the one! It's under his preaching that I've grown!"

Couldn't they see that it wasn't about Paul or Apollos? It's not the botanist or scientist who gives life to plants?

Likewise, no preacher can give you eternal life.

Paul tried to bring this truth to the people of Corinth. He and Apollos were just implements, servants! Paul sowed the seeds and nursed them to their seedlings, and then Apollos came and took care of them and gave water, Paul explains. But just as it is only God who can give life to a seed, so it is only He who can breathe that wonderful spiritual life into any human being.

But how does the faith thing work? There are basically four things to do. The first is that someone is conveying the gospel message to you, and for this the Lord uses people, not angels!

The second is that the Holy Spirit speaks to you through this person and invites you to become a kingdom child. He is offering you a gift, the gift of eternal life.

The third is that you have to make a decision. You have to decide if you want to accept this gift and whether you are going to refuse it. But you have to realize that if you accept the gift, it will necessarily mean that certain responsibilities will go with it.

This brings us to the fourth element, your responsibilities. They are not a condition for receiving the gift, but it is something that must naturally come from the fact that the Lord has given you the gift without earning it. The person who "thaws" and cares is the one who helps you to master these responsibilities.

I have often had the privilege of sharing the Gospel with someone. Usually I never hear if the person has accepted it. But it does not matter, because I only do what God asks me to do, and furthermore it is between that person and God to finalize the matter. I can't

give life. Only God can!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the wonderful privilege of being a gardener in your garden of life. Please help me to do my work enthusiastically.

Building Construction

1 Corinthians 3:9-17

Any builder, architect and engineer will know how important the foundations of a building are. If soil conditions are poor, then that foundation is all the more important. I worked for 40 years as a draughtsman who designed buildings, and often saw the consequences of poor foundations. Buildings bursting apart if the foundations are not according to prescription. Ballito is built largely on a huge sand dune. Storm water can easily flush the sand out from under the foundations if you are not careful. If those foundations are not firm enough to withstand it, your home tumbles.

The right foundation is cast in concrete mixed with a very specific formula. The thickness and width of a foundation is determined by the engineer after looking

at a variety of factors. When this concrete is congealed and "mature", it is hard and virtually indestructible. Then it can support huge building work.

Two thousand years ago people knew exactly what the value of solid foundations were. However, it was not poured into concrete, but huge boulders were packed under the ground, and the building was erected on it. Once such a foundation is in place, then the building is erected, then it is impossible to successfully remove and replace the foundation under the building. Everything must be broken down and the foundation must be taken out with great effort before a new foundation can be laid. Then building work must be done from scratch.

Paul uses this well-known image to explain the importance of the foundation on which to build your faith. "The

foundation is Jesus Christ," says Paul (1 Cor 2:11). Just as the foundation of a building is not negotiable, so the foundation of your faith life is not negotiable either. The only "approved" foundation is Jesus Christ, and only He alone. If you throw a lot of rubble and stones with the concrete in a building's foundation, you weaken it, and your building will crack. In the same way we dare not add any other conditions to our faith life with Jesus, because then our building of faith will also crack. If the way in which sacraments are served is necessary for your salvation, then there are problems with your foundation. And if political beliefs determine if you're going to get salvation, then I'll raise my eyebrows. Once I saw a video clip taken at a wedding, where the priest was serving holy communion to the bride and groom. The piece of bread accidentally

fell out of the priest's hand, and down into the front of her dress. For him it was a deadly sin if the holy supper was to be lost, and in order to settle the matter, he briefly put his hand in front of her dress and dug the bread out from where it made you blush. It was hilarious, but it made me wonder about the purity of the foundation in that priest's life.

However, there is a second issue that is important in any construction work. The building itself must be of good quality, otherwise problems may arise. It's no good if you have a good concrete foundation, but you build a corrugated iron shack on it. Your construction needs to match the foundation, otherwise it may be an insult to the foundation on which you build.

It is the same in our spiritual life. We already agree that Jesus as a foundation is not negotiable. But what each one

does with his building of faith is his own business. How you build your building of faith may not compromise your salvation, but the question is whether it is going to bring shame to the name of your foundation, namely Jesus? What does my building of faith look like? It doesn't have to be a palace! All of us are not Billy Grahams and Angus Buchans. However, I have to remember very carefully that the Holy Spirit lives in me, and that my home, therefore, whatever it's size, must be clean and tidy. Each one of us must build according to his ability, but what we build must be good and honorable to the Lord.

If you pollute your life through debauchery, foul language, lovelessness, laziness, gambling, gluttony and the like, you are causing shame to the Foundation on which your faith is built. An unbeliever may see your

building, and say that if that is what a believer looks like, then he certainly wants nothing to do with Jesus! It makes you a spiritual killer, because then you are the cause that someone who could have received eternal life has lost that life. Yes, you might still get eternal life yourself. After all, Jesus gave it to you, but you are just going to scrape through it (1 Corinthians 3:15). What a shame!

What does your construction look like?

Prayer:

Lord, I do not want to be a disgrace to You. Please help me to build my spiritual building beautiful and neat, and an ornament for you.

Temple of God

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

"Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" Paul asked shocked! Then he seriously warns: "If anyone damages the temple of God, God will punish him, for the temple of God is holy, and the temple is you."

Harsh Words! But what exactly does Paul mean? Is your body specifically being spoken of here? As we read a little further, we see in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that Paul says that our BODY is a temple of God, and that we dare not pollute it with (for example) a riotous life.

However, it seems as if two different things are being spoken of here. Paul refers to a plural, and so we can assume that he refers to the church or congregation as a temple of God as well

as the individual. This puts a huge responsibility on you. That means you have to think much wider than just yourself. In the previous pericope, we clearly saw how your spiritual building should look. Now Paul explains exactly why this building should be done so well. Because the Spirit of God dwells in that building of yours.

Maybe we should first look at the broader picture. How do your actions affect the church or congregation? Insensitive action can cause a congregation's image to suffer great damage. Perhaps you still remember the pastor who fell into sin and broad disgrace over the congregation. Then the neighbouring congregation also became involved. A believer who falls into sin is quickly spotted by especially the unbelievers, and then accusations are made, saying, "That's how the

CHURCH operates!" However, the world expects a believer to remain standing, and everyone just waits for the day that he should also fall, just so they can say, "See how hypocritical believers are!"

However, it is not about us, and what our image looks like, but we need to realize that we are the image bearers of the church, Jesus' property. But also the image bearers of Christ Himself! So if I damage my image through sin, I damage the image of the church and of Christ. Therefore, it is so important that we always remember that we are the temple of God.

However, it is not just externally that we can cause harm if we sin, but also internally. That pastor who fell into sin also did a great deal of damage to the congregation. The morale of the congregation must have been extremely low after that incident, and it would take

very long before they could function optimally again. This is especially true when it comes to church leadership if someone stumbles, that it has a great influence on the whole congregation. Congregation members who are not very strong in their faith are affected the worst, and they soon lose courage. However, it also causes people to sin, because then they start gossiping and talking, and often even innocent people are involved. A crazy cycle!

So be very careful what you do! And if desires want to overwhelm you - think of the consequences of your actions on a very wide scale.

However, there is also another, very important side of the matter. You must consider your body as a temple of God for your own sake and your personal relationship with God. Considering 1 Corinthians 6:16, we cannot help but

admit that one's own body is spoken of here. So it is your responsibility to look after your body. "The temple of God is holy," Paul says, and so we dare not damage this temple (body). Your body does not belong to yourself, but to God. He created it. "You belong to Christ," Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:23. By deliberately letting it deteriorate by living unhealthy, is therefore a sin. How do you live unhealthy? Wrong habits such as smoking, drugs, alcohol abuse, overeating, eating too little. These are all things that destroy the body that He entrusted to you.

There are other ways in which you can dishonour this temple: an irresponsible lifestyle is not only disgusting and a dishonor to God, but it also puts you at risk of getting dangerous diseases such as Aids. Even worse is that you can even transmit these diseases to other

people.

But the Lord not only tells us all the time, "Don't, don't"! He wants us to use this temple of ours to His glory. Live healthy and radiate a positive image with your body. Radiate an image that glorifies the Name of God. The purpose of a temple is to see God in it, and that is exactly what we have to do with this temple. Friendliness, empathy and love must radiate from it so that everyone will recognize God in it.

Prayer:

Lord, please make me aware continuously that I am Your temple, and therefore I will radiate Your love with it.

Manager for Jesus

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

The heads are rolling! Recently, numerous high-ranking persons have been questioned for their integrity, and were scandalously dethroned. Many people in the highest authority, even people who served as ministers, stand guilty before the judges. This week, even the previous state president was not spared. Who's next?

Jesus once told a parable of a man who wanted to go on a trip, so he instructed managers to control his finances. Although they were slaves, they each had an important task: to make the most of the man's money he had left in their care. He trusted them, because while he was away, they had to represent him in his household and finances. It was a very responsible task.

When he returned home after a very long absence, he learned that two of them had gone out of their way to do something remarkable with their money. They went out of their way and showed big profits. But the third guy buried his money and didn't do anything about it. Of course the slave was in big trouble because he just wasted the man's money! It could have earned interest in a bank! Read this story in Matthew 25: 14-30.

Leaders in a congregation are appointed in exactly the same way as those slaves (executives), but in the congregation they actually represent God. They were appointed to manage the congregation's affairs on behalf of the Lord. It puts a huge responsibility on the shoulders of every leader, whether he was given a small job and whether he had a very big job. The Lord expects every leader to

deliver his absolute best, even though he only received one single talent.

When Paul wrote this letter to Corinth, he obviously remembered this parable of Jesus. However, he touches another very important aspect: in Whose service are you really? And to whom do you have to account?

When you get a job in a congregation, it may be the congregation that gives you the appointment, but the actual One who sets you up is Jesus Christ, and it must necessarily make you look at it in a totally different light . "In particular, a manager is required to be trustworthy," says Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:2

What exactly does this mean to me in practice?

First of all, it asks for my reliability. If I said "Yes" to Jesus, He must be able to rely on me to do what He asks of me

and that I might not turn around halfway through and say, "Oh God, I'm not really in the mood today!" If I decided this morning I didn't feel like writing this devotional, then there would be thousands of people who wouldn't get the devotional. Perhaps there would be someone who needed this devotional very urgently, someone with whom Jesus had an appointment today through my writing. And then my unreliability would become critical for human life. So it's not about me, my comfort or my convenience, but about God's dealings with people, and that I play a key role in that.

But I must also realize that I was appointed by Jesus to act on His behalf. So, for example, if I do evangelism, I'm going to talk to someone about his salvation on behalf of Jesus. I am His mouthpiece, and I have to make sure

that what I tell him is not my own opinion, but that it is scripture-bound, and that it comes from God. In other words, I must listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and convey what He wants to let that person know. I don't think we realize every day the tremendous responsibility of serving the Living God.

This, of course, also means that I will prayerfully carry out my task and constantly seek the will of God so that I may not listen to my own thoughts. It also means having a living relationship with God. It is impossible to act on His behalf if my relationship with Him is not alive.

Not only does this place a big responsibility on my shoulders, but there is also a great deal of consolation in it. Because I do this on behalf of God, people cannot point fingers and judge or condemn me. I just do what He asks, so

I can still be calm about it, no matter what people say. There is only one who judges me, the Lord! Only He is competent to judge, because only He knows me through and through. So as long as I do what He asks of me, and faithfully and to the best of my ability, I can sleep peacefully.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for being able to stand in your service. Thank you for knowing that I can speak to Your authority. Please guide me to be faithful, and to do only what you ask of me.

True Happiness

1 Corinthians 4:6-13

Paul walked up and down eratically. He is bitterly troubled when he thinks how that congregation is missing the point! "Write to them," he says upset to his secretary, "Who makes you so important?" That's a rhetorical question, and of course it has only one answer! They must very well realize that it is not their own goodness that makes them so important. Only God alone can provide. Of course, some people (humanly speaking) are more important than others, but then they must realize very well from where it comes. "Write: And what do you own that you didn't receive?" Another rhetorical question. They must also realize that everything they have come from the Lord, popularity, good looks, smartness, even possessions - everything comes from

Him! "Let's rub it in with another question." Now Paul is getting well worked up! "If you have received it then why do you pretend to have not received it?" No man can pretend that he is responsible for what he has. If the Lord does not give you something, you have nothing!

Agitated Paul continues to dictate: "You already have all that you desire!" Oh, the irony of it all: at world level, they have everything, but they have little to lead them to spiritual maturity! How he wishes he could only knock a little real wisdom into them. "You are already rich!" They may have worldly wealth, but of the true riches of the Word and of knowledge of God, they are poor. "You are already ruling like kings!" Do they not realize that we will only reign in the afterlife one day? Then, of course, every believer will be a real king! But if this

congregation had only approached life differently, they could now already have been governing sin. But for this they are still way too immature. "Maybe I should tell them I want to sit with them on the throne!"

The problem with the Corinthian congregation was that they then already thought that you should have a heaven on earth. They now already have Christ, and that's all you need. Spiritual growth is superfluous! Why would you worry about it if you are already standing in heaven with one foot? Pride and bossing rules their lives, and humility was a scarce commodity!

What a contrast: this congregation versus Paul and the other apostles! Paul was in prison, and it was often the fate of several of the other apostles. Paul has seen himself ending up in the arena to be torn by wild animals or gladiators. If

you have seen the movie "Quo Vadis" then you would know what a spectacle was made of the believers. They were considered weak, foolish. They were jeered at by the bloodthirsty crowd who had hoped that these Christians would put up a good fight, but that didn't happen. Like sheep, they entered the lions' mouths, singing.

Paul writes to the Corinthians how he and his fellow apostles are constantly suffering, often even go hungry, and that there is no question of wealth. He doesn't even have a home, wandering around from town to town (if he's not in jail). And then he must stay alive by working, even though he preached the Word. Paul was, of course, a tent maker by profession, and he maintained himself by making or repairing tents, wherever he went to preach. Of course, for the inhabitants of Corinth it was a

shame to work with your hands. Only slaves did such dirty work! All kind of work they were interested in was head work. After all, it was noble and not in such a low class as manual work! As a result, men like Paul, who did the degrading work of tent-making, were regarded as the filth and foam of the earth. Certainly one of the reasons why Paul and his associates were often abused.

This problem was aggravated by the fact that they were dressed rather poorly and had little of earthly things. This is so contrary to the so-called "prosperity theology" which is so often proclaimed today. "Health, Wealth & Prosperity," it is often called, or "Name it, claim it!" It is a mistake to think that only because you are a believer, it must necessarily go well with you.

The believer, however, has a very

different kind of wealth: grace, love and inner peace that only God can give you. True happiness has absolutely nothing to do with material prosperity or wealth. Inner radiant joy can be yours even if everything in life goes wrong for you. We can learn about it from Habakkuk! These things are worth much more than all the wealth of the earth together. Make it your own and radiate the love of Jesus with kindness and caring. This is where true happiness lies.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the inner wealth you have given us. Help us radiate Your love through showing kindness to the world.

Home Alone

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

Children alone at home can often mean big trouble. The movie "Home Alone" is surely far-fetched and excessively exaggerated, but it makes you think that you do not leave a child alone at home. Usually, their imagination runs riot, and then they try all sorts of things they would never do if Dad or Mom were there. Or their sudden freedom leads them to all kinds of mischief.

Ballito sits with a huge problem - it hits us every year in November: Matrics! These young people now suddenly have freedom, away from the parents and authorities, and then they go totally bezerk. The abuse of drugs and alcohol is frightening, and with it often disgusting promiscuity and wild parties continue until dawn. Often they get so out of hand

that the neighbours just can't bear with them anymore. If it is just noise, you may still be able to live with it, but they say brandy does not have brakes, and then vandalism follows. Often, great damage is caused. And when you call the parents to tell them what their children are doing, the answer is usually: "Our children? Never! It can't be them! You are definitely making a mistake! Our little girl/boy is well-behaved!"

If it wasn't for an organization like Red Frogs, doing great work under this lot, things might have gone much worse!

Mom, Dad, do you know what your kids are up to this year while they are away on their Matric bash? I'm just asking!

Paul sat with a similar problem: the difference was that his "children" who had to stay alone at home were already grown-up. In a sense, the Corinthians

were his spiritual children. He led them to Jesus by his preaching. While working in Corinth, he gave the congregation a very good example to follow. However, after leaving, they began to do just as they pleased. "Dad" Paul's beautiful example, was soon forgotten, and followed their own minds.

What did Paul have to do to solve this unbearable situation? He threatened that he would soon come and visit them and settle with the trouble makers in the congregation himself (if the Lord wanted to). "What do you prefer? Do I have to come to you with a cane, or in love and in a spirit of kindness? "(1 Corinthians 4:21.) But Paul never got that chance to go back to Corinth. It was not in God's counsel!

However, Paul considered another plan: he would send Timothy to his "problem children". Dear old Timothy! He meant

so much to Paul. As a young man, Paul met him during his second missionary journey in the city of Lyra. Timothy was already a believer. Immediately Paul saw that this young man could mean a lot to the Gospel, and he took him on his travels. Later, he could rely heavily on Timothy, and he began sending him to congregations if he could not go personally. He had to visit the congregation in Thessalonica on behalf of Paul, and later was even permanently appointed as a preacher in Ephesus.

But now Paul had a very big job for Timothy: he had to go and see to the mess in Corinth. He had to take this letter to the congregation, and probably read it to them. What a huge task on the shoulders of a young man!

You and I should ask ourselves the question: "What do I do if I am home alone?" Maybe a strange question, but

what I mean by that is, when believers are busy with church matters, we usually act very piously, we make all the right sounds. If I go on holiday, then there is nobody who knows me (at least, so I think), and then I totally lose it. I do things that I would never dare do at home. Maybe I'm going to be on a booze spree because I'm on holiday! Church? Who then goes to church if you're on holiday? And if it's just us men, and the women aren't around, then everything is thrown overboard! Of course, I take a Bible with, just for in case. One might need it in an emergency!

When planning your December vacation this year, the Lord invites you and is constantly aware of His presence. Plan time for church visits during your holiday. I am excited to attend a church service in another place, and to worship with totally different believers, and to experience

how they do things. Even quiet time when on vacation can also be a fresh and exciting experience for you, especially if you can meet the Lord on the beach or in the silence of the bush or in the breathtaking beauty of the mountains.

Make your "home-alone-time" exciting with the Lord!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I can have You with me, even when I'm away on vacation. Please keep me aware of Your presence every moment.

Yeast

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

The marulas in the Lowveld were plentiful in that year, and upon my arrival in the Bush, the maroelas they lay abundantly on the ground under the trees, just right for eating. For the guys who don't know maroelas: you don't pick a marula from the tree. You wait for it to fall off the tree by itself, then it is ripe. We pick up buckets full of marulas, so as not to waste them. And then I decided, in my wisdom, that a little cold marula beer in the hot summer days would not be a bad idea.

I fill any hollow thing I can lay my hands on, full of sliced maroelas. A few cups of sugar are added, and just to play it safe, some yeast to help the process a little. It is brewed, and the result is several buckets of deliciously refreshing marula

beer!

However, I was a little mistaken about the quantity, and the beer eventually got the upper hand of me. A week or so later a vapour hung in the house and put you on a trip just as you entered the front door. The last bucket stood one side and fermented. Everyone was a bit weary of it. When I finally picked up the courage to lift the cloth, it was bubbling and boiling - a witch's brew, if there ever was one! One taste of that brew shook my foundations. Worse than mampoer! The yeast had done it's work!

Yeast can be dangerous if it is abused! Paul realized this very well. Just a few grains can affect everything around it in an instant. In the same way, wrong influence in a congregation can in a short time quickly spread it's poison and affect everyone.

Thus, the poison of the sin of one of Corinth's congregations was souring the entire congregation. The whole thing probably started out very innocently. The tradition was that when a man dies, the eldest son takes over the entire household. His mother and his father's other wives (yes, they were very brave in those years,) as well as the boys and unmarried girls are all put in his care. And so this fellow of whom Paul wrote, probably inherited a household. One of his father's wives (his stepmother), however, raised his hormones, and instead of moving into the spare room, stepmother moved to his bedroom. Even the heathens did not tolerate such disgusting behaviour!

If the congregation had done something about it, it wouldn't have been that bad, but they didn't do anything! And like yeast, this man's sinful life later began to

sour the whole congregation.

Paul's response is one of shock. "Do something!" He cries out, "Get rid of the poison!" Then Paul writes a terrible thing, which is often completely misunderstood: He says the man must be surrendered to the devil!

How can Paul say such a shocking thing? Let me explain: The church is regarded as the site of God's rule, while the world outside the church is seen as belonging to the devil. So to surrender someone to the devil would mean that he was being banned from the church. This does not necessarily mean that such a person is lost! He still has his faith in Jesus. This should also not be seen as a "punishment", but a love act to try to jolt that person to his senses so that he can realize how bad the sin is that he stubbornly clings to. Hopefully he will then repent and break with his sin.

The church will welcome him back with open arms.

Similarly vile sins often occur today in our modern congregations. However, we have become so immune to the tidal wave of sin around us, that we endure it and look the other way. The discipline, actually an action of love, is seldom still applied by the church. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we often sit with congregations, three-quarters of who are not active. And the bacteria that causes the decay spreads slowly but surely throughout the congregation. It's just the few "hardy" members who are immune. If we do not work with drastic measures to reverse the decay, our congregations will eventually be totally engulfed.

By the way, what does discipline mean? Is it "punishment"?

No, discipline means briefly that

someone who falls into sin is chided in love and that you try to persuade him to turn away from sin. If he refuses, then other believers are also involved. Everything is done to get him on the right track. Sometimes harsh action is needed!

Paul is talking harshly to our churches today. We really need to do something about the areas where there are major problems. We dare not ignore it, and hope it will come right by itself. We need to do something urgently before it may be too late.

Prayer:

Lord, please give us the courage and power and wisdom to address the problems in our congregation.

Court cases

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Sensational court cases are part of everyday life. And now I'm not talking about a court case like that of Oscar at that time. I'm talking about civil court cases where people attack each other over some dispute. Oh boy, then the dirty laundry will be washed for everybody to see! There have been several such cases over the past few years. And the tragedy is that none of the two parties are really the winner. Both usually suffer the same pain! The only people who laugh all the way to the bank are the advocates!

In fact, we're very fortunate in South Africa that the fashion of "court-hauling" in America hasn't really hit us. There you cannot even snore at the night, then your neighbour drags you to court for

pain, suffering and loss of income if he could not work properly. You are robbing him of his sleep! I think the only reason we don't have much of this kind of courtcase is that it can take many years before your case actually comes to court. It is simply not worth the effort and the astronomical cost.

In Paul's time there was a very complicated and effective judicial system in place, operated by the Romans. For believers, however, the major problem was that the system was run by heathens, unbelievers. Paul's argument is that unbelievers cannot yet judge between the affairs of believers? They simply don't have the same standards. The church or congregation would, however, be the designated person to resolve a dispute between believers. Paul is not trying to make intercession for ecclesiastical courts. The right thing

would actually be to discuss the dispute in love, and if there is no solution, leave it to God to act as Judge, and if necessary, then you will eat humble pie to preserve love and peace.

The big problem with disputes is that all the dirty laundry is usually flung out. Accusations are thrown back and forth, and all the scandal of many years ago are unearthed and displayed to the world. There is usually a slight twist to the story to give your case more depth, and then it's not just the two parties who are hurting each other, but often a whole lot of other people who are also involved.

Everything actually boils down to the absence of love. If we just want to listen to what the Lord says in the Word, then much pain, humiliation, and hurt can be spared. Jesus summarized the law of God by saying that you must love God

and your neighbour as yourself (Mat 22: 37-40). He went on with the shocking statement that you should even be willing to love your enemies (Matt 5: 43-44). There must be even greater love for your fellow believer. "As I love you, you must also love one another. If you love one another, everyone will know that you are disciples of Me." (John 13: 34-35).

Great words these, and words that we totally forget about when we are wronged by someone. Let us first forget about the first two, your enemy and your neighbour, who can also mean unbelievers. The third example of love mentioned here by Jesus is something very intimate between believers, blood family, brothers and sisters in Jesus. Of course, brothers and sisters can get angry with one another because none of us are angels. However, it depends on how we deal with this evil. Can we talk

about the things that bother us in love and forgive one another? That is what true brotherly love means. Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive every one that transgresseth against us” (Luke 11: 4). How can we pray this prayer if we don't mean what we say? How can we expect God to forgive our many sins if we are not even willing to forgive the little sins someone else is doing against us? Thank goodness that God is so much bigger than us, and His grace so great that He is even willing to forgive our unforgiveness!

The fact is, I have to be prepared to speak to my fellow believer. And if it so happened that he was stubborn and refused to listen to my side of the story, then the right thing to do was to forgive him. And if necessary, then I should even be prepared to suffer. The case is

much bigger than me, because it is God's Kingdom that is in jeopardy. The world is watching us with a falcon's eye. If believers come to court, it is front page news: "Look at what Christians are doing!" In honour of God's holy Name, we dare not become involved in such matters as it causes a stain on Jesus' spotless robe.

If there is no solution to a dispute between believers, then the designated solution is to take it to the church council so that the congregation leaders can decide, and so keep the matter between believers. In this way, God's name is at least protected.

Prayer:

Lord, teach me to truly love, and to forgive, no matter how great the injustice is against me.

Prostitution

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Prostitution is against the law in South Africa, but the law usually turns a blind eye to it. The majority of parliament even wanted to legalize prostitution. But there are many other institutions where the dividing line is so thin that it might as well be seen as prostitution, such as strip clubs and the like.

However, prostitution is not a modern thing! I remember many years ago how the prostitutes in Durban hung from their windows to advertise their "goods". But furthermore, is described as the oldest profession in the world. We read of it throughout the Bible.

In the port city of Corinth, prostitution in Paul's time was a very profitable industry. It was so bad that, there was even an image of Aphrodite, the sex

goddess on one of the coins, to serve as kind of advertisement for this extremely popular industry. Beautiful, young slave girls were in high demand. They were hired out by their owners as prostitutes. The men were expected to visit the women of the night. It was part of life!

Just as Paul did not speak out against slavery, he also did not speak out to prostitution. Why? Both were pagan industries that Paul could do absolutely nothing about. The people would just laugh at him if he'd say it had to end. However, Paul knew what the consequences would be if you took part in such things, and so he warned the believing men to stay away from it. It was probably a man-thing in those years. Today, women also visit brothels, so what Paul is saying to the men today is equally applicable to women.

The elders said, "Every unbeliever has

his mark". This means that you try to justify your actions from the Bible. Well, Paul saw this thing everywhere in Corinth. The men there also tried to justify their visits to the prostitutes through Scriptural pronouncements. "Everything is permissible to me," they said. Today we may even justify this from Galatians 5: 1, where it says that Christ has set us free. So we are no longer bound by the law, and to sin a little is also permitted. However, it is very dangerous to read things out of context. So Paul is quick to say that not everything is good. If you go around with such carelessness, then you must know that you are violating your body. We have already said that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Your body is there to glorify God, and by abusing it through immorality, is totally against its real purpose. Through immorality you

become one with the prostitute, Paul says. How can you still be one with Jesus in the same breath? She is part of the evil world, and so you associate yourself with the Evil One! Jesus cannot be associated or shared with the evil world!

But Paul also touches another point that such sexual debauchery becomes addictive. Once you get caught in this web of evil pleasure, you won't easily get rid of those sticky claws. We are not just talking about prostitution, but all the other things that go with it, such as strip clubs, lap dancers, pornography, etc. You just want to have more and more all the time, and these things cloud your mind to such an extent that you can no longer have a relationship with God.

Verse 13 is often misunderstood: "Food is for the stomach, and the stomach for food." This is actually a euphemism,

where food suggests sex and the stomach suggests the genitals. The Corinthians thought it was the spirit that was important, and that what you do with your body is perishable and therefore insignificant. Sex (food) is meant for the genitals (stomach), and it must be used, regardless of whether it is indecent or not.

If we think carefully about prostitution, then it's actually a messy story. The woman is usually exploited. She's there against her will. Even today she is often a slave! Prostitution is a breeding ground for dangerous diseases and, moreover, it is a winning recipe to end marriages. An even greater danger is that it can totally destroy your spiritual life, your relationship with God.

Paul concludes this chapter, saying, "You have received the Holy Spirit, who dwells in you, from God, and you do not

belong to yourselves: you were bought, and the price paid. So you must glorify God in your body.” No one could put it better! I was bought at a high cost - the money was the precious blood of Jesus. I belong to Him now, I am His property. Why then should I pollute my body with any form of immorality? It actually goes a lot further, because I dare not pollute my mind with it either, because not only my body, but also my spirit belongs to Him. Let us keep our whole life, body and spirit pure for Jesus!

Prayer:

Lord, I confess that I belong to You. Keep me from falling into any form of immorality.

The Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:1-40

Several people seem to have written letters to Paul about the problem of prostitution. He mentions that people have already written letters to him about this to get answers. Today, the questions become even more difficult so that even theologians are puzzled. And everywhere they try to put out fires!

Everything started with grandfather and grandmother Adam and Eve, and the desires they went through in those years. However, this is an age-old problem. Paul had clearly seen it there in Corinth. That is why he writes this chapter in great detail, and he does not hesitate to do it. But I have to confess that I have some questions for Paul when I see him one day, because I do not understand some of his reasoning.

Fortunately, I'm not the only one, even Peter wrote that he doesn't always understand Paul!

In Corinth there was a very strong expectation at the time. Believers believed that the second coming of Jesus could take place at any moment, and so Paul also believed. It is, of course, also true that we must live as if the Second Coming can happen today. The problem, however, is that you can become so caught up in your expectation of return, that you can lose a whole perspective on life. A good balance will be to expect Jesus back today, but to do your life planning as if He will only come in a thousand years.

In the light of this Second Coming expectation, the Corinthians wanted to know about everyday things and how to deal with them. There were two possibilities for sex: the first is to live

totally dissolutely (as is often the case today!) This would mean that the man could freely have intercourse with his slave-maids. After all, they were his property! Brothels were also freely available for every man's enjoyment, and that of course also leads to other relationships outside of marriage. Others again had the totally opposite view of total abstinence, which was actually a consequence of the ascetic movement. It meant having a total self-denial in different areas of life, and even withdrawing from the whole world. According to them, abstinence from sex was a condition for spiritual growth.

In history, both of these views had a great influence on humanity. For example, in the sixties we had the Hippie movement with "Make love, not war!" as their slogan, where free sex was the order of the day. In Victorian times, it

was exactly the opposite. Any sex, even within marriage, was seen as sin.

Paul clearly states that only the third option is justifiable. This means that sex can only be practiced between a man and a woman in a normal monogamous marriage with a lifelong commitment. A newspaper editor once said that a newspaper is like a good woman: every man should have his own, and he shouldn't read his neighbour's newspaper.

From what Paul says, there are some things that we cannot ignore:

A marriage is eternal, and may not be broken by divorce, except in very special cases. The current trend of "series monogamy", where people continue to marry and divorce, is unacceptable according to Biblical standards. I read once in a newspaper of a man who was

married and divorced eleven times! How many times was Liz Taylor married and divorced?

Polygamy, where a man may have more than one wife, was common in the Old Testament times, but nowhere in the New Testament is it justified. The marriages of our former state president is certainly not based on Christian principles, nor is the polygamous marriage of the Mormons!

The whole debate on living together is answered very straightforward in this chapter: there is absolutely no reason to justify it, and it is therefore a sinful relationship. During a Daniel conference held in our congregation a few years ago, one of the young men came to the realization that his living-together relationship was not according to God's will, and only then did he make the decision and ask the pastor to marry him

and his girlfriend. Are you in such a relationship? It's not too late to make amends. Do the right thing!

Out of wedlock relationships, of whatever nature, are wrong. End it!

Paul concludes with his own opinion, that it is better not to marry, because then you can devote yourself fully to Jesus. However, this is only his opinion! My own opinion is that marriage complements your relationship with Jesus. In our marriage it works! By this I would like to say thank you to my own darling wife for being my spouse for 45 years, and that she complements me so wonderfully.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for my spouse. Please keep me faithful to her forever.

Offerings to Idols

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

How much freedom do I have as a Christian? This is a question each of us has already asked. For example, may I eat pork? This is clearly forbidden in the Old Testament! Then there are believers who are very worried about the food bearing the "Halaal" stamp of the Muslims, because this food is dedicated and blessed by a priest. Isn't this perhaps offerings to idols? However, this stamp also has other implications, I do not want to discuss today.

Someone sent me a video on the "praying hand" figurines that are so popular, especially among older believers. His claim is that it can bring disaster, and especially poverty into your home, but that your poverty can disappear if you get rid of the figurine.

The statue was originally, according to an old legend, the "symbol of poverty."

The congregation in Corinth's problem was much bigger, and they wanted to know from Paul what to do. Of course, idolatry was very active in Corinth, and the believers were only a small minority. When an animal was sacrificed, the meat was divided into three. The skin and legs are sacrificed. The priest got some of the meat, which he usually sold on the market. The third part went to the person who brought the sacrifice, and he usually invited his friends for a banquet where this meat was served. Of course, for the believers, this was a very big problem, because they didn't know if the meat they were buying on the market might be offerings to idols. And to make matters worse, they did not know if they could eat with unbelieving friends, for it might have been sacrificed to idols.

Paul had to deal with this matter very diplomatically because he wanted to prevent any believer from getting hurt in his faith. Therefore, he began with a description of who or what these so-called idols actually were. Were they really the mighty gods that their worshippers pretended them to be? Today, the Hindus have the "mighty" gods Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, plus many others. Paul clearly states that there is only one true God. Of course, this does not mean that there are no other supernatural beings. The devil has a very big hold on the unbelievers, and his demons appear as "gods" so that the devil can rule over the unbelievers.

Paul's argument is: if then there are no other gods, then a believer can boldly eat any sacrifice of idols. Everything has been created by God, anyway so we cannot pronounce what He has created,

unpure. There is, however, a very great condition attached to it: when you eat something you know was an idol sacrifice, then you must keep this in mind. If you take into account the idol at all, then you no longer give glory to God, but to the devil, and then it is sin.

This brings us back to the praying hands figurine. If you regard it as something that can give you poverty, then it is actually sin! It's superstition that can harm your faith!

On the sacrifice of idols: all believers are not as strong in their faith. For most of us, this matter is not a problem at all, but someone who is weak in his faith can easily stumble when such a thing crosses his path. So if he sees me eating idol offerings, then he may think it is right to honour the idol. So for his sake I would rather refrain from doing so.

What are the practical implications for us today? Most of us never get to do with idol sacrifices? For example, we can apply it to many of our church traditions. To mention an example: in the Dutch Reformed Church the worship services have been "quiet and subdued" for many years. There was never hand raising or hand clapping or similar "disturbances" because it was "sectarian". However, it is now increasingly happening that members use their Christian freedom to break away from these traditions. For some members, however, this is a big problem, and for the sake of them we have to be careful not to change everything at random. Unfortunately, the term "weak brother" is often completely abused, and people hide behind it to get their own way.

On another level, however, there are issues such as the use of liquor. For

some believers, any use of alcoholic beverages, even wine, is a very big problem. For others again it is not a problem, as long as it is not abused. For the sake of the person having a problem, it is better if you do not drink with him at all. Similarly, it would grieve a Jewish believer if I was eating with him and serving pork, as they usually still practise the old Jewish traditions.

The big secret is love: if we go around with our fellow believers in love, these things will not be a problem to anyone.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the wonderful freedom you gave me as a believer. Please help me not to misuse it.

Interview with Paul

1 Corinthians 9:1-18

Some time ago, I heard somebody going on about a certain preacher's remuneration. It would be a shame that the congregation should pay him so much!

Many people still argue that a congregation's pastor must get a starvation wage, because he does the work anyway out of love for the cause. And besides, he only works one day a week! Some even reckon that he should serve the congregation without compensation, and must take care of himself, as Paul did!

I had the wonderful privilege of conducting an exclusive interview with Paul while in house arrest in Rome. It went like this:

“Uncle Paul, there are conflicting reports

about your apostleship. Tell us whether you are one or not."

"Am I not an apostle? Didn't I see Jesus our Lord? Look, old boy, there on the Damascus road where I met Him, He sent me personally! So I am by full law an apostle, one who is sent forth! And the fruit of my labour shows it."

"Uncle Paul, the trick question we really want to ask is whether a preacher is entitled to compensation?"

"Look, that is a very sensitive question. Sometimes I feel a little hurt about people who want to condemn me so much when something comes to me. But look at Peter and the other apostles, and even our Lord Jesus' own brother, James. They do not need to suffer hunger, and in addition, their wives are still being taken care of! When they travel, the women go with and the

congregation pays for it. It's just me and poor Barnabas who have to slave away with the tent making to stay alive."

Paul pointed with a crooked finger at one of the soldiers who was standing nearby: "That soldier - do you think he works for nothing? Do you think he serves his country and the emperor for free? Of course not! He gets paid for what he does!"

"Yeah well Uncle Paul, but it's a little different ..."

"Well then, what about a farmer? Do you think a grape farmer will not eat his own grapes? Or do the farmhands that tend the cattle - perhaps you don't think they'll drink some of the cow's milk? That's their right! Likewise, a congregation must also be prepared to give up something to keep it's preacher alive."

Paul gets a smile on his face: "Have you

ever stood and watched where a farmer is threshing the grain? Why do you think the farmer never keeps the cow's mouth shut so that he doesn't eat a part of his profit? That's because Moses' law says he can't do it! Now why would Moses make such a silly law? Did he love cattle? No, let me explain to you: it was God's command to Moses! Not because God was concerned about cattle, but He wanted to say something much deeper with it. He wanted, among other things, to say that gospel servants like me and Barnabas, just like those cattle, should not be prevented from also getting part of the congregation's proceeds. Just as you can't keep that cattle's mouth shut, so you must not bind my mouth (spiritually). Do you understand?"

"Yes, Uncle Paul, but now there is another thing that makes less sense to me. Why didn't you ever ask for money

from the congregations?"

"For the simple reason, that the Gospel is so important to me, that I would rather support myself by making tents than lose one single soul because people think they have to pay me to preach. It was my personal choice! Anyway, I get so much pleasure from the preaching that I don't want money as well!"

"Uncle Paul, what would your message be about this to the people of the year 2019?"

"I would say, take good care of your preachers! After all, they are precious to the Kingdom. Don't let them use their precious time to scramble for supplements to stay alive. Put your hand deep in your pocket so that there is enough in the congregation's treasury to properly care for your preacher, and that there is plenty left for the work of the

Lord. Think of the missionaries like me and Barnabas, and give generously to them as well, because they often work for a starvation wage."

The question that Paul may ask you and me this morning is not just whether we care properly for our preacher. It goes a lot further: do I have an open hand and purse for the work of the Lord? It is not about me having to give, but I want to give thanks for what the Lord has done for me. This is one way to live out your gratitude.

Prayer:

Lord, I confess this morning that I do not give you enough for Your work. Forgive me and help me to open my hand.

Responsible Freedom

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Oh, the wonder of true freedom! A little bird flew into my kitchen one day. When I heard his distress call, I immediately went to see what was wrong. And there, the bewildered and confused little thing sat against the window. He struggled to get through the glass, because on the other side he saw the wide open world and the garden. But here he was trapped amongst many things that wanted to control his life and smother him. Carefully I tried to catch him, but it just made him even more bewildered, and the poor guy helplessly fluttered as he flew back and forth across the kitchen.

Finally, with great difficulty I caught him, and I felt the warm, fragile little body in my hands. I took him outside and slowly

opened my hands. Suddenly he saw freedom. Like a lightning bolt, he shot out of my hands and seized his freedom with both wings.

As a young man, Paul was in a prison. Now, not one with walls and physical chains, but one with rules and regulations, rigid do's and don'ts. He never tried to escape from this prison, but actually dug himself deeper and deeper into it. He learned scrolls of law out of his head, and every one of them he fulfilled in faithfully, to the finest detail. Before that day when Jesus confronted him near Damascus, Paul was a Pharisee. Actually, the Pharisees were not bad people at all, but very good people, who tried to live by God's law. In their efforts, however, they became so entangled in traditions and man-made laws that they completely overlooked the meaning of everything – LOVE.

Then Jesus came and delivered Paul to Damascus. This release process did not go without its pain and trauma. It took Paul several years to be accepted and to process the true extent of his new freedom.

However, freedom brings responsibility. When I released that little bird, his first priority was to get away from danger, and especially to avoid the cat. For Paul, his freedom entailed a different kind of responsibility. His great passion in life was to give other people that freedom he had. In this task he put all his energy. Sometimes it even meant that he had to give up his own freedom just to give it to others.

Yes, Paul had set himself free from the old binding Pharisee practices, for he had all too clearly realized that it was not laws that save but Jesus alone. However, sometimes it was necessary

for him to practice these practices again for the sake of peace. So he had to circumcise Timothy so that he could gain access to Jewish synagogues, even if he did not agree. "To the Jews, I became like a Jew to win Jews," Paul sighs in 1 Cor. 9:20. It could not have been easy for him to have to take up the old yoke again, while he was previously trumpeting that it was not necessary to go under that yoke.

Today, many missionaries are in the mission field with the exact same dilemma. Although they preach that Jesus sets free, they themselves must often be bound by a certain form of dress and ritual, so as not to offend. By being voluntarily bound, they thus win the respect and trust of the local people, and it opened doors to preach the Gospel. For example, one day I was talking to a sparkling young girl in the

mission field at Bambizana. Instead of wearing the comfortable clothes that suits a young girl, she came running through the veldt, dressed in a long dress reaching to her feet, and buttoned up to her chin. "If I don't dress like that," she says, "the women will reject me, because I must be dressed like a decent woman to win their respect. This is how all the respected women in the area dress."

I don't think it was easy for Paul when he had to eat pork with the pagans for the first time. After all, it was imprinted in him from a young age that you should not eat anything "unclean". But he had to give up all his whims and fancies for the sake of the Gospel. And when something was a problem for someone, Paul adjusted to it, just to win souls for Jesus.

As believers, you and I have been given

that wonderful freedom that Paul speaks of. But along with freedom comes a certain responsibility. The Lord wants us to enjoy that freedom, nor does he ask us to suffer under the yoke of the law again. But we must sometimes be willing to give up our freedom voluntarily for the sake of other people. For example, I love my red wine, especially relaxing next to a fire in the bush. But if it's a problem for someone, I'd rather stay without it. And I would even eat something that I totally dislike if it meant not hurting someone. Jesus is more important than my preferences!

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to use my wonderful freedom with responsibility.

Life's Race

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Great sporting events are something the Greeks were well used to. The first Olympics took place already in 775 BC, so it was already a very old institution in Paul's time. But it wasn't the only one of its kind. In Corinth, Isthmian games were a huge sporting event. Paul had on many occasions probably sat on the stadium himself watching the athletes, because he often used athletics as an example to bring home some truths. He once again used images from the world of sports, in his letters to the Corinthians. After all, he knew that these people would understand it very well. The Isthmian Games were very high on the calendar.

Paul followed Jesus' example, often using images that his readers knew very

well, to bring truths to them. It worked, because once you had a picture in your head that you could associate with a certain truth, then you simply didn't forget the truth. I'm barely out of church on a Sunday, and I already forget the pastor's sermon. However, if he told a poignant story to bring his message home, then I often remembered it for many years. I can still remember a sermon in reasonable detail about Rev. Dana Minnaar from forty years ago, just because he used such a striking image to illustrate his message. Some parts of that sermon I can even remember word for word.

However, it is interesting to know that Paul's examples differed from those of Jesus. Jesus' entire ministry took place in the countryside, with the exception of a few times when He was in Jerusalem. So the images Jesus used have almost

everything to do with rural things, parables of farmers, seedlings and vineyards.

In contrast, Paul's total ministry again is in cities. His images always had something to do with city life and things happening in the city. Things that people were familiar with and that immediately caught their attention.

When Paul then wanted to convey this very important truth to the Corinthians, he used a very familiar image to them - athletes at the Isthmian Games. In their minds they could see the well-built men standing there on the track, muscles rippling in anticipation of the starter. Then the flag drops, and the athletes were gone. Each ounce of strength was used as they continued. The crowd became hysterical as each one encouraged his or her own hero. When the athletes got near the finishing line, it

sounds as if the stadium was going to explode. Driven by adrenaline and the encouragement of the crowd, every athlete gave absolutely everything he had to be able to wear that laurel crown.

In the end, only a single ecstatic athlete reached the finish line first and then threw his hands in the air with excitement as he won. The others did finish the race, but for all of them it was a disappointment, as there was only one single crown. Why didn't they win? Did they not practice enough? Wasn't their preparation good enough? Didn't they put enough energy into the race? There could only be one winner!

When you run a race, you must realize that you are not necessarily going to win a prize. If you're running half-heartedly, you're definitely not going to make it. In addition, a lot of self-discipline is needed to truly reach the top. For example, a top

athlete knows he has to give up a lot of things if he wants to win. Delicious food is definitely not on his menu. He must eat what gives him the necessary strength, and often it is boring food. He needs to practice and practice, and put a lot of time into his preparation, time he could have used wonderfully for relaxation!

As a believer, I have to make a decision: Am I just going to be content to jog, or am I going full on this life race? If I start running later, I can finally reach the finish line, but it will be watered down. Only those who venture into full battle will receive the crown of victory! Just like in sports, preparation is extremely important. I have to be willing to give up some things. Sin is one of them!

My Guide is the Bible, and I must make sure I understand and know it thoroughly. It's no good just reading a

verse or two to soothe my conscience. I must understand what I am reading, and I must understand the background to which a Bible passage is written in order to understand what the true intent is.

Prayer is my spiritual breathing. Without it I can forget the race! My power and equipment come from the Holy Spirit, and I must allow Him to guide my life. But then of course I must also have the will to win the race! Without it I give up halfway already!

Turn your eyes to the finish line today, and make every effort to run that most important of all races!

Prayer:

Lord, I want to win this race! Please be my Coach!

Are Sacraments Enough?

1 Corinthians 10:1-10

Some of the Corinthians were under the impression that certain symbolic acts would save them. Today, there are still people who believe this to be the case. For example, they believed that if you were baptized and used communion, then everything was fine. Paul had a great surprise for them: Indeed these are very important symbols or sacraments that we never dare ignore, but they cannot bring you salvation! Paul clearly wants to impress this idea in their minds, so he uses an example from the Old Testament that everyone knows very well: the Israelites' departure from Egypt.

After the Lord struck Pharaoh where he was most vulnerable, he commanded Israel to leave. To him they meant only trouble, and if he could get rid of them,

he might be a happier man. Moses did not hesitate, and within a record time more than three million people had started the exodus (not everyone agrees with the number of people). It must have had a logistical scope that would cause any general nightmares. But when Pharaoh looked at the great cloud of dust disappearing like this, he began to think again, and he realized that he had been cheated. He was furious, and pursued the Israelites in the chariots of his formidable army.

For this fragile nation which was only a few days old, that was very bad news! They were in no way capable of defending themselves against any enemy. They certainly had no weapons. They were truly a soft target!

But the Lord had other plans. He showed the people the direction they had to go by following a massive cloud

by day. And at night there was a big fireball in the air in front of them. I can imagine what it must have looked like - a breathtaking sight! What's more: God was personally present in this cloud column and fireball. Exodus 14:19, as well as several other passages, speak of the Angel of God who was in the cloud and fireball. The Angel refers to the second Person of the Divine Trinity, the Son, Jesus.

When Pharaoh's forces suddenly came up behind the people, they groaned in anguish. Then came the Lord's next great miracle: He moved the cloud mass between the Israelites (who were at this stage like rats against the Reed Sea) and the Egyptians. All Pharaoh's soldiers could see was the impenetrable, pitch-black cloud curtain in front of them. On the Israeli side, however, the cloud was brightly lit, setting the stage for yet

another breathtaking miracle. Moses calmed the hysterical people, and then he stretched out his hand over the sea at the Lord's command. Suddenly, an easterly wind blew up, making the infamous Cape Sout Easter look like a dump. In front of the astonished Israelites' unbelieving eyes, a wide path opened up through the sea, allowing them to walk on dry ground. The rest - of how the Lord confused the Egyptians, and how the whole lot drowned when they sought to pursue the Israelites through the sea, is history.

For the Israelites, this was an incredible experience. They began to realize that the Lord is truly God. But history has also shown us how soon they would forget all these things, as well as the many other miracles afterwards, and reject the Lord. We also know that very few of these people ever saw the

Promised Land, precisely because of their unbelief.

Paul now explains to the Corinthians that the Israelites had absolutely everything to remind them of God, but that they lacked one thing: faith! They defied God with their idolatry. The first incident happened already, just weeks after the exodus, while the Lord was giving Moses the law on Mount Sinai. The people danced around a golden calf at the foot of the mountain!

Paul explains that even our most beautiful ritual acts and sacraments can never get us to heaven. Only faith in Jesus Christ can do this for us.

He further warns that a believer cannot live as he pleases. Many of the Israelites believed after seeing the miracles, but later they defied God with idolatry, immorality, continually complaining and

many other things.

The question is: how should I live my faith? Is there perhaps a constant unhappiness about how God handles my affairs? Is there possibly an idol in my life, something that is more important to me than God? Maybe sports, gambling, drinks or friends? Or is there perhaps an immorality that drives me away from Him? Be careful not to lose your “ticket” to heaven!

Turn back to God! Before it might be too late as for the Israelites of old!

Prayer:

Lord, I want to lay my sins before Your feet this morning. Forgive me, and help me to worship You fully.

Another Great One Falls!

1 Corinthians 10:11-14

Yesterday we read about Moses and the Israelites, and the miracles they experienced. Paul says that these stories serve as an example to the Corinthian congregation. Indeed, it is just as an example for us today.

We tend to ignore the Old Testament. We might read the Psalms and Proverbs and Song of Solomon, but the rest we avoid, because it is full of violence and all kinds of old, meaningless laws. For example, if we read Exodus, we see two things: on the one hand, the Israelites' murmuring, rebellion, debauchery, apostasy and disbelief. On the other hand again, we see God's repeated miracles, acts of love, mercy, and forgiveness despite Israel's poor behaviour. But we also see God's wrath

when things get completely out of hand and the Israelites provoke Him.

This is why Paul says, "Those who think they are standing firm had better be careful that they do not fall." (1 Cor 10:12). Yes, the Bible and especially the Old Testament are full of examples of such people. The biggest (literally) of these was probably the giant Goliath. If there was ever an impressive man, it was Goliath. A full three meters tall in his leather sandals! And his armour was equally impressive. Anyone who would dare get his way would be a mincemeat within minutes. But he made the mistake by insulting the people of God, thus provoking the Lord with his arrogance. We all know the story of the young red-faced shepherd that made Goliath bite the dust with a single pebble from his sling.

Goliath is not the only great hero to have

fallen. Indeed his fall makes us rejoice, for he was Godless. But then we read about the beloved David's fall later. The same David who killed Goliath was later that wonderful king whose songs we still sing in church today, and whose poems we love to read. David rose up to be a giant in the faith, truly someone who loved God. But then we see him stumble and fall very hard, when he sees a beautiful woman bathing from his balcony. David had only one thing on his brain, and in the end it led to a cowardly murder. David thought he was standing, but he fell - very hard! His son, Solomon, suffered the same fate. He was a true man after God's heart, and he wrote the delightful love book, Song of Solomon in the Bible. Once again it was his great love for women that caused his downfall. Solomon's thousand women eventually led to idolatry. And he fell hard!

Some years before these events it was again the great powerful Samson. He dedicated his life to God, but when he became involved with a pagan woman, he once again fell very hard. His eyes were brutally probed out, and for the rest of his days he had to do the work of a donkey in a dungeon. However, his day came after his remorse, and with his immense power he caused the Temple of Dagon to collapse on a horde of people who were belittling God.

There are still many such examples of great pillars who thought they were standing, and then they actually fell. The interesting thing is that their fall was usually used to simple temptations of life. None of these heroes had been tested beyond their means. They were all driven by some sinful desire. In the musical "My Fair Lady" the one character sings: "The Lord above gave

liquor for temptation, to see if man can stay away from sin. This is exactly how many people see the temptations of life - they actually go to looking for them! "God will not allow you to be tested above what you are capable of," Paul says in 1 Cor 10:13. He goes on to say that even if such things cross your path, God will even also give the outcome.

As a believer, you and I often become too comfortable. We begin to forget our total dependence on God, especially when things start going well. You start forgetting to be in constant conversation with Him, and then you start to trust in your own power - after all, you have a lot of it! And this is where the trouble begins, because you think that you can easily solve this little temptations that comes your way. "With a little bit of luck - when temptation comes, you'll step right in!" Over the past few years, we have

seen time and time again how great pillars, the role models of society, even ministers came to a great fall when they forgot about God, and enjoyed the temptations.

Paul warns the Corinthians to stay away from idolatry. At that time it was the greatest temptation. Today's "idolatry" is much more subtle. Sex, drink, gambling, sports, yes even our beloved game, rugby can become an idol! Live close to God, in full dependence on Him, and you will be safe even when temptations come your way.

Prayer:

Lord, I am so easily tempted. Please hold my hand tight and guide me through it.

Relationship Meal

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

When asked about how far our Christian freedom goes, we told each other that God created everything sacred, and that for religious reasons we should not avoid certain kinds of food, even if it was originally intended as offerings to idols. But what about idolatry? How should I view it? In Paul's time, idolatry was a common practice for the people of Corinth, and Christians were a very small minority. Paul's very clear warning to the congregation is that they should have nothing to do with any form of idolatry.

It sounds obvious, but it wasn't quite that simple. Great pagan festivals that the whole city took part in were everyday occurrences. For example, as we would celebrate Christmas, so they would celebrate a pagan feast in honour of

some idol. Then there were also all the regular cult meals where new friendships were forged and business contacts exchanged, all in honor of the idol, while everyone celebrated.

The Christians in Corinth were used to these things. After all, it was all part of their lives before they became believers. What would be wrong with that? What's wrong with having a nice meal and a bit of fun? The problem is that it creates a triangular community, where the believers, the unbelievers and the evil spirits or idols form the three elements. No believer can remain standing if they are part of such a community.

Paul now compares himself to the Lord's Supper, where there is also a triangular community. Here, however, I, as a believer, am the first element. With me, there are the other believers and of course Jesus Christ, who formed the

third element.

The question is: What actually happens when we use communion? When I drink from the cup, the things that happened to Jesus during His crucifixion, the reconciliation with God, and the remission of sin, are not transferred to me. Thus, a fellowship with the blood of Christ is established.

The bread also has a further symbolic meaning. When bread was broken in Paul's time, it was usually shared with someone else. For example, Jesus broke the bread, and it was distributed to the large crowd of people sitting around Him. Eating together like this will bind people to a unity. In communion it works the same way: we share the bread with one another, and then a mutual communion is established. So we are connected in an intimate relationship. But it goes further, for at the same time a

communion with the body of Christ is also established. As we mentioned earlier, a triangular relationship is formed here, because not only is my fellowship with Christ involved, but it is I, Jesus and my fellow believers who are all in a close relationship to a unity of love.

Another example Paul uses to explain this unity is the sacrifices the Jewish people have brought. When someone offered a sacrifice to the temple, the priest received it. Part of the animal was sacrificed to God. A second part went to the priest, and the rest went to the person offering the sacrifice. It is then usually cooked at a festive occasion and eaten with family. So there was a triangular participation: God, the priest and I. Likewise, communion is never only between me and God, but always includes fellow believers. I cannot celebrate communion on my own!

However, there are certain consequences to this relationship. We all realize that Christ is sinless, holy and without any stain. Therefore, because communion ties us with Him in a relationship, it also presupposes that we, as believers, will pursue a sinless and holy life. After all, we are fragments of one bread, the body of Christ!

Paul concludes with a question: "Does an idol ever have any meaning?" Of course not! They are inventions of the devil. Colluding with the enemy, however, means getting involved with the dark things of the devil. We know, of course, that the devil is the enemy of God. So to participate in any godless things the world is doing, and to party and celebrate with the godless, is to give praise to the enemy of God, the devil. Therefore, if you are part of this, you dare not partake of the communion,

because then you are polluting the sacred community between believers and Jesus. You are breaking the communion triangle!

Let us keep this relationship pure and holy, as Jesus planned it.

Prayer:

Lord, please help me stay away from godless practices and relationships.

Abused Freedom

1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

I once attended a Synod meeting in Pietermaritzburg. During a break between discussions, I stepped out onto the porch to get some fresh air. A prominent pastor stood next to me, dug out his packet of cigarettes, and soon the blue smoke fumes filled the air. I felt the tightness around my chest gripping me. Within seconds, my nose was blocked, and I sat with a throbbing headache. "Why did the man have to come and smoke here in public? Doesn't he take other people into consideration?" I wondered as I tried to escape the choking smoke. "We are allowed to do anything," the people of Corinth told Paul. This was a typical Corinthian saying, applicable especially to the believers, because they were liberated! Not so?

"Yes," Paul sighed, "that is true, but not everything is good!"

Is it a sin to smoke? And what about alcohol? Is it a sin to occasionally drink a glass of wine?

I myself did smoke many years ago, and I know what it does to your health. When it started to affect my health, I stopped. Is it sin then? Anything that harms your body, the temple of God, is sin. Similarly, it is a sin to eat unhealthy or to be gluttonous. Drinking too much wine is a sin for the same reason. The fact is that we cannot single out a single act and say, "Now this is sin!"

However, if we harm someone else through our deeds, then the red lights start to blink dangerously. Unfortunately, smoking is one of those things that can harm other people's lives. This is especially so when you smoke in the company of children, where you can

cause great harm. "But I don't smoke near other people," you might say. Very thoughtful of you, but do you realize how you smell after a smoking session? I often recoil when I come near a smoker.

No, I do not want to exclude the smoking habit, but I simply use it as an example. There are many other similar things that can harm your fellow-man, and which you should preferably stay away from, even if you do not see it as sin.

Paul again mentions the example of the eating of sacrifice. "Eat everything that is sold in the butchery," says Paul. By that he means that the portion of meat that priests get after an idol sacrifice is often sold in the butchery. So you are never sure what you are buying, and you can also buy a delicious steak that was actually part of an idol offering. Paul explains that it does not matter, because everything belongs to the Lord.

However, if you were to eat with friends, and they explained to you that this food was actually part of an idol offering, then it is better to say, "No thanks!"

Why? Will the meat have a bad effect on you then? No, that's not what it's all about. By such an act you simply want to say to the people, "I worship God alone, and I want nothing to do with idols." If the other person is a believer who may not be so strong in his faith, in this way you strengthen his faith.

As a believer, I have a wonderful new freedom. I am no longer restricted by all kinds of laws that must be fulfilled so that I can obtain salvation. Jesus has already paid for everything, and I can enjoy the freedom. But sometimes it is expected of me as a believer to voluntarily limit that freedom for the sake of other people.

"Why?" The Corinthians asked Paul.

"Why should I now give up my freedom because of someone else's conscience?"

Let me give an example: A mom walks through a park with her toddler. The little guy is exuberant, and he runs around wildly, screaming and singing voiserously. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. If the same mom takes her toddler through a hospital's foyer, it's a whole different situation. He is being restrained, and he is not allowed to utter a sound. Why? In the foyer, an old aunt sits on crutches, someone who is writhing with pain, someone who is seriously ill and someone who has just heard his loved one has died. If the toddler were given freedom to go out there, it would torment some people a lot, and these "weak" people would suffer even more.

So everything just comes down to love

again. Love your neighbour just as much as yourself. So if you smoke, it is a matter between you and God. Most importantly, however, you will take into consideration our poor guys who struggle with sinus and asthma, and especially the children, and would rather give up your freedom and go and smoke where you are not bothering anyone. And when someone with an alcohol problem comes to eat with you, you'd rather keep the bottle of delicious red wine hidden away!

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the wisdom to know when I might harm someone else, and the ability to always put the interests of others first.

The Hat, Oh the Hat!

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

I take a stand at the back of the church so I can see the fashion parade nicely. There is a deathly silence, and all you hear is someone with a troublesome cough and a church bench creaking with a deafening sound as hefty old Aunt Suzy takes her seat. She is wearing a pink hat today, as she has been wearing for the past twenty years. It's just that the brim of the hat seems to get wider every year as she gets broader, maybe for balance. One by one, the creations are drifting down the middle aisle. There are antiques with plastic flower arrangements, and plastic fruit arrangements, and everything is ingeniously balanced on the head. How many hairpins are needed to hold some of these giant arrangements in place? Can be dangerous! Then of course there

are still the wagon wheels (woe betide you if you end up behind her!) The artworks, the cobwebs and the fishing nets. One old lady is wearing a pillbox dating back to the first world war. The moths already had a few bites out of it, but that doesn't bother her, as long as she is wearing a hat!

Aunt Ann was wearing a long black dress, buttoned up to her chin, with a sombre black shawl, a black hat on her head and a black veil covering her face. And then she rounds it all off with a pair of black gloves. I am so sorry for her, she is mourning terribly!

Of course, the men all wear hats, too, because it's fashionable. But before they enter the church's doors, the hat is respectfully removed, as befits a man. And then, as they pass by the stained-glass window, the sun shines brightly on their bald heads. No man, not even the

young rebels, dared to wear long hair because it was un-Biblical. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Elvis was so strongly condemned in church circles!

I started giggling as Aunt Mabel and Uncle Able walked into the church. She is huge and her muscular arms will easily earn the envy of a rugby forward. She lets him go in search of the right pew, but when the poor man accidentally walks past it, he automatically ducks because he knows what's coming. Yes, everyone knows who is the boss in that house! Poor Uncle Able, what a life!

Do you still remember? Pity, the younger people missed so much in life!

Paul probably never realized what he did to humanity when he wrote 1 Corinthians 11. This section was taken up literally to be applied today.

The fact is, however, that if Paul were to

go a little further, and describe what clothes are appropriate for a man to wear, then we men would all have to wear dresses today! And if we were to participate in sports we would have to do it naked. Thank goodness, we didn't go further than the hat!

I think everyone has already realized that we should not take Paul's precepts up literally for our lives today. But why is this passage still recorded for us today? Can we ever attach any value to it?

The background of all this is that all decent women wore headgear at that time, and a respectable woman's hair was always long as a symbol of her femininity. If a woman were to get involved in an extramarital affair, her hair was shaved to show she was ashamed. Paul wants to say in this passage that Christians should not try to overthrow the entire social order, even if they have

Christian freedom. Continue living as society feels proper. In this way you get the respect of non-Christians. In today's terms, for example, we would say that it is normal to lie on the beach in swimwear. However, if you show up in your workplace in a bikini or speedo, it's improper!

Another example would be if you started working for a large company and things didn't look very kosher to you. It would be extremely foolish to try to change things on the first day already. You won't get anywhere, and may even lose your job and your chance to fix things! First, win everyone's trust by being a great asset to the company, and then start talking gradually with the bosses about malpractice.

What then, of the man's "authority" over the woman? No, Paul says nowhere that he needs to be the "boss"! He is the

head. The man is programmed to be the head, but that doesn't mean the woman should be subordinate to him. After all, in Galatians 3:28, Paul himself says that everyone, both men and women, is one in Christ. Men and women are different from each other, and each has its own niche. However, the man is the one who is usually the leader in marriage. But then a leader as Christ was, a serving leader, who leads with great love and without dominating.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to live in such a way that I never offend anyone else.

How do we celebrate Holy Communion?

1 Corinthians 11:17-26

This morning is a very simple topic - at least on the face of it. We all know the customs of communion, and it's meaning. Well, that's what we think, but it's not as simple as it seems. Why do we celebrate communion as we do today, and where do the customs come from?

There is the little girl's famous story, who was watching her mother cook a chicken. "Mom, why do you break the wings?" She wanted to know. "Because my mom taught me that way," replies the mother. Shortly thereafter, the little girl asks Grandma why you should break the chicken's wings when you cook it, and again comes the answer that she learned it from her mother. When the little girl finally had the opportunity to talk

to Great Grandma, she was very curious about why Great Grandma had taught Grandma and Mum to do that. "No, my child," comes the shaky old voice, "In those years my saucepan was too small, and I had to break off the wings first to fit the chicken in!"

I have always assumed that communion is celebrated this way today because the earliest church did so. I was wrong!

Of course, we know that communion has its origin on the night before Jesus' crucifixion, when He and His twelve disciples ate the Passover together. Several years later, we deduce from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that the faithful regularly held a communal meal, where the congregation brought their food and wine to worship and to enjoy it together, and so celebrate the communion. It was not just a symbolic meal with a piece of bread and a few

drops of wine, but a proper meal.

More than a thousand years elapsed before proper re-evaluation of the Lord's Supper. Meanwhile, the Roman church had the mass involved in some form of daily communion celebrations. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 statements of reform against the church door in Wittenberg in 1517, things began to change, but communion remained much the same. Zwingly (another great Reformer) suggested a few years later that things should change. In the end, it was Calvin who set out a proper explanation of communion. According to him, it had to be celebrated every week, because the preaching of the Word must be accompanied by Communion. For practical reasons, the weekly celebration became monthly and later quarterly. Furthermore, the whole character of Communion celebrations has also

changed over the years. What was originally a joyous meal has gradually turned into one of mourning and sorrow.

Even in our own South African history, the customs of communion have changed drastically over the past 100 years. At that time, communion easily lasted two weeks. Farmers came from far and wide and camped out in the village square. Catechism, faithfulness, church service and communion were celebrated. Even when I was still a child, Communion was still a very big event, lasting a whole weekend. Friday night was the preparation service. Sunday Communion, the afternoon reflection and Sunday evening Thanksgiving. Today it has completely watered down, and I think we make too little of it! The wonderful symbolism of the Lord's Supper often passes us by, as it has often become only an essential ritual

and a piece of incomprehensible tradition that flies by in a fleeting moment during an ordinary worship service.

How we should celebrate Communion is unfortunately not explained to us anywhere in the Bible. Paul had a great problem in Corinth, because their Communion celebration got completely out of hand. Some people were gluttonous with their food and wine, while others were starving. It totally killed the whole spirit of Communion. Paul's simple guideline for what is supposed to happen, he describes in 1 Cor 11: 23-26, where he simply explains that on the last night the Lord broke the bread with His disciples and told them it was His body that was being broken for them, and that they had to use it in His remembrance. Then He sent the cup with wine, explaining that it was the new covenant

sealed by His blood, and that they had to use it in His memory.

What do you and I do with this meal of remembrance? Is it still a special joy for us in His honour? Or is it just a piece of unintelligible tradition? And Rev./Pastor, what do you do to make the Lord's Supper a special experience for your church? Has it just become a formality for you to settle, or is it something that makes you shiver with anticipation, and do you go to great lengths to make it a wonderful experience for your congregation?

Prayer:

Lord, so often Holy Communion has already just passed me by fleetingly. Help me to once again experience it as something very special.

Gifts of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Since childhood, I have always been extremely fascinated by nature as you have certainly derived from my writing. As a little boy, I marvelled at the brutal force of a simple dung beetle. I could watch these creatures for hours and test their strength. I spanned them in like oxen on a yarn thread in front of a matchbox loaded with stones. Nothing was ever too heavy for these bugs to pull. In the farm pond it was again the simple old spur-toed frogs that amazed me. These slippery frogs have the ability to worm themselves out of virtually any situation. If you try to hold him, he will cling with his sharp nails and worm his slippery mucus body from your grasp.

Once again, it was the rhebuck that caught my imagination. I stood open-mouthed and wondered how he was

running at full speed on the most dangerous slopes on the edge of steep cliffs. Never did one of them ever slip and fall. Oh, there were many more wonders than those my mind could record. There were the cicadas that could scream so terribly loud, but also stay invisible at the same time. You had to be very good at tracking him down. The otter that simply disappears under the water and hides so that one cannot find him.

If we start with this topic, there will be no end. The wonder of how each of the animals was "adapted" to fill his niche in life amazes me time and time again. We may be having a great debate about this one, but I still believe it is not "adaptation" but one of the many wonders of creation.

This morning Paul was talking to the Corinthians about a very similar topic:

the so-called “Gifts of the Spirit”. There has been fierce controversy, debate and reproach. Many people are jealous of gifts that others have and they don’t. But let's see what Paul has to say about this.

To start with, he begins by saying what are NOT gifts of the Spirit. We need to understand the background to understand what Paul really means. The custom in the heathen world of Corinth was that the priestess went into raptures at the Apollo Temple by chewing bay leaves or beech leaves. Then she spoke gibberish that was interpreted by a priest and written down in verse. Often the Lord is cursed in this jargon. Paul warns very strongly that believers should be very careful and make sure that such unusual languages really come from the Holy Spirit and not from the evil one. Spiritual gifts must at all times be practiced in such a way that it puts

people under the rule of God. If this criterion is not met, then there is a big mistake!

But what are these "Gifts of the Spirit?" We cannot impose gifts on anyone, as is often the case. And we dare not get jealous of the gifts someone else has received. Each person's gifts fit his personality and circumstances.

Paul speaks of three types of gifts. However, what he mentions are just a few examples.

The first is gifts of the mind, for example wisdom and knowledge. I am often amazed at the knowledge some people have of the Bible, and how they can bring the background of Bible history to life.

The second group of gifts Paul mentions is that of miracles. Here is the gift of exceptional faith, the kind that can literally move mountains, as well as the

gift of healing involved.

The third group of gifts is that of speech, including the gift of preaching, or proclaiming the message. Along with that are the gifts to judge a message, to speak unusual sounds and languages, and to interpret them.

It is important to remember that you do not dare to condemn another person for a gift he received, or perhaps to envy the prospect of receiving the same gift. It is equally important that you use the spiritual gift that the Holy Spirit has given you, however slight it may be, with all your might, in honour of God. Also, remember that you use this gift at all times in full dependence on God.

It is also important that you never dare to see yourself exalted above others who do not have your specific gift. I have heard so many times that someone condescendingly says that someone

who has not yet spoken in tongues is not filled with the Holy Spirit. It is spiritual pride!

We may not elevate one gift above another! Each one is equally important.

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to use my gifts with great dedication, and in total dependence on You, in honour of Your Great Name.

Exalted Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Have you looked properly at nature and seen how everything fits in, each into its own niche? If you look at a successful ecosystem like the Kruger National Park, you are amazed at how each living species has its exact location. There is an extremely fine balance throughout the system. The old big one, the elephant, ensures that the forest does not grow too wild, and that there are open spaces for grass to grow. Buffalo, in their huge herds, keep the tall grass in check, so that the other herbivores such as zebra and blue wildebeest have short grass to feed on. Lions control the numbers of impala, buffalo and zebra. Ticks cause old and weak animals to weaken quickly, making them easy prey for especially smaller predators. And so the herd is kept healthy and prepared so that only

the best genes are transmitted. Actually, it's a lot more complicated than this simplification. Nature is like a very delicate watch with fine and extremely complicated gearing. If one single gear is removed, the whole watch is in trouble! Then he cannot function properly. And if one gear is allowed to grow too large, the balance is also disturbed, as sometimes happens with the explosion of elephant numbers. The whole forest is then threatened!

The Church of Christ is an equally delicate clockwork that is very finely balanced by a large variety of gears of various shapes and sizes. This clockwork occurs in many different fields. Not only does the church consist of a wide variety of nationalities, ethnicities, colours, languages, peoples, rich and poor, but there is also a wide variety of worshipping styles among

believers.

Yesterday we talked about the variety of Spiritual gifts. In today's passage, Paul wants to illustrate that all the different gifts form a unity.

Someone was very shocked because I tried to compare the church with animals or nature. Paul made an equally shocking statement to the Corinthians by comparing the Spiritual gifts with the body. Shocking, because the Corinthians absolutely despised the physical! However, the Corinthian congregation had another problem, to elevate one of the Spiritual gifts above all others, thereby causing an imbalance. The gift they valued so highly was the gift of speech. With this gift you were exalted above the rest, because then you had the clear proof that you have the Holy Spirit in you and that you speak through the Spirit. The rest was at a lower level,

so everyone just wanted to practice the gift of speech. In this way, a worldly separation took place in the congregation. It got so bad that people with this gift considered themselves exclusively as Christians. It became a kind of fashion trend!

That is why Paul made this absurd comparison with the body, to show how ridiculous their action really is. A body consists of many limbs, he explains, and if the body consisted of only one exclusive limb, it simply would not work. For example, if the whole body were just an eye, it would be a tragedy, because how could you hear without the "inferior" ear? It would give off a very strange and definitely bizarre situation.

In the same way, a great variety of spiritual gifts are needed to allow the "body" of the church to function properly. And one is not above the other. For

example, if everyone just wanted to prophesy and speak in tongues, there would be a huge imbalance in the church. Assuredly these gifts are important, but we must be careful not to separate a single gift and to elevate it above the other.

However, there is another danger that threatens the church when one gift is elevated above another, and that is spiritual pride. In Corinth, the rich and nobles looked down on the "insignificant". The rich were, of course, the smart and educated people, and for the poor who could not afford education, it was not enough to master the new culture of the gift of speech. "I don't need you," Paul says, is the reaction of the rich to the poor, because they do not have the exclusive gifts.

Paul becomes almost vulgar as he continues to compare the body parts

with each other, and then concludes that the parts we do not even want to talk about have just as important a place as the lofty eye.

I have been attacked several times because I have not yet "mastered" certain spiritual gifts. I am delighted with what the Lord has given me, and I grant everyone the gifts he has received, and rejoice with them. Don't let us get jealous of each other or elevate ourselves above anyone else. Always remember where your gifts come from, and live in dependence on God!

Prayer:

Thank you for the gifts You have given me, Lord. Help me to use it in humility.

Use Your Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

It's almost time for the Day of the Covenant at Waterval Boven. Outside the village, on the slope of a hill stands a corrugated iron shed that is abandoned throughout the year, but suddenly on December 14th, two days before the festival, suddenly there is great activity. Everyone is there for the feast of all feasts, and the run-up to that sacred day is great fun. Braai's are held, speeches, singing and "Boeresport" games played galore. On the 15th everything reaches a pinnacle, and it is fun especially for the children. Tug-of-war teams challenge each other. Teamwork is of much greater importance here than the brute force of certain teams. If a team is well organized, it would be able to make the biggest bulls bite the dust. But then there are the bag races, egg-in-the-spoon

race, and then the hardest of all, the three-legged race. This one requires you to work very closely with your teammate. Your right leg is tied to his left, and then you have to react like one man. If your legs don't work together one hundred percent, you're going to bite the dust. Literally!

Paul is still busy with the gifts of the Spirit, and he wants to show that, although there is a variety, they must still form a unity. As believers, we also run in three-legged races, and working together is the big secret.

Of course, there is also a ranking order. In any organization, there must be someone who leads, otherwise there can be no order. Paul mentions his order order: Apostles, who oversee all congregations, Prophets - leaders in the local congregation, preachers, people who perform miracles, people who can

heal, and those who use unusual languages. Then Paul asks a rhetorical question: “Is everyone perhaps apostles? Are they all prophets? Are they all preachers?”(1 Cor 12:29).

Paul's list, we must remember, is applicable only to his own era. Apostles no longer exist for 2000 years already, and all the church structures have changed completely, several times already. His list is not supposed to be complete either. He simply wanted to try and bring home a truth to his readers. The exact same truth that was meant for the people of Corinth 2000 years ago is still just as relevant today. But our list today is going to look totally different from Paul's. Today, things like computer literacy, singing talent, hospitality, writing and the like will replace or complement many of the gifts. The point Paul is trying to bring home is that the church and the

congregation must function in such a way that all these wonderful gifts that the Lord has given us as believers will come to their right in the church. People must feel that they are part of the body of Christ, and that everyone should complement and support each other by using their various gifts.

In Paul's time, a congregation was very isolated, and often people never went beyond the boundaries of their own town. Today, the entire world is one big city, and people from different continents can interact with each other as if they are close to each other. Communication systems such as the Internet, TV and satellite technology have all virtually been brought together under one umbrella.

All of these technological developments present totally new challenges for us as believers. We must be prepared to look

far beyond our own small congregation. The wonderful thing is that the Lord gives us as believers the gifts to use the technology. As believers, we can now talk to other believers around the world and share our joys and problems. Many times I have had the wonderful privilege of helping fellow believers in Durban, Nelspruit, Australia and England in one way or another. Through the gifts the Lord gave me, I was able to get the help of a pastoral psychologist in Korea for someone else in the world on another continent. These days, these messages reach people across the globe, not only through email but now also through Whatsapp.

The big secret is that we have to look far wider than a single Spiritual gift. For our believers, the variety of gifts has never been so great! “Set your hearts, then, on the more important gifts.” Paul says in 1

Cor 12:31. Sit down and think prayerfully about all the gifts the Lord has given you, and use them to the best of your ability in the service of the Lord. Yes, they may seem like secular gifts to you, but maybe that is exactly what the Lord wants you to do to use in His service.

One lady said to me one day, "I have no gifts - what should I do?" Really? Each one of us has gifts, even if it is to clean a place, or to bake pancakes. Use what He has given you with joy and enthusiasm for God.

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to fully use my gifts for You.

The Very Best Gift

1 Corinthians 13:1-7

Angelic words, clanging cymbals,
if I do not love then I only make noise.

Where is my kindness, where my
patience?

Without it I am indebted to love !
Speech and envy and also conceit,
seek your own interest, oh the
touchyness!

Accounting of evil and rejoicing in
injustice.

With that in my life, love comes to an
end!

But love.

It rejoices and it laughs as the truth
prevails.

Is tolerant, incorruptible, bigger than
everything here.

Prophecies will perish, languages cease

to exist,
But love will last forever.
Love will never perish.

Listen to the song, at bit.ly/engeletale

1 Corinthians 13 is, besides Psalm 23, probably one of the most read passages in the Bible. Still, this is probably the part we least care about. Oh, the thoughts are so beautiful, but when it comes to putting them into practice, they often fall far short with most of our believers.

Paul describes the gift of love as the best gift. It is so easy to get a big head with any of the spiritual gifts, and maybe want to blow your own horn. "I received the gift of healing, and now I am one level higher than my fellow believers." However, we have seen from the previous few excerpts that these gifts were not given to us for our own enrichment, but to build up our fellow

human beings. Further in humility and full dependence on the Giver of all the gifts.

Everything ultimately comes down to love, because by living your gifts you show love to your fellow-man. Love is not a feeling, but a verb! Love does not make a distinction between people, but you must also be able to live the same love you have towards someone close to your heart, towards someone who is repulsive to you. It is not easy!

1 Corinthians 13 is a wonderful poem written by Paul to illustrate love. It is divided into three parts: In the first, he tells how essential love is. In the second he makes it clear what love is and what it is NOT, and in the third part he sings of undying love. In verses 1 to 3, Paul wants to make it very clear that the most beautiful gifts we have are absolutely useless if they are

not put into practice with the right attitude. It doesn't matter how noble my gift is - it can be one of healing or languages or prophecy. It may even mean giving my life to others or giving away all my possessions to help the poor. However, if these things at all mean that I want to get acknowledgement for myself, then it is meaningless. If it is operated without the necessary love, then I have become just an empty tin can making noise.

We sometimes marvel at someone who speaks to you and you enjoy it. He has the most beautiful words and thoughts that inspire you to great heights in your spiritual life. He says things that make you gasp for breath out of sheer wonder.

However, if that preacher acts loveless or does not practically live the love of which he preaches so beautifully, then he has become that proverbial

reverberating cymbal that just makes noise.

The same goes for someone with the most wonderful faith who can literally move mountains. People flock to him for healing, because under his hands the most horrible diseases disappear into thin air. But if love is lacking in his life, all these beautiful gifts are worthless.

What are the qualities of love? Patience and kindness, even if your patience is put to the limit and someone harasses you. Sometimes it feels as if the burdens of life are a heavy load on your shoulders, while you still have to be friendly. And if that taxi cuts in front of you and annoys you while you are late for work, then you should still be patient. It's not easy! It takes hard work and a lot of perseverance on your part to remain calm in such circumstances and radiate Jesus' love.

There is no place for envy, and self-interest plays no role. Conceit, envy and boastfulness are things far removed from true love. Total forgiveness (forgive AND forget!) Is one of the characteristics of love in your life, and so is tolerance.

As believers, we should read 1 Cor 13 every so often, mirroring our lives, because we forget so easily. Do I really live out my love as the Lord expects of me? Have I truly mastered the very best gift the Lord has given me?

Prayer:

Lord, I have to bow my head in shame this morning, because my life is so desperately lacking in the realization of my love. Please help me to truly love again.

Everlasting Love

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

We have already seen in the previous devotional how important Paul considers love. It is the greatest of all the gifts, and it can cover everything. Now Paul is also singing of the absolute imperishability of love. It will last forever, even after all the other gifts have disappeared.

But there is a problem - you and I are still mortal people who are worldly. We are not perfect and we have our weaknesses! Our knowledge is so terribly restricted that even the highly educated professor does not know everything. This is extremely frustrating, because there are so many questions to which I have no clear answer. So often people ask me questions, and sometimes I just have to shrug and say, "Sorry, I don't know either!"

Paul compares our knowledge to a mirror. Have you ever tried to shave or apply makeup on a cold winter's morning while the mirror keeps steaming up? It's frustrating! The image you see there is dull and virtually unrecognizable. Then it is touch-and-go, often with dire consequences! Also our knowledge of faith is extremely poor. But someday that mirror will shine bright, and we will be able to see and understand all of this clearly. Then it will in any case not even matter anymore, because then we will see the Lord face to face, then everything will be complete.

The great secret about your ignorance is that you must constantly learn, research and seek the truth in the Word of God. So you have to polish that mirror up brightly! Paul compares us to children who need to grow up. If we are only satisfied with the minimum we learned

as children, then our faith life becomes like a stagnant swamp. Then again, we will never really know how to properly live that love, which Paul so highly values. We must shake off childishness and grow through hard work, practice, study, and practical lessons to become adults in the faith. Only then can we truly begin to show our love.

However, it is not our weaknesses that Paul wants to talk about, but love he sings about. It is especially the undying love that he proclaims.

If I really want to know about love, and how imperishable it is, then I should actually start reading the Bible from Genesis 1. The many outreaches of love of the Lord recorded in the history books of the Old Testament begin to give us a picture of how far His love extends. It starts with Adam and Eve. He wanted to be a friend to them, even walking with

them in the garden. They betrayed Him! Such treacherous betrayal actually deserved the death penalty, but God's grace is so great that He still spares them in love. Then He even gives them promises as well!

Through the thousands of pages of the Old Testament we read the names of people to whom He has shown love. Names like Noah, Abraham, Isaac and even Jacob, the deceiver. His love is so great that He, after all Jacob's deceit, made him the father of the nation of Israel. For Moses, the murderer, He called in love to become the greatest leader of all time. He took Moses and his rebellious, murmuring, faithless people in love through the inhospitable desert to the promised land, despite them constantly running after other gods, and grumbling and complaining about every little thing. If that's not love

Then, of course, David was still the adulterous killer and, Solomon the polygamist. And what about Jonah the reluctant, Samson the woman trancer, Rahab the prostitute and many other names? But love prevails when the Son of God became human and had to go through the most terrible humiliation, persecution, rejection, mockery, torture and execution in order to bring about reconciliation. There the Lord brought the greatest sacrifice of love ever!

But that was only the beginning, for this love extends into all immeasurable eternity, because only after the end of the world will we be able to experience what true love is, and we will also be able to live it.

And today? Is it ever worthwhile to try to live in love at all? My love is so flawed! What use will it be anyway?

It is precisely about the immeasurable

love that God has revealed through the ages, and especially about the final price paid by the Son for our atonement, that we as believers must do everything in our power to live love out of gratitude for His great sacrifice. . He left no stone unturned to pay for us! Now it is our turn to plow the greatest gift of all back into the vineyard of God.

Prayer:

Oh Lord, my love is so flawed. Please help me to fully live it out in this way to thank You for what You have done for me.

Glossalalia

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

I sit in the doctor's waiting room, busy with my own thoughts. The consulting room is full, and I can see that it will be a long wait this morning! A mom comes in with her little son. He sees the closet of toys in the corner and makes a beeline for it. I wonder what kind of toy he's going to pick. The toddler grabs this, drops that and then he pulls out of the depths of the closet something that makes my hair stand on end. Who would be so stupid as to put a flute amongst the toys in a doctor's consulting room where silence is needed?

The toddler's face lights up. He draws his lungs full of air and blows with all his might. One elderly lady who fell asleep, almost fell off her chair. An awful screeching whistle on one false note fills the room. Then he discovers that if he

covers the holes, he can produce other sounds as well. The "music" he makes has no rhythm and no tune, and I want to block my ears. But the child is in ecstasy. He is the only one in the entire room who enjoys and understands his performance. Thankfully, Mom comes to the rescue of all present - much to Junior's dismay!

Paul devotes the entire chapter 14 to glossary, or the use of unusual languages or sounds, and prophecy, the gift of preaching God's message. He divides it into three sections: In verses 1-25 he explains that glossary and prophecy must be understandable, and that it must build not only believers, but also unbelievers. In verses 26-37 he says that this must also be done orderly. In verses 37-40 he summarizes everything, and asks that these things should not be forbidden, but that at the

same time there should be order in the worship service.

Services of worship in those years looked totally different from what we are used to today, especially in the ordained Reformed churches. There was absolutely no guidance from any person. It gave any member of the congregation, regardless of it's origin or status, the right to stand up and contribute to the service. It could be a word of wisdom, a Psalm, revelation, or a pronunciation in a foreign language or sound. Everything was acceptable.

Unfortunately, people competed with each other. Some wanted to be the "superstars" and gain a reputation for themselves. Often people screamed at each other. Getting an orderly turn was often a daunting task. There was much talk, little listening, and very little made sense at the end of the day. People went

home angry with each other. It was a sad state of disorder.

Paul's purpose was basically to accomplish two things with this writing: first, to restore that love of which he had just sung, and to restore peace between believers. And secondly, he wanted to try to create order in the worship service.

The first major thorn in the flesh was glossalalia, which was so horribly abused in the congregation. They had to understand very well what this gift really is and how it should be used properly.

Glossalalia is the utterance of strange sounds or languages. It is actually a prayer or praise, a communication with God, and is not meant as an intelligible communication with other people. It only serves to build up the person who expresses it, and not to the rest of the congregation. Paul explains this in 1 Cor. 14:2-4.

Some years ago, I was with a number of other believers from a variety of churches, when the person in charge said, "Let's pray together." I was totally unprepared for what was to follow. All around me, everyone suddenly prayed aloud, some of them in foreign languages. For me as a staunch NG man, as well as for a number of other people, it was total disarray. What started out as a great spiritual experience all fell apart for me. Many of those involved simply did not attend similar meetings again. What was supposed to bring believers together actually drove believers apart.

Paul uses the analogy of a flute playing just a jumble of sounds (like the boy in the story above). It hurts your ears, but if there is a recognizable tune, it is a completely different matter. If speaking in tongues is not accompanied by a

Spirit-inspired interpretation, then it should rather be left alone.

Prophecy, on the other hand, is of much greater significance. It establishes people and builds the congregation. It brings together believers of diverse denominations as a close unit.

Is it wrong then to speak in tongues? No! Paul himself did this too (verse 18). But if you want to do it, it must be done in the right place and time so that no one will be disturbed by it.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the wisdom to use the gifts You have given me at the right time so that people will be established through them and so that they will take place to Your glory.

Order in the Worship Service

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

In 1956 we went on holiday to Amanzimtoti. One of the must-see places is of course the Oriental market in Durban. I was about eight years old, and this outing was, of course, very exciting to me. The many fragrances were overwhelming! Curry that looked bitterly dangerous was displayed in neat heaps of light yellow, bright yellow, brown and bright red. And then the stuff had the most dreadful names I dare not repeat, otherwise my mouth would be scrubbed with soap! There was also a dizzying wealth of other merchandise, shockingly-bright materials, shoes, handbags - just about anything under the sun was on display in that market, even fish!

On the one hand, I marvelled at all the strange things, but at the same time as a farm boy, I was totally flabberghasted.

The narrow aisles and all the salesmen talking at once and wanting to force their goods on us. At the slightest show of interest in a product, the guy will try to persuade you with a smooth tongue and a lot of persuasion, so you later feel you want to turn tail and run. Perhaps it was precisely the total disorder of the market that attracted so many people to it.

If we think back to yesterday's devotional, you might be able to compare the disorder that prevailed in the church in Corinth with that old Eastern market of the fifties. As the various merchandise on the market was noisily displayed, the gifts of church members were exhibited in the worship service. It makes you shudder! In the second part of 1 Corinthians 14, Paul then specifically pleads for order in the worship service.

In verse 27, Paul begins with glossary,

the speaking of tongues. He explains that only two or three may use this gift, and not simultaneously, but each in turn. However, there is also a condition that there must be someone who can lay it out, otherwise they must stay silent and do it at home, where they can talk to God personally.

The second case that Paul touches on is one concerning the prophets. Again, only two or three may participate in this, one by one, and then what they say must be judged by the other to ensure that the things they say are truly from God, and not merely sucked out of their thumbs.

This may sound very funny to us, but we must remember that the believers in those years did not have the wonderful guidelines we have today. All they could go on was Paul's word and Old Testament scriptures. The Bible, as we know it today, didn't exist at all. It was

only compiled many years later. Prophets under the guidance of the Holy Spirit made certain statements, but then it had to be made certain that it was really the work of the Holy Spirit.

How privileged we are to have the Bible today, along with a myriad of commentaries, background studies and explanations. In addition, we have teachers who study for years to guide us.

Paul wants to make it very clear that there must be order in the worship service. Everyone cannot do as he pleases, just when he wants to, but everything must be done in an orderly and thorough manner.

And then Paul touches on a very sensitive subject, one that has already caused much debate and sadness, the woman's place in the worship service. "They are not allowed to speak," Paul

says. Then it seems that he actually has it against the questions the women ask, and that they should rather ask their husbands at home. What would he mean by this?

There are two possibilities. The first is simply that at that time in the specific community it was unheard of for a woman to publicly express her opinion. This was the man's privilege! Remember, women had no status. He did not want the Christian women to reverse the social order. Do you still remember the devotional about the hat? Today it is, thank goodness, very different.

According to the Bible millennium, the use of heathen women to go to the temple of Apollo and bring all their questions about things like birth, marriage, remarriage after a divorce and occupations for their children to the

priests. It was possible that the Christian women now came to the prophets with the same kind of questions in the worship service. These are things that do not belong in the worship service, but rather in private conversations.

Paul concludes by saying that glossalalia should not be forbidden, but that everything should be done in an orderly way.

Now I wonder, would a worship service like the one in Corinth work for us today? Of course with the necessary order as Paul pleads! Perhaps it would be a very interesting experiment, for parishioners to do all the work for a while, and not be spoon-fed by the preacher. What preacher is going to be brave enough to try this?

Prayer:

Lord, as there is to be order in the

worship service, so I would like to ask
You to also bring order in my personal
spiritual life.

He Has Surely Risen

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul explains that the Christian faith is certainly not a mystery cult.

Why would he put such emphasis on it? The answer lies in the temple of Demeter where young girls performed certain rituals. Demeter, the goddess of agriculture's daughter, Persephone, was abducted, according to legend, by Hades, the god of the underworld deep into the earth, where she was forced to marry him. As Demeter, her mother goes to look for her daughter, she neglects her responsibilities, so the plants begin to die. Fortunately, her father, Zeus, intervenes and helps her rescue Persephone. But she first had to make a deal with Hades: Persephone can return, provided she comes to stay with him half of each year. This has caused it to be

summer half the year and the other half winter while she is down there.

This absurd story had a profound effect on the people of the time. Young girls were incorporated into this mystery cult, where, among other things, they were baptized in the sea during dramatic performances and had to drink holy drinks in the temple. They then went into a spiritual extacy to become one with Demeter and prepare the spirit for a life after death. Of course, everything was accompanied by all kinds of immorality.

The problem was that this mystery cult was such an integral part of all the inhabitants, that pagan converts had a hard time breaking with it. So it ended up in the congregation. The story of Jesus' death and resurrection was just another myth for them. Baptism and Holy Communion gave them unity with Jesus in the same way as Demeter and

Persephone. In that way, their spirit was so renewed. Even the sexual malpractices remained part of this. Their motto was, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32). Everything that Paul taught them had to be seen in the light of the mystery cult.

To address this issue, Paul had to put everything into perspective. He reminded the congregation of the things he taught them about the Gospel he originally preached to them. It was of utmost importance to realize that there was salvation in the Gospel alone, the glad tidings of Jesus, and that nothing else could save you. He implied that this mystery cult that had crept in to the congregation was making their faith in vain.

Paul explains in a nutshell how Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and rose from the dead. Unlike the mythological

story of Demeter, Jesus' resurrection is not merely a mystery or spiritual resurrection as some learned people today claim, but a physical, bodily resurrection. There were many witnesses who saw Him after His resurrection. On one occasion, there were 500 people gathered when Jesus appeared to them. Surely five hundred witnesses couldn't be wrong!

The fact was that Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection was a reality, and not just a myth. And what was more: Jesus died for us to bring about reconciliation between us and God. He is the only Way to God! There is no other way we can find reconciliation. But that is not all: God expects us to worship Him alone. So there is no place for any other mystery cult of any kind to be used with our Religion, as was the case with the Corinthians.

But we no longer believe in Greek gods today! So what does this have to do with me? Maybe, but there are many other, often far more subtle forms of mystery cults that can often creep into your life so unnoticed. To name a few examples: one that many believers are guilty of is astrology, these "innocent" star predictions or zodiac signs. I want to explode if someone asked me under which zodiac sign I was born. It is nothing more than a mystery cult, where the stars are supposed to determine your future. Not only is it the biggest joke, but you also play right into the hand of the devil with this occult profession.

Another very disturbing thing is the "innocent" calling up of spirits of the deceased. There have been a few TV shows where people are supposedly in contact with deceased loved ones. Not

only is it unBiblical, but it is a devilish practice. With lots of smooth talk, the medium claims that his or her so-called clairvoyance comes from God. The devil sometimes comes to us with sweet words!

Stay away from the occult! It can and must never be practiced with your faith in Jesus, the only Way! You cannot serve God and Mammon at the same time. Decide who you want to serve today. But my family and I - we will serve the Lord!

Prayer:

Lord, the devil comes with so many beautiful words. Please help me to see clearly through his mask.

Life after Death

1 Corinthians 15:12-34

I read a report a few years ago in a newspaper that made my neck hair bristle: In an established Reformed church in the Netherlands, an ordained preacher preaches that there is no God! God is only in the minds of people, or so he claims. Some of the members were upset, and eventually it was referred to the supreme authority, the Synod. The Synod's decision was that there were no real grounds for dismissing this atheist preacher. He was therefore able to continue his atheistic teachings undisturbed! In our own country, South Africa, a few years ago a few highly educated theologians came to the conclusion that Christ was never raised from the dead, but that it only happened in the minds of His disciples.

When I hear things like this, a feeling of

nausea rises from my stomach. How can people, especially highly educated Bible scholars, ever think that way? What went wrong in their lives, that the core of the Christian faith was lost to them? However, this thought is not something new. Paul is haunted by the exact same problem that stuck it's head in the Corinthian congregation, and he wants to smother this problem before it's too late!

I once lived on a farm near Welkom. Early one morning, I woke up from a wierd rumbling sound. I jumped out of bed and looked out the window. A long row of tractors came driving up the dirt track and began tearing open the red earth with their plows. After they plowed all over the peace of land, they sowed sunflower seeds in the furrows.

At dusk I walked through the field. There was no sign of the seed that was sown.

It was buried and wasted. Evening after the evening, I strolled through the dry field to see if anything might be happening. But nothing!

One morning, I peeked through the window. My heart started beating wildly! There is a faint green glow on the red ground. I ran to the field excitedly. As far as I looked, there were tiny green leaves peeking through the harsh soil. I wanted to rejoice: "There is life after death! Here is the clear proof!" A few days later, the carpet of dry red earth was a lush green carpet of young sunflower plants. In my mind's eye I saw the mass of golden yellow sunflowers, heavy in the seed, ready for the big harvest. Everything was worth it!

How worthless, absolutely pitiful would our faith be if Christ had never risen from the grave. Paul says that this would of course imply that there would be no

resurrection for you and me. Then the famous physicist, Steven Hawking, would be right with his statement that man is like a computer: if you pull out the plug, everything is over - then you're dead!

However, we know differently: We have seen many times that there were several eye-witnesses to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Early that very morning, some of His followers had already seen Him. That same afternoon a few men walked with him to the village of Emmaus, and He spoke to them and explained what had happened. To these witnesses it was also like the sunflower seed that they saw dying in the ground, and then the miracle happened when the dead seed reappeared alive and burst bright green from the dry earth, showing that there really was life!

The evidence that He is alive, and that

He ascended to heaven, is absolutely overwhelming, despite the sceptical people who seek to dismiss it as stories. However, it also has a different conclusion for us: If it is so that Jesus rose from the dead, then we can also assume that for me and you as believers there may also be a similar resurrection from the dead. Of course, we know from the eye-witnesses' report that Jesus' resurrection was not only a spiritual resurrection, but that it was also an physical one.

Thomas could press his fingers into the holes that the nails made in Jesus' hands during the crucifixion.

He sat with them on the beach and ate some of the fish they had fried.

He was not a spirit, yet His body was different - a glorified body. Just as one day you and I will rise from the dead and have a wonderful glorified body. We will

not only be spirit, but recognizable people with an imperishable body without the limitations of our old earthly "tent dwelling" today.

Most wonderful of all, however, is that you and I will be with Jesus and can see Him in all His glory and majesty.

If we have understood these things, the saying "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" can no longer be part of our lives, because then we will serve Jesus fully today in preparation for that great day.

Prayer:

Lord, I want to live fully to Your honour, for glory awaits me when I will one day be with You with a brand new body.

A Brand-new Body

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Yesterday I wrote about the sunflower field. But I want us to linger there for a while. I want to show you something exciting! Take a look at one of these sunflower seeds. What do you see? A dull, blackish, insignificant pellet that doesn't look like much. But bury it and see what happens! When it germinates, a breathtaking miracle happens. Those first fragile little leaves protruding through the hard ground already make you gasp for breath. What will become of this little plant? And it's no good looking for the original seed you planted. All that remains is an empty shell. The small plant grows into a large plant in a relatively short period of time. And then it blooms! And what a flower! Golden yellow, as big as a plate, and loaded with rich seeds that sparkle, as the sunflower

always keeps its face focused on the bright sun. If you try to compare this magnificent plant to the original dead seed, you will be amazed. How is it possible that that dull little pellet could become such a beautiful plant?

Paul asks: "How can the dead be raised? What kind of body will they have?" (1 Cor. 15:35). "Stupid question!" Paul says. But in fact, this is not such a stupid question, as it is often asked. Yes, we might not ask out loud, but each of us secretly wonders about this. How does that happen? Do I ever get a body again? Doesn't my old body just perish the day I die? Of course it does! But do I just become a spirit? Is my old skeleton going to get meat and skin again on again with the second coming? And what if my body was cremated and the ashes were scattered in the sea?

Paul explains that there is discontinuity

when you die - your old body perishes. Yet there is also continuity at the same time, because your spirit lives on. In a sense, we remain the same, because the exact same person who dies is still alive. See, the real you is actually spirit, and your body is just a shell that houses your spirit. But then the miracle happens: as that sunflower seed suddenly changes completely in shape, so do we. As the life juice of the seed simply passes and forms the core of the brand new sunflower plant, so your “life juice”, your spirit enters the brand new body, a glorified body.

Jesus came to demonstrate it to us after His crucifixion. When he rose from the grave that day, he was still exactly the same in some ways. His essence did not change, and He spoke to His friends. Yet He was also very different at the same time, for example He entered a room

while the door was still closed. He was no longer bound by the usual old laws of nature. He was still recognizable, and even the holes in His hands were still there, where a few days before, rough nails had ripped through His flesh. Yet, these were no longer raw wounds, but visible signs of the expensive price He had to pay for our sin. Yes, Thomas could push his unbelieving fingers through the holes to experience firsthand that Jesus was a reality. Same, but very different!

My old earthly body is so vulnerable! I often realize this very thoroughly when my fragile body does not want to cooperate with my spirit. But one day, when this old body is totally worn out, then I'm also going to get such a wonderful glorified body. Then, like Jesus' body, it will no longer be bound by the laws of nature. It is going to be

imperishable and illness will have absolutely no effect on it. It's going to be a perfect body!

However, the question is whether we will all look the same? Let's go back to the fields again. I plant a sunflower seed, a corn kernel and a peanut side by side. Will the new plants look the same? Of course not! They are going to differ from one another, even though they are all three "resurrection plants". Paul explains this by referring to the stars. After all, all the things up there in the sky are celestial bodies, but the sun and moon are totally different, and so are the stars. Paul did not have a telescope, but I think he would be stunned if he could look at the stars through such a thing and see that there are indeed no two stars that look the same. Some "stars" are even galaxies or gas nebulae.

There comes a day when the sound of

trumpets will echo around the world (1 Cor 15:52). It will announce the Second Coming of Jesus. At that moment, everyone who has already died will have a brand new body, and those who are still alive will be changed to become immortal. Everyone will be given brand new clothes to meet Jesus the King.

"Death is destroyed; victory is complete!" Paul rejoices. "Where, Death, is your victory? Where, Death, is your sting?" (1 Cor 15: 54,55)

Prayer:

Lord, I look forward to that day when will I also get a brand new resurrection body.

Please Help!

1 Corinthians 16:1-12

Jerusalem was in great distress: the believers fell into poverty. Paul doesn't say exactly what happened, we can only guess. Perhaps the expectation of Jesus' return was so great that people simply stopped working. Now they sat and waited for Him to come and fetch them. The statement that may make more sense is prosecution! The Jews had very strong family ties, which included not only the close family, but also a wide extended family. This family stood together through thick and thin, supporting each other.

But then the "terrible" thing happened, that some of the family members "betrayed" their faith and became Christians. For the tough Jews it was the limit, and all family ties were broken with these "deserters". If you are no longer

family, then you are no longer supported. The problem was that the people were so dependent on each other that the poor Jews who became Christians were suddenly totally without any income, because no one wanted to trade with them or support them in any way. They were now dependent only on their new family, their fellow Christians. Unfortunately, just about all of them were in the same boat in Jerusalem. They helped each other, but in the end they could simply not maintain it.

And this is where the overseas congregations came in. They did not have the same problems of rejection that prevailed in Jerusalem, so their lives could continue normally. Paul is now pleading to the church in Corinth to do the same as the other churches. When they got together on Sundays, they had to bring money for the believers in

Jerusalem. When there was enough, a few men would take it away to the Jerusalem congregation.

When Paul writes this letter, he is in Ephesus. But as usual, his plan is to move again soon. The long road beckons him, and he realizes that there is still a big mission field open for him. He plans to travel through Macedonia on a wide detour to visit congregations there, and then eventually to Corinth. He wanted to spend some time there. However, things worked out differently for him than he had planned. The problems in Corinth later turned out to be much greater than he thought, so he had to hurriedly board a ship and cross the Aegean Sea to Corinth to put right things there. However, it was not a very successful visit!

Meanwhile, Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to try to put things right. Timothy also

had to deliver Paul's letter in Corinth. Paul therefore paved the way in his letter to the Corinthians to receive Timothy kindly and hospitable. They also had to assist him financially while he was there. Timothy was only a young man, and the people might look down on him. Therefore, Paul pertinently asked that they would respect him and not look down on him.

Of course, Paul and Timothy have come a long way together. Paul met him during a visit to Listra. His mother was a converted Jewess, and his father a Greek. Timothy was already a believer then, and Paul immediately saw that this man had much potential as an evangelist. Then his teaching began under the direction of the great master, Paul. What a wonderful privilege! To Paul, Timothy was invaluable on his missionary journeys. After his return

from Corinth, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to minister there.

At the end of Paul's letter he mentions Apollos, and that he wanted to send him to Corinth, but that Apollos refused. We might have easily condemned Apollos for that, but it wasn't that simple. There was serious group forming in Corinth, and Apollos knew that returning there would only make matters worse. Therefore, he would rather stay away and keep the peace.

Through this piece of history, the Lord also speaks to me and you today. First of all, we must know that today, just as in Paul's day, there are large numbers of believers who are cruelly persecuted and oppressed simply because they are Christians. Open Doors and Incontext tell the sad stories of millions of such people. They urgently need our help and our prayers. What are we doing about it?

Bibles for Believers, on the other hand, tells of many millions of believers who have never owned a Bible in their lives. This organization distributes Bibles where people are so poor that no one can afford a Bible. We have an abundance! Let us help, and make a huge difference in someone's life.

Prayer:

Lord, in our abundance we so often forget about others who have nothing. Please open our eyes and hands and purses to the needs of others.

Letter Conclusion

1 Corinthians 16:13-24

As we learned over the past two months, Paul wrote this letter to a congregation that gave him nightmares. Everything that could go wrong in the congregation, went wrong! There were divisions, false doctrines and atrocious sins. Some members of the congregation thought they were superior to the rest, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit were blatantly misused.

Nevertheless, in the letter ending Paul spoke to them in the greatest love, as a father would do with his little children. "Be vigilant," he dictated to his secretary. "Stand in the faith, be courageous, be strong!" Paul encouraged them, even though they grieved him so deeply.

In my mind's eye, I see a little old grandmother on her rocking chair.

Around her, the children shout and play and scream so loudly that she feels like blocking her ears. Little Jonhnnie pulls Sarah's plait, and she screams at the top of her voice. Nickholas throws a mud cake at Peter, causing further pandemonium.

Suddenly, Granny beckons them all closer, and then, without being angry or annoyed, she gathers them together like an old broody hen her chicks. Then she starts to tell them a story, lovingly and passionately. All the frustration she had just experienced was forgotten as she captivated with full dedication the children's undivided attention with her wonderful stories.

To simply always throw accusations and to condemn may justify a congregation that is stubborn. To us, it may feel like it is the only way with such difficult people. However, to only accuse and punish,

those people will only aggravate the situation. After all, that's just what they want! However, by dealing with the matter in love and with great compassion, you can only win those people for the Lord. After all, has Paul not just sung the excellence of love in chapter 13? Here we see how he practically applies it in his own life, and with how much love and compassion he deals with that apostate congregation. What a beautiful example for you and me to follow!

But it is not only in dealing with a congregation that you treat someone with such love. It works equally well on a personal level. Go try it out on someone who is difficult, rude and oblique to you. You will soon find out that miracles are happening! The condition, however, is that your "love" should not simply be a well-acted play, but truly from your heart,

unfeigned.

Paul now pleads with the congregation to acknowledge Stephen and his family as leaders in the congregation. This man is willing to serve the congregation, but if he is not accepted, it is in vain. With acceptance he can make a big difference in the congregation. People like Stephen should be appreciated.

How often do we not see that a preacher, who is willing to give absolutely everything to a congregation, has to face great criticism from some members. I've experienced it many times before, that that poor preacher just can't do anything right in their eyes. Give him the necessary support and gratitude, and make his work a pleasure for him. Then he will bloom, and probably provide a much better service in the congregation. Of course, this also applies to any church leader.

In the few closing sentences of Paul's letter, he congratulates other congregations and celebrities, such as Aquila and Priscilla. They used to live in Corinth too. They fled there at the time when the Jews were banished from Rome, but now they had settled in Ephesus. Later again they did missionary work in Rome. With these greetings, Paul wants to, in a very subtle way, make the Corinthian congregation understand that they are not just a stand-alone congregation, but that they are part of a much larger organization, believers from all over the world. They must fit into this larger community, and be part of it. So of course it still is today. No church is a detached structure! In the first place, of course, you are part of the larger organization of your own denomination, but also of all the other denominations. As believers, we are all

part of God's extended family, no matter what church you belong to. And so we must respond to one another in love. We must support one another and bear in prayer.

Finally, Paul himself writes with his own shaky hand the final sentences: "Maranata - come Lord!" He sighs his expectation at the coming of JESUS. And then he affirms his love for them: "My love is with you all in Christ Jesus."

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, for this inspiring and edifying letter from Paul, and that it can have an impact on my life as well.

Letters to a Congregation

Introduction to 2 Corinthians

The question many theologians ask each other is how many letters did Paul write to the church in Corinth? The answer is quite simple: We don't know! What we do know is that there are definitely more than two letters written, and that 2 Corinthians is not just the second letter. Now why would Paul spend so much time writing letters to this congregation? Just because there were so many problems, and they constantly needed his attention.

It all started, early in the year 50 AD, when Paul, Silas and Timothy worked in Corinth for eighteen months. Paul moved in with Priscilla and Aquila. They were also tent makers like him and he worked with them while ministering the Gospel to the people of Corinth. It wasn't easy, because the Jews in the city

refused to accept him. They insulted him in such a way that he could no longer preach in the synagogue at all. Eventually, the Jews dragged him to court. However, their attempts failed, and the whole lot were thrown out of court!

As a result, Paul and his team worked mainly among the non-Jews, and were persevered despite all the opposition they received from the Jews.

Just after they left for Syria, Paul had already written his first letter to warn them against immorality. The young congregation completely misunderstood this letter, and wrote a letter to Paul, in return sending it to him with a delegation. They were not happy!

Before this delegation reached him, however, Paul wrote a second letter to the congregation, the well-known 1 Corinthians, in which he already

answered many of their questions. However, when these troubled men came to Paul, he decided that something had to be done quickly to calm things down in Corinth, so the young Timothy was delegated to fix things there. But things were still not pleasant in Corinth, with Paul having to make a short emergency visit. This visit was extremely unpleasant for him, because he was grossly offended by someone there.

After this traumatic visit, Paul once again wrote a letter to them, the so-called "letter of tears." Titus had to deliver the letter. With great anticipation, Paul was looking forward to Titus' return. He wanted to know what was going on, and whether his letter had ever had the necessary effect. In his letter he asked, among other things, that the troublemaker should be briefed.

Titus brought good news - the tide was

turning in Corinth! Now they could start working on the things that really matter, love of one's fellow-men and reconciliation.

In about 55AD, Paul wrote chapters 1 to 9 of 2 Corinthians as a letter of atonement. He once again sent them with Titus. In this he also, among other things, started a collection to be gathered for the impoverished congregation in Jerusalem. Things seemed to have deteriorated again in Corinth. So Paul was forced to send another letter a few months later, chapters 10-13 of 2 Corinthians. He wrote that he would visit them again in person soon. According to Romans 15: 25-26, we get the impression that this third visit from Paul was successful, and that he also received a good contribution from them to go to Jerusalem.

It is such a pity that Paul's other letters

to Corinth were not preserved. But still, out of the two that have been preserved for us, we can form a good picture of the congregation that makes us think so much of many of our own congregations today. If Paul had to write to every congregation today, he would surely have died an early death! However, it is very important that we learn from Paul's letters to Corinth about our own situation, and apply what Paul pleads for.

The first important thing we need to learn is the commitment Paul had to his calling, even when he was offended, disappointed and rejected. Church leaders should not be discouraged, but persevere with their eyes on Jesus, and continue with their calling, despite!

Church members must truly take note of how to continue to be compassionate, and sensitive to one another's

circumstances in our modern, accelerating society. We should never just theoretically look at the distress of others, but we must do something about it. Believers' care for one another certainly has financial implications too!

2 Corinthians teach us to fulfill our daily duties according to the demands of the gospel, and to live what we confess. It teaches us about discipline, dedication and loyalty, and that undercutting, abuse of power and gossip do not dare to appear in the believer's dictionary. So this letter asks of us a dedicated relationship of faith with the Living Lord!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for this letter from Paul. Please help me apply it to my life.

Grace and Peace to You

2 Corinthians 1:1,2

It's November 1973. I feel the hard, cold, rocky soil of Potchefstroom through my sleeping bag. The ground is extremely hard and uncomfortable when I lean on my elbow. But tonight I don't even think about the cold or the discomfort. All I see in my mind's eye is my beloved. "In three weeks, we are getting engaged," it bubbled inside me, "as soon as I get out of this military camp!" In the flickering light of the paraffin lamp I draw my writing pad closer. How do you start a love letter? I've never written such a thing in my life! At school, they taught me about business letters, not love letters! "My dear," I begin. "We have just arrived in Potchefstroom, and I yearn for you." A stone under my elbow hurts painfully, but I hardly feel it. The only thing on my mind is the great love of my

life. And then I pour my heart out, all my longing on the piece of paper.

At that time, pen and paper were the only means of communication! It was even worse in Paul's time: no phones, cell phones, whatsapp or email. Not even a postal service! So when Paul begins to write his letter to the congregation in Corinth, he must make sure that every word is perfect, because someone will have to deliver it personally, and it will take that person weeks of travel.

"Of Paul," he dictates. He struggles to see, because his eyes are weak, and his handwriting leaves much to be desired. So someone has to do his writing, someone who can write well. And the recipients must know that he is not writing this difficult letter on his own authority, but on the authority of God. The Holy Spirit laid it on his heart! "An

apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God," he continues. Yes, not everyone accepts his apostleship, but he is firmly convinced that he is most definitely a proxy messenger of Jesus Christ! Didn't Jesus personally appoint him there on the road to Damascus? There he already received the command from Jesus to do what he does today! No, he was not appointed by man, but by God himself!

Moreover, he does not write this letter on his own. Timothy also gives his input! Dear Timothy, what would he do without him? Whenever there are problems somewhere, he can just rely on the young man to go and solve the problem. One day he will still appoint Timothy as a preacher somewhere in a congregation. Yes, Timothy was with him when they founded the church in Corinth. That guy worked hard there in Corinth. Perhaps it

would not be a bad idea to send Timothy to personally deliver this letter. Then he can also straighten things up a bit where it is now completely chaos. Or what about Titus? Yes, Titus is perhaps the right one to deliver the letter.

"Write there: and from the brother Timothy." Paul points to his secretary.

"To the church of God in Corinth," he dictates, as the secretary looks at him in anticipation. Indeed, it is God's church, though there are so many problems. Sometimes it almost seems that this congregation does not belong to the Lord at all, but He has a wonderful purpose with them, and again and again Paul only has to see how the Lord provides and how He picks them up again every time they had fallen. But more importantly, the fact is that this church, with all its flaws, is set apart for God. They are all saints, dedicated to

the Lord. Isn't that, of course, just what the church is? Oh how great is God's grace! If it were merely human, the congregation would have fallen apart already. But by God's great grace they have been preserved, and it almost seems as if they are now heading in the right direction.

Paul suddenly remembers all the other congregations around Corinth: "And to all who belong to the Lord throughout the whole of Agaje." Everyone should read the letter, not just this single congregation. The other churches must also take note, because it is not he, Paul, who writes the letter. After all, he writes it on behalf of God, of the Holy Spirit, who puts these thoughts in his heart!

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!" Indeed "Grace" to the Greeks and

"Peace" to the Jews! Thus begins this timeless letter, which is still extremely relevant to every congregation today, not just that of Corinth. Because it was inspired by the Holy Spirit, the letter was addressed to you and me personally, and we must take note of what Paul is writing. So if he offers you and me this morning grace and peace, then it means we can make it our own.

May that wonderful grace of the Lord, and the peace that transcends all understanding, be yours today, and may you experience it very clearly, every moment of the day.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for this wonderful letter, and that it is meant for me personally.

Encouragement

2 Corinthians 1: 3-11

The central theme of Paul's letter might be: God is faithful and He gives us courage even when we are suffering or in trouble. This thought is clearly expressed in the preamble of the letter.

It is not easy to encourage someone if you have not experienced any difficulties in life. To cite an example: try to comfort someone who has recently lost a partner. If you haven't already gone through that pain yourself, can you tell that person that you know how she feels? How do you know? That pain, loneliness and great loss is something you can only talk about if you have experienced it yourself. And the same goes for hardship, anxiety and death. How do you encourage someone in such a situation, if you haven't been through it yourself and experienced it?

Paul was definitely the right person to talk about this kind of thing because he himself went through so much suffering. So we can't say: "He's a nice one to talk to - what does he know about our modern predicament?" Paul went through more problems than any of us will ever experience!

When Paul met Jesus at Damascus that day, he lost everything he had in life. Remember, he was a prominent Pharisee who moved in high circles, and he certainly had many influential friends. When he suddenly became a Christian, all these friends deserted him. He lost his income because he made a living by persecuting Christians, and he was surely paid for this "noble" service. Now he was stranded, without friends and without an income. The Christians run away when they saw him, because how could they trust him? Paul literally had to

flee for his life!

When he eventually won the Christian's trust after several years, he was sent to the heathen world. There, the Jews chased him away because he was a Christian, and the gentiles wanted to kill him for trying to overthrow their religion. He ended up in jail repeatedly. He was scourged, thrown with stones, and constantly lived in mortal fear. In addition, his ship sank several times, and it was only a miracle that he did not drown too.

Through all this opposition, we must remember that there were no modern transport systems, and that Paul had to travel thousands of miles on foot, often through very dangerous or inhospitable parts of the world. He had to face hunger, thirst, cold and heat, and he surely had to sleep many nights on the hard ground under the stars. But

perhaps the most difficult thing for Paul was his personal life. As a born Pharisee who grew up with Jewish laws and traditions, he had to learn to live with gentiles and to give up his traditions and all that mattered and was precious to him. Paul knew everything about suffering! I don't think we can compare our worst hardship or trouble to his best days!

Therefore, Paul can speak from experience when he encourages people. He went through it, and he knew what he was talking about.

But what does Paul say? He does not start with a lament, but a praise! How does my prayer begin? Often with a lament over our circumstances, and just for in case, we end with a half-hearted praise song. Paul, however, realized where his salvation came from, and so he could not help but praise God for

being the One who gives encouragement and strength. He carries Paul through all his troubles. And us? We often complain because we think God might not answer our prayer! Let's look for the positive for a change, and praise Him for it!

Does this mean that if we start praying differently, all our circumstances will change? Will our problems disappear into thin air due to some miracle?

That's not what Paul says. Of course, nothing is impossible for God, but the great thing is that we can know that He will encourage and strengthen us to stay standing, even through the greatest of difficulties and trials and sufferings. Paul writes that their suffering was far beyond their strength, as if the death sentence had already been pronounced upon them. Terrible! Yet, through everything, he could still experience God's

faithfulness and love very intensely.

Paul realized that his problems were happening so that he would realize his total dependence on God again and again. Only the Lord could save him, and us as well!

But there is another very important matter that we must remember carefully, and that is to pray for one another as believers. I have often personally gone through very hard times, but knowing that there were so many people praying for me kept my faith alive. Believers are in dire need of each other.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that I can know this morning that You are carrying me through all my trials.

Criticism

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

As church members, we are often guilty of unnecessary criticism without realizing what the true background is. Because I am not a preacher myself, I think I could definitely touch on this topic. The first place through which a preacher is chronically under attack is his sermons. I have often listened astonished when a poor preacher's message is taken apart. "He repeats too much," it is sometimes said. (Maybe he should have repeated that thought a few more times, because it still didn't sink in to the listener!) The listener wanted a real, genuine Hell-and-Fire sermon! And when the pastor preaches about sin, it is also not right, because then it becomes very personal. And then there are the people who want to dictate to the preacher what the subject of his sermon should be the next

Sunday. They clearly do not understand how a sermon works. Let me try to explain: A preacher secludes himself in prayer and then ask the Holy Spirit to guide him in his preparation for the sermon. The message he is going to convey is not what people necessarily would like to hear, but may be nothing less than a message from God. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the preacher, in full dependence on the Lord, not only prepares the sermon, but also chooses the topic. If the Holy Spirit lays it on his mind to preach about love and grace, then he will be disobedient if he decides to preach about something else instead. Who do you obey more, people or the Lord?

Secondly, preachers are accused of not doing their job, the accusation being made without the person being aware of the true circumstances. Now let's be

honest with one another: a preacher is not a super-human! He is an ordinary human being who is entitled to work 5 days a week and 8 hours a day. None of us, except the work slaves, are willing to do more. Let's start with the sermon: Preparing for a sermon usually takes between 20 and 30 hours a week, so almost 4 business days. On the fifth day, he has to make time to visit hospitals that are often widespread, attend meetings, preach, hold catechism, make crisis visits, fulfill synodical duties, attend to administrative affairs in the church office, hold burial services and much more. And then he is also expected to make time that same day to do 500 house visits throughout the year. May I put it very categorically: It is humanly totally impossible!

I think Paul often became discouraged, too, because he had to face criticism

from not only one, but many congregations that he and his associates established over a number of years. He was still responsible for every congregation, and he had to personally address their problems. How Paul managed it was a miracle!

Here he was burdened again with a huge problem, namely the church in Corinth. Things were not going well, and then the congregation still had the audacity to criticize him and question his way of working, because he had promised that he would come and visit them, but he didn't. Why? He was neglecting his duties!

Why doesn't the Reverend come to visit me? He is neglecting his duty! Really? Moreover, they do not understand everything Paul writes. He better come and explain to them personally if he knows what is good for him!

Paul explains that he acted with frankness and honesty that came from God. Moreover, he does not dare to be led by people's wisdom, but only by the grace of God (v 12). "I just hope you will understand us one day," Paul sighs.

Paul is accused of fickleness and unfaithfulness because he did not visit the congregation as promised. When he answers them about this, he first seeks the fault in himself. Maybe he was in a hurry? Or because of human considerations? But then he concludes that he listened to the Lord, for if he had made the intended visit, he would have gone against the Lord's will.

The Lord's message out of this to you and to me today is that we must think very carefully before we start criticizing wildly. And then I just want to add that it is not just about the preacher, but also in general. First, make sure of the

circumstances before you start making accusations. But then there is a second factor to keep in mind: what is the will of God? Who among us dares to prescribe to the Lord what He should do and what not, and what He may tell us and what not? After all, he is the LORD!

Prayer:

Lord, please put a guard in front of my mouth, and let me think twice before I criticise anybody.

Jesus' incense

2 Corinthians 2: 5-17

The smell of incense is trapped in my memory forever. A scent that reminds me of a visit to Durban's Oriental Market in my childhood.

Such an Oriental market is a marvelous world of spices and herbs, of rows and rows of stalls with colourful fine materials and exotic fruits, and of over-eager salesmen with matchless powers of persuasion. And then, of course, that aroma of incense hanging heavily in the air.

But not everyone is equally crazy about incense. Many people cannot bear the smell of it. For some people, it causes hay fever or asthma, and it feels as if they want to die from that very same nostalgic scent.

And this is exactly what Paul is talking

about here when he writes in 2 Cor 2:15 that we as believers are like incense. We spread the scent of Christ when our faith is burning. For some people, that scent is something that makes them want to be part of the church of Jesus. But unfortunately, that same scent represents the disgusting smell of death for other people. These are the people who realize all too thoroughly that Jesus is the only Way, but with such frivolities as faith they do not want to be concerned. Eternal death is their destiny, but the price to pay for salvation is simply too great! The scent of Christ spells to them "DEATH".

But now I'm actually moving ahead of today's scripture. The entire run-up to the incense story began with certain Corinthian congregation members who caused much grief for Paul and the other congregation members, troublemakers

who made life miserable for all. The problem is: how do you handle such grouses?

With great love! Of course, you can't just let it go it's way. The abscess must be eliminated, otherwise it will devour the entire congregation. The problem must be sorted out with the person, but then the big secret is that you forgive and forget about it. You dare not hold a grudge against him for years to come. We can conclude that Paul was bitterly hurt by this situation. However, he has already forgiven the person(s), and now he is asking the congregation to do the same. But it's not just a sake of forgiving. That person must be welcomed back warmly into the congregation. "Forgive and encourage," Paul pleads, "and show love to him" (vv. 7 and 8). Staying angry with the man would mean that you are actually

carrying out the plans of the devil, and that is not what a believer wants to do!

What Paul writes to the Corinthians, of course , exactly the same applies to us today. I have too often seen that the congregation remains angry with somebody and simply does not want to forgive him, or worse yet, fail to settle the matter with him. Maybe the leaders are too scared of confrontation to talk to him. I'm guilty of it myself, because I just can't handle confrontation - one of my weaknesses. Eventually, the thing snowballs, so the congregation is split into two. Once it has gone this far, it is extremely difficult to defuse the situation. On the other hand, I have also seen the results, of an abcess being pricked open by being discussed.

A trouble maker usually has a very strong personality, and if he is lovingly withdrawn into the congregation, he can

be invaluable to the congregation. So get him on your side rather than against you!

Once these kinds of things start happening in a congregation, and the close bonds of love that bind the congregation together become visible outside the congregation, then you are spreading the wonderful scent of Jesus.

Someone tells me about a Muslim woman who came to her during an outreach to Jordan. The woman remarked that these Christian outreach groups are all so refreshingly different. Their love for each other is so remarkable!

On Sunday mornings after the worship service, the members of our congregation stand around for a long time chatting and drinking coffee, eventually leaving after much persuasion, so as to lock up the church!

Why? Because the scent of love and unity is spread. Often here are visitors from elsewhere, and then they socialize, and immediately feel part of the “family.” This is the kind of incense Paul writes about.

I want to ask you this morning: how welcome do people feel in your congregation? People have often told me that they do not enjoy their own church. How do you manage to get people together as a family to practise the fellowship of the saints? Pray with some friends about the matter, and then make a decision to just have a good Sunday morning. Invite others from outside through your heartiness, and soon there will be a wonderful group sharing their love for one another and thus spreading the incense of Jesus.

Prayer:

Lord, I would like to spread Your love to

everyone I come into contact with.

Letter for Jesus

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Yesterday's scripture almost wants you to think that Paul is blowing his own trumpet. For example, he writes, "We are not like others who make money out of the Word of God," and then he goes on to say that he preached the Word in sincerity and responsibility on behalf of God. Does that sound a bit conceited? I think Paul himself suspected that this could create that impression, and so he was very quick to ask, "Are we beginning to praise ourselves?" (2 Cor. 3: 1).

We got to know Paul as someone who is extremely outspoken, and straightforward. He says a thing as he believes it to be said. And if he believes he is setting an example, then he says so too. But he does not want to create the impression that he commending himself. The only thing that really

matters to him is the gospel preaching. However, this matter is so closely intertwined with his own life that his life is truly an example of how it should be done. I think Paul could rightly believe that he was right to make such statements! After all, he was convinced in his heart that he was right.

When applying for a job, the first thing your prospective employer usually asks for is a letter of recommendation, or a resume. That document is not drawn up by anyone else, but by yourself. Look, I already had seen CV's which made me laugh! The way some people praise themselves, and saying how wonderful they really are, can be hilarious. The tragic thing is that a resume has lost its value totally nowadays, precisely because of this tendency to colour in a resume so wonderfully. What is the truth?

The same goes for testimonials. All too often a person gets so caught up in a testimonial that he becomes completely unrecognizable. The testimonials I received in my Matric Year described me as being an angel!

In short: CVs and testimonials have become totally worthless. If Paul were to ask us today, if it is necessary for him to send his resume first before we listen to him, what would be our response?

If Curt Darren were to perform in your town tonight, do you think it would be necessary for him to first hand out his resume? It may include how many CDs he has sold in his career, how many times he has already performed and how popular he is. Such a resume might attract a lot of people. But he doesn't need a resume, because he is well known for his charisma and stage personality. People look past his

mistakes and see the artist behind them, and they flock to his performances. He is his own CV and testimonial.

In the same way, Paul did not need letters of recommendation to preach the Gospel. But it's not about Paul, but the readers of this letter. He wants to emphasise to everyone who reads the letter, to be such a living testimonial. "You are a letter of Christ," Paul writes, "written with the Spirit of the living God, not on stone, but on the hearts of men."

The question this morning is, what does our own letter look like? What does the world read out there when they open our letter? Maybe we should pause for a while and read our own letter first. Look for spelling mistakes, ugly words and spots where the ink pot fell over.

The very first thing we need to look at is who is the author of our "biography". Is it truly Jesus? Or did the devil also write a

few lines? If the devil has used his pen on my note, things like anger, lovelessness, anger, unforgiveness, gossip, evil talk, selfishness, greed and all that nasty stuff will come out somewhere in my life. Anyone who reads those things in my biography will know immediately that Jesus is not sitting on my throne of life. Funny how one single dirty dot on a letter, spoils the entire biography, even though it is written in the most beautiful print. And the more beautiful the letter, the uglier that spot stands out. It is a warning to people who live very close to the Lord to live so much more meticulously, otherwise they mess up their "biography."

What should be written in a believer's life story? Love, kindness, trusting in God, love, caring for others, love, compassion for others' needs, a passion for the

Gospel, love, honesty, self-sacrifice, love, bubbling joy - even under difficult circumstances, love. Did I maybe forget to mention love?

What does my life story look like? Is it necessary for someone to write a letter of recommendation about me first? I would like to invite you to pray with me about this. Let's do a little introspection and fix the problems.

Prayer:

Lord, my life story has so many nasty ink spots. Please help me to get it clean.

The New Covenant

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Poor Paul fought fiercely, not against gentiles, but against his own people. In the first place, of course, there were the Jews who still clung to the Jewish faith. These people regarded Paul, who was once a fiery Pharisee, as a traitor, and on several occasions wanted to kill him for disobeying the law of Moses. And then there was a second group, the Jews, who adopted the Christian faith, but still clung to the old Jewish traditions and the law. They still demanded that circumcision be a prerequisite for a life of faith, and that the laws of purity should be strictly adhered to. They even wanted to try to force the gentiles who came to faith in Jesus to fulfill these requirements. In Acts we see the fiery debates that have been held on this issue. And what we read in Acts are just

the tips of the hippopotamus's ears. They fought for days on end over this thorny issue.

In the end, the "synod" made a decision on this in a large meeting in Jerusalem. They agreed that the gentiles who come to faith in Jesus should not be placed under the burden of the law of Moses. After all, they are not Jews. But not everyone was happy with this, and still, many years after, there were still the die-hards trying to push the laws down everyone's throats. This confused the poor gentiles, and they did not know which way to turn.

Paul is now trying to explain. Because he was a Pharisee himself, he knows these things very well, and he knows exactly how their heads work. As a Pharisee, it was instilled in him that you must obey the law one hundred percent, and if you are also a descendant of

Abraham and circumcised, then you will receive salvation. In fact, the Pharisees took the whole thing a step further, and made a whole series of laws that would prevent you from accidentally breaking a certain law. They had certain prayer times and prayer belts. The law is tied in a container against their foreheads. Yes, even things that were meant figuratively, they performed literally.

“The letter kills, the spirit creates life,” Paul writes, and he knows exactly what he is talking about! It is not about the outward actions, but about what is written in your heart. Paul speaks of the law that was carved on stone tablets by the hand of God at that time. Tough, rigid laws that had to be carried out. At that time it was very necessary, because it had to give the Israelites, who lived in paganism for hundreds of years, a guide to follow. In the new dispensation, these

laws should not be written on stone but on believers' hearts.

Now, I'm going to say one thing that many believers might stone me about: In faith, it's no longer about keeping the Ten Commandments. Are you shocked? The Ten Commandments are negative: you may not do this and you may not. If you do not obey these commandments promptly, some people say, your path is going straight to hell! No, that's not true!

What did Jesus say? He said that there must be two important guidelines in your life: Love God, and love your fellow man. This is a positive law. What does it mean? If you truly have love for God in your heart, you certainly will not abuse His holy name, as it has become so high-fashioned these days. Just watch any movie and count how many times the Lord's Name is abused for every little thing. If you truly love the Lord, you will

honor Him above all and everyone, and other gods will no longer have a place in your life. Other gods? Things like making an idol of sports, money, food or anything. If you truly love Him, you will trust Him for everything in your life. Then you will have a living relationship with Him.

What about your fellow-man? If you love your fellow-man, the commandments given to Moses will automatically be part of your life. Then, unloving acts such as theft, adultery and killing will definitely not appear in your dictionary. "Killing" actually has a very wide meaning: it is to hurt your fellow man in any way, not only by your actions, but also by your words. By gossiping or speaking evil of someone, you are actually killing him mentally. And then the awful one: desires! Oh yes, there are also good desires, such as living closer to Jesus.

But there are also bad desires, and it is these that lead to all kinds of vile sins that can hurt people bitterly. If there is truly love in your heart, there will be no room for these desires, and you will automatically respect your parents as well as other older people and give them the honour they deserve.

So, if I say it's not about complying with the commandments, then I actually want to say that with love, you are automatically complying with the commandments. It's going to be written in your heart, and you're going to live it.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me much more love in my heart, and teach me to truly live it.

The Old and New Dispensations

2 Corinthians 3:7-18

Ever wondered about the Old and New Dispensations? We, the Christian believers, are living in the New dispensation today. Paul is trying to explain the differences here with figurative language.

The Old Dispensation (Old Testament times) obviously had a very long run. It began with Adam and Eve, where the Lord made a covenant with them in the Garden of Eden. It was passed on to Noah, Abraham, and Jacob. But the Old Dispensation really only reached its peak with Moses.

In Egypt, for the first time, the Jews truly became a nation. Over a period of several hundred years, they grew from a small handful of Jacob's children to 3½ million people. When we read between

the lines, it seems that their faith was completely blunted by the overwhelming idolatry of the Egyptians. They no longer knew what was right and wrong, and many of them probably didn't even know who God was anymore. Therefore, at his first meeting with the Lord, Moses asked the Lord how he should explain to the people, Who is this God who sent him - what is His name?

At the command of the Lord, Moses led the people to Mount Sinai, where He initially met the Lord. Here, the people would truly see the glory of God, which would strengthen their faith, which had hitherto been very unstable. To the people, these sightings of the Holy God were a terrifying experience. They did not see Him themselves, but only experienced His holy presence, but it was already too much for them, and Moses was sent to meet God on the

mountain.

To Moses, this must have been a tremendous, indescribable experience. Not only did he deal with the Lord alone, but God also gave him here the law to convey to the people. Remember, the people did not know the difference between right and wrong, and they had to be taught in advance how to conduct themselves towards one another and towards the Lord. For the people, this was the beginning of a whole new era, where they had to learn to walk in faith like babies.

For Moses, the whole experience was so great that his face actually shone. It scared people to look at him, and eventually Moses was forced to wear a veil. Moses was ecstatic, and the people were also on a great high.

However, it did not last very long, and gradually this wonderful experience

began to fade. Moses' face was no longer so radiant, and fearing that the people would notice that his face no longer shone, he simply continued to wear the veil. For the people, the law was initially a guide on how to live and serve God. Over the years that followed, however, for most Jews, it began to be about keeping the law for the sake of the law. They completely overlooked its purpose.

The question that is often asked is whether God made a mistake with the law? No, definitely not! Moses and the law had a definite place and significance in the history of man. However, it was a temporary measure, something of a transient nature. It had to prepare the way for that great event of salvation that had come with Jesus. Of course, Jesus' coming as Savior was already planned, many millennia before Moses.

However, along with Jesus' act of redemption, something else of vital importance happened: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. These two events brought to an end the Old Dispensation and brought about a complete New Dispensation. There are two aspects involved in this dispensation: first, of course, Jesus' salvation. As we as believers are all well aware, Jesus is the only Way to God and to salvation.

But what about the law? Is it no longer necessary to keep the law? This is where the second aspect comes in - the Holy Spirit. Because He is now part of every believer's life, He is the One who writes the law in our hearts. Now it is also no longer the rigid laws that Moses had to pass on to the people, but as we saw in the previous passage, the law of love. The Holy Spirit guides us in this new law so that we can become more

and more like the image of Jesus. Paul writes that the brilliance on Moses' face faded, but that the brilliance of the glory of God that we must reflect must shine brighter and brighter, as the Spirit guides us.

The salvation of Jesus and the guidance of the Spirit are inextricably part of each other, and as believers we never dare to separate the two. So listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and obey Him.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank you for saving me. Please also guide me to obey Your Holy Spirit.

A Veil over the Gospel

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Paul can certainly be a role model for any person engaged in the spreading of the Gospel. Here he tells the congregation in Corinth a little about his ministry and that of his associates. I think they should have faced a lot of opposition everywhere they preached the Word, but they still did it with joy. Jaco Thom wrote a novel about Paul's life story. The image Jaco creates is one of a missionary who is often devastated by his circumstances. I myself wrote a book about him in Afrikaans, with all the information I could gather from the Bible about Paul, titled: "Paulus, Sendeling na die Heidene."

It was especially the Jews who continued to persecute him in every possible way, because he would preach a "heresy." According to them, he

despised all the old Jewish traditions, and often they wanted to kill him or expel him from the city. On the other hand, there were Gentiles who often wanted to kill him for messing up their businesses with the Gospel.

Most of us would have been hopelessly discouraged by the impossible circumstances under which Paul worked. The worst was that he did not earn a salary for what he did. Occasionally, a congregation gave him some sustenance, but most of the time he had to make tents to stay alive.

However, Paul did not despair. Why not? "God had mercy on us and commissioned this ministry to us," he says, and for that reason he was able to face life with great joy, even when times were tough.

The one big secret behind this work of Paul and his associates was that they

were very honest in their ministry. They they committed themselves to ministering the Word absolutely pure. There were no gimmicks, and only the truth was proclaimed by them, though it often cost them much opposition.

In spite of all this, the Gospel was often covered with a "veil" for certain hearers. Why? Just because people don't want to hear the Word. Paul says that "their minds are blinded by the god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4: 4). The devil covers their minds so badly that they cannot see the Gospel.

Can we now say that it is only the devil's fault that some people are blind and deaf to the Gospel? Indeed, he has great influence, but we cannot well attribute everything evil to the devil. Every person, whether a believer or not, knows what is right and wrong. If an unbeliever purposefully finds himself in a sinful

situation, he plays right into the hand of the devil, and allows a dividing wall to come between him and the Lord. To cite an example: everyone knows it is wrong to steal. Most unbelievers will not stop at such dangerous things. However, there are those who knowingly become involved in theft, perhaps simply because the opportunity presented itself. Ultimately, it becomes a way of life that spurs him on to other more serious crimes. The deeper he immerses himself in the mess, the further he drives away from any form of religion, and the less he comes in contact with an opportunity to hear the Gospel. There is in fact a veil between him and the Gospel. The devil's work? Yes, but definitely also his own!

But that's unbelievers! I am a believer after all, so it will definitely not happen to me! Really? We should never be too reassured. I have often seen believers

slowly starting to drift away from the Lord. I have often received sad letters from people saying that they no longer know if they are still saved people. Once upon a time he gave his heart to the Lord, but now he's not sure anymore. He doesn't come to church and his life is a mess. It feels like the Lord has forgotten about him.

Listen to what Paul says: "We avoid practices that cannot bear the light and that we should be ashamed of" (verse 2). As a believer it is hard work and discipline to live in such a way that the Gospel is not veiled from you. Indeed, Jesus lightened our hearts with His bright, pure light the day He came into our lives. However, it is my duty as a believer to keep that wonderful light on, and to make it shine brighter and brighter every day, so that other people can also see the light of Jesus through

me. When I live in that light and actively work in the Lord's vineyard, there simply cannot be a veil that makes the Gospel fade for me. When I live that way, I give the Holy Spirit space in my life, and allow Him to guide my life and lead me on the right path. Then He truly becomes the Comforter that Jesus promised me with His Ascension.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me the strength to live actively for You every day, so that there will never be a veil between me and You.

Treasure in Clay Pots

2 Corinthians 4:7-15

We are like clay pots, says Paul, very vulnerable and fragile clay pots. But a wonderful treasure is hidden inside these decaying clay pots of ours. What exactly does he mean by this? Believers are not super people, we are just ordinary people who have also been exposed to the transience of life. Even the most devout believer cannot live a single day without sinning or stumbling. Many of our bodies are also shattered by illness and other suffering, and many believers are cruelly persecuted.

But what is important is what we carry within us. The Holy Spirit is in us, and He is the greatest treasure we can ever dream of.

Paul wrote a poem to illustrate this. I tried to reproduce the poem in my own

words.

Oppressed am I, so constantly,
so terribly afflicted
But Jesus holds my hand so tight,
that I am never depressed!
I feel so dumb; I cannot think,
my mind is misted over.
But despondent? With God with me?
No way, my brother!

I'm persecuted, bullied,
they keep on hitting me.
But God is always at my side,
His help is never far!
I was trampled, felled down,
my body is in pain.
But standing up, am I for sure!
For God is my comfort!

Jesus is my Saviour and
His image I carry in me
By how I live and what I do,

everyone sees Him in me!
It rejoices within me
to carry this cross
I'll continue to live in love,
the way that Jesus wants!

My Better Half has a thing about clay pots. When we pass by a roadside stall, the first thing looks for is a beautiful clay pot. The problem, however, is that the clay pots you buy in the remote countryside aren't usually baked in an oven to make them strong, so they break easily. The fate of many clay pots in our house was that someone just accidentally knocked them over, and then they were cracked or broken. But then yours truly usually saves the pot from the trash, because such a cracked pot gives character to your garden. And then the broken pot gets a place of honour where it decorates the garden beautifully, so being very useful.

Indeed, the clay pots of our own lives are often the same. Believers are also not exactly hard-hearted, and you easily get cracked by life. We usually want to see it as a bad thing that happened to us. When we collapse mentally, physically or financially, it sometimes feels like the end of the world has come.

When we went bankrupt a few years ago and lost everything, it also felt like the end of the world for me! But the Lord had a purpose for it, and I still see His wonderful hand in everything that happens to me every day. For example, one thing I learned is to rely on Him alone. I can cite numerous examples of how He provided at just the right time when I needed something desperately. The Lord still provides for our needs today. On top of that, we get tons of love and care from people, some of whom we would never even expect.

On my porch, there was once a palm tree in a heavy clay pot. One day, the tree's roots became too big for the pot, causing it to shatter, broken, irreparable. I wanted to throw it away at first, but I got busy, so I forgot about it and left it just like that, with the potsherds lying around it. And then the interesting happened: for the first time, everyone passing saw the pot and the tree, and everyone talked about this particular root system of the tree that was now so exposed and how interesting the potsherds decorated the tree.

When life breaks your clay pot, don't cry about it. Yes, it is sometimes very painful, but know that there is a wonderful purpose to it. Your broken pot is often worth much more than when it was beautiful and whole.

Most importantly, however, is not the pot, but the contents of the pot. Often a pot

has to break so as to reveal it's contents, such as my palm tree in the broken pot. The Contents of a believer's clay pot is the Lord. How do we reveal and show Him to the world?

Prayer:

Lord, I realize this morning that I am just a fragile clay pot. Help me to showcase my Contents to the world.

Our Old Tent Dwelling

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

From a relatively young age, a dear friend of ours had already begun to see the signs of rheumatism in her body. She played tennis regularly, but gradually it became more and more difficult to hold a racket, and in addition, the pain in her back handicapped her so much that she had to stop playing. But it did not stop her bell-ringing sound, cheerful, always cheerful and cheerful, and she could never stop talking about her Savior. She later gave her beautiful piano to the church when the rheumatism in her fingers began to get so bad that she could no longer let the enchanting sounds flow from it. But still, she was an encouragement to everyone she came into contact with.

Several back surgeries were inevitable in the end, as the pain consumed her.

Complications with anesthetics often almost cost her life, and the consequences were terrible. But still she remained a bubbly person, an inspiration to everyone who met her. She later had to use a walking frame to give her mobility. If you found her shopping, then you knew you'd be staying for a while, because she couldn't stop talking, with her bubbling laughter echoing through the store! More operations followed, each time with catastrophic consequences. One operation left her completely paralyzed. According to the doctors, she would never walk again. A few months later, she was again shuffling behind her frame, warped by rheumatism and pain, but still sparkling as always, and still full of courage. Her old "tent dwelling" was distorted and often it was only the big guns like morphine that could ease the pain. But

to give up, and stop witnessing the love of Jesus, she never did! Rochellé was a real encouragement to everyone who met her.

We become so easily discouraged, or even angry with the Lord, when the slightest setback hits us. Paul was talking about a tent dwelling. He certainly knew very well what he was talking about, because he made tents himself, and he knew exactly how fragile they could be. And if a storm hit such a tent, it could very easily be blown away. Personally, I often sat shivering in a tent as the storm raged outside. It's no joke! So our old earthly body is also just a temporary tent dwelling that has been exposed to all kinds of storms. Some tents are made of strong canvas, and can withstand the worst storms. Other are made of lightweight material that leak when it rains or rip if the wind blows

too strongly. Some of us are often very fragile, and we are sometimes knocked over by just a breeze.

But a tent is something you usually stay in for a limited time only. You have your home where you live permanently! Some houses are small and shabby, others are palaces, depending on how you have progressed in life. The same goes for our life here on earth: your body is only temporary, just as long as you reside here on earth. Your real body is waiting for you when your tent dwelling finally gives in, because then you will move into your permanent home. Some are not going to have a grand house, because they did very little for Jesus during their “holiday”. Others are going to get a palace again because they truly served the King on earth.

Have you ever spent a holiday in a tent where things are really miserable? One

where the rains and storms plague you? You have two choices: You can either stay in your tent with a long face, and make the whole vacation for yourself and everyone around you a nightmare. Or you can decide to dance in the rain, splashing in the water pools, laughing and enjoying yourself in spite of the bad weather. The same is true for our tent dwelling where we are on earth: If the storms plague you, you can sit down and pity yourself, and maybe blame the Lord for your situation. Or you can use the storms to your own and other people's benefit, and cheerfully praise the Lord, despite the storms. Don't let life storms get you down. Rise above your problems like Rochellé. When the worst storm in my life hit me, I first wanted to cover my head in sand. But then I made a decision to trust the Lord to hold me in His arms during the crisis. The results were

amazing! Instead of sitting down and crying in defeat, I could suddenly laugh and tackle life with renewed enthusiasm. And I got plenty of help from dear friends to help me tackle life again. I cry easily these days. However, I do not weep with sorrow, but with gratitude and wonder for the wonderful faithful care of the Father in my life.

All these things just mean that you cannot help but reflect with new zeal the wonderful light of Jesus. How wonderful it would be if the Lord would make me live in the heavenly dwelling today! But already, on the other hand, He makes life in my old tent dwelling an everlasting feast for me. I'm overflowing with gratitude!

Prayer:

Thank you for all the wonderful things You do for me, Lord, I praise and honour Your great Name!

Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Reconciliation has become a very big word. We experienced it in our own beautiful South Africa in 1994 during the big election. People were angry with each other, but at the same time they were also afraid of each other. Some responded in anger and swore revenge. Others again hid away and stored food, or even fled the country because the end of the country had arrived. Many people were embittered by injustice committed against them over many years. Some wanted justice done with violence, while others just wanted peace.

You probably remember how the mediators struggled with the wisdom of Solomon to get all the parties around the same table to find a solution. Some accused the mediators as traitors who gave away the land, while others praised

them as angels of peace.

1994 Was not the last reconciliation attempt. Even today, there are peacemakers working day and night to bring rebels and governments together to try to stop the terrible bloodshed. Sometimes they are successful, more often they fail tragically, then someone else had to take over.

What should someone look like that could bring about reconciliation? What should he look for in life? First of all, he must have 100% faith in the cause he is fighting for. If he has the least doubt, chances are he will fail. In the second place, it must be about reconciliation alone, and there can be no side issues. If he does it to get something out of it, it will end in disaster. Thirdly, he must have the patience of Job, because reconciliation is a process that can take a long time, and the parties often have

the most absurd conditions. And every time when there seems to be a breakthrough, someone again thinks of another obstacle to throw in the road. A conciliator must also be prepared to keep things simple, and not to use all kinds of gimmicks, because later it will only cause problems again.

When Paul writes about the ministry of reconciliation, it is not only between man versus man, but also between man versus God. The problem is that one cannot truly happen without the other. To be reconciled to God also involves reconciliation with your fellow-man. Surely you can't say that you suddenly love the Lord very much, but you still hate your neighbour?

What should this reconciliation look like between man and the Lord? In the first place, his belief in the matter must be unflinching. Surely you can't tell

someone to believe in Jesus, if you are not fully convinced yourself? In the Reformed church in the Netherlands, one of the teachers is an Atheist. Now, I do not understand at all: how can he preach faith if he does not believe himself? It just doesn't make sense! I do not mean to say that anyone who is still young and uncertain in the faith cannot preach the Gospel. On the contrary, the Lord wants you to testify from the moment you come into faith. However, it also means that you must work hard to strengthen your faith so that you can become a more effective witness.

Secondly, it is purely for you to be reconciling alone. There may be no side-issues linked to it. When I write these excerpts, I do not proclaim the Dutch Reformed Church or any doctrine. It's about Jesus alone! So please do not ask me about all kinds of doctrines through

which churches differ. This is besides the point!

Thirdly, it may not be about what I can gain from it. Jesus offered us the atonement free and purely out of grace, and therefore we dare not in any way try to profit from it. However, that does not mean that we should not pay our preacher. On the contrary, it is precisely our duty to give him a good sustenance so that he can give all his time to the training of members and the preaching, and not as poor Paul often had to make tents to stay alive. Incidentally, Paul also received sustenance in certain congregations, which gave him more time for the Gospel.

And then you definitely have to have the patience of Job as you spread the Gospel. People come up with the most absurd excuses not to make a decision. We must remember two things: we must

give such a person time to make a decision for himself. You dare not bully him into making a decision. Secondly, it is never my own persuasion that makes him decide, but the Holy Spirit working in him.

Finally: Keep it simple and scriptural. Don't come up with all kinds of gimmicks, because later things are going to complicate things for you. And work with great zeal! Every believer (yes, you and me too!) is an evangelist!

Prayer:

Lord, please keep the gospel fire burning inside me.

Everything for Everyone

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

I'm always afraid that I might write something in my daily devotional that will offend someone. Yet I still manage to step on someone's toes every so often, and then I have to please explain to stay out of trouble. My big criterion is to remain scripture-bound only, because the moment you stray from Scripture, you are in great trouble. But unfortunately I am only human, and besides, I do not have all the book knowledge that a minister has. So I ask now in advance: forgive me if I write something that you totally disagree with. I'm not referring to a specific case right now, because I've often been asked about something that someone disagrees with. However, I take comfort in the fact that every time I am rebuked, someone else is ecstatic about the exact

same thing.

I also take comfort in the fact that I do not stand alone in this problem - I am in good company. All pastors are rebuked at one time or another about something they said. Furthermore even Paul, the greatest missionary of all time, often had to endure his hiding because someone was unhappy with his remarks. And the attack on him was often not just an oral one, but physical. In 2 Cor 6:5, he writes: "We were beaten, thrown in prison, and ended up in rioting". If there was one man who had reason to lament, it was Paul, because he could never do everything right in everyone's eyes.

For that reason, Paul had to be extra careful to live, act, and preach absolutely faultless. Friendliness had to radiate out of him, and he had to understand everyone's circumstances. He had to be tolerant. Why? Paul worked with

basically four groups of people of totally different views.

On the one hand there were the staunch Jews, who clung to all the old Jewish traditions and laws. They expected him, as a Pharisee, to do exactly the same. If he did not follow the law impeccably as their traditions expected it, then he was in deep trouble.

The second group was the Jewish believers. Most of them could not start with the traditions, but at the same time they worshipped Jesus. They were divided on exactly what was expected of them. They were confused.

The third group was the unbelieving Gentiles, who were furious about Paul's disdain for their gods, and coax away their fellow worshippers.

And then there was the fourth group: Gentiles who came into faith. They had

absolutely no qualms about Jewish traditions, and could not understand what all the fuss was about. The Jews expected them to follow at least some of the Jewish traditions, such as circumcision.

And somewhere between these four groups, poor Paul and his associates were trapped. It was a completely impossible task to live in such a way as to satisfy everyone. And the things they preached caused even more consternation, because the Jewish believers wanted Paul to preach that the law should be fully maintained, while the Gentile believers demanded that Paul preach that everyone was freed from the law, and that it is totally unnecessary.

Therefore, Paul wrote the poem to illustrate what they had to go through: “We receive honour and dishonour, we are offended and praised” (2 Cor. 6:8).

In our own ministry it is often the same as with Paul, and I have to tread carefully! Despite this, I am often tempted to voice my opinion on some controversial topic. It is easy for a preacher in a congregation, as he preaches what the views of his church or congregation are. Unfortunately, I write to believers on a very wide range of views. There are those who believe that creation is only 6,000 years old, and others who believe it is 15 billion years old. There is the issue of the Sabbath or Sunday. Then there are questions about baptism, Holy Communion, observance of the law, tolerance for gay people and much more.

I've been enticed a few times to touch on these kinds of topics, and every time I've been reprimanded about it. On the other hand, there are often people who try to convince me to take on their views.

There is only one subject that we all agree on, and that is the wonderful act of salvation of Jesus. We can agree on that. Let us praise the Lord for this, and resolve all other disputes. After all, Jesus is great above all and everyone, and He is the mighty Lord and Saviour, strong Redeemer and Eternal God! Amen!

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we worship You as our Saviour. Help us to live in such a way that everyone will praise You through our lives.

Way of life for Jesus

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

A Bible version can be easily disengaged, and then seen as a total way of life. Take, for example, the first verse of today's scripture: "Do not go into the same yoke with unbelievers." The first thought that comes to mind as you read it is your work situation. Most of us work shoulder to shoulder with unbelievers. Should I resign immediately and look for another job where only believers work? And if my spouse is an infidel, does that mean I have to divorce him/her?

If we are going to read this version on our own, and literally want to record it, then it is indeed the command! But as we read much further, we begin to see that it is about much more than a work situation with unbelievers. In addition, if we take into account the living conditions

of the people in Corinth, it will start to change the picture completely.

What were believers in Corinth's situation? They were a very small minority in the midst of a crowd of idol worshippers. The city was very strategically located, with a port on two sides of the city. There was a constant flow of Italians, Egyptians, Syrians, Jews and Easterners, and everyone's religion was reflected in the city. There were temples for Apollo, Asklepius, Aphrodite (the sex goddess), Demeter and Persephone. In the temple of Aphrodite, a thousand prostitutes were housed as priests, and prostitution was the norm. The moral standard of the city was something terrible, and drunken orgies were the order of the day.

So you find that Paul is talking about a way of life rather than a work situation. Just think, if you were used to the

dissolute way of life of Corinth, then it can be quite difficult to suddenly have to live a completely different type of life. Everywhere around you, that life of free sex and drink continues. The believer must therefore refrain from doing so because it is a sinful life. It was not easy for the believers! Elsewhere in Paul's letters to Corinth, he speaks precisely of the fervent influence on the congregation, where believers still practised sinful practices as a way of life. So Paul wants to tell the Corinthian believers that they have to separate themselves from the sinful life of the city and distance them from it. They had to live a life that matched that of a believer! Therefore, not to pull in the same yoke as an unbeliever, we can see rather than not lead the same kind of life as an unbeliever.

If we were to apply this principle to our

present-day life, then we can see how the seductions of the city today beckon to us as believers. Our country is pervaded with idols of a different nature, but they are just as enticing and seductive as the temples of Corinth. All around us there are the temples of the seductive money god, the casinos. These temples are designed to attract even the most hardened believer, with their breathtaking architectural beauty and spectacular displays. The most beautiful example of this is the Lost City, which attracts millions of people each year. And once you are there, the one-arm bandits are winking with their flashing lights and promises of millions waiting for you.

Then there are still the sex temples like Teasers, which make the men's eyes pop, places where they can surrender to the lust. And don't think that you won't

find believers there! Everyone does it!

Shall I move on? In the business world, there is the Temple of Corruption that sends swells across our country like a tidal wave. For example, to get a plan approved in a municipality, you first need to bribe the building inspector!

“How can there be a partnership between right and wrong?” Paul asks. “And how can there be communion between light and darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14). If we live in a relationship with Jesus, we cannot also have a relationship with these kinds of worldly practices, the practices of the devil. Think of it this way: as a believer, the Holy Spirit lives in you and me. Shall I now take Him into a gambling hole with me? Or in a nasty place like the clubs where girls sit on my lap and dance without clothes on? I'm horrified at the mere thought of it! And will I run

dishonest business practices like everyone else does anyway? And this while my Savior Jesus is here with me? How can I !?

With this passage, Paul wants to press on me and you to live differently than an unbeliever. The day that Jesus saves you, your entire outlook on life must change from one that no longer follows the devil's practices to a way of life that will constantly ask, "What does Jesus want me to do in this situation?" way of life, you will no longer be in the same yoke as the unbeliever, but you will rather focus on the noble things of life.

Prayer:

Lord, please keep my eye on Jesus, and give me the desire to do things that are sacred, rather than following the lusts of the world.

Chastisement

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

Sunday afternoon on the farm. I sigh heavily, I'm dead-bored! All the grown-ups have passed out and snoring, while I have to rest and play with my toes. I'm not allowed to do this and I'm not allowed to do that or go swimming, because it's Sunday. I'm bored, I'm bored stiff!

I hear the dogs bark, and I just know that something is happening outside. I run outside, and then I see the bicycles coming down the dirt road. My heart does a double summersault. These are some of my friends who rode out of town to come for some sports on Sunday afternoon here at our farm outside Waterval Boven. I run to meet them: "Howzit! Howzit?" It's summer and it's hot, especially after the pedalling over the steep hills on the way to our farm.

"Let's cool down in the dam first," comes the request from the panting guys. My heart gives a few wild heartbeats. Dad explicitly said that I may not go swimming today. After all, it's Sunday, and you don't swim on a Sunday! I still want to protest, but the village boys are already on their way to the dam. So what can I do now? The clothes are already being stripped off in the run and by the time we reach the dam everyone is already naked. But who cares? The grown-ups are still sleeping, and anyway, who is going to notice a bunch of naked boys?

Judging by the screaming, swimming, diving and mud-throwing to each other, everybody is enjoying themselves in the dam. And gone are all the Sunday blues! Above all the noise, I imagine I hear someone calling to me up there from the house. At first I ignored it, but when the

voice becomes urgent: "Louis, come here immediately!" I suddenly get a sinking feeling in my stomach. I grab my pants and put them on while running. I know for sure that I'm in a deep mess this time. Dad explicitly told me not to swim, and

Dad doesn't get angry easily, but the face that pops up in front of me gives me the chills. Dad means business! In the dam I can still hear my mates laughing, and it hurts! "Go pick yourself a cane," came the order. I have never received such an assignment in my life. Crying I walk to the field. I know exactly which tree makes the best clay stick, and I know which one can hit the most painful, the quince stick! It's very difficult, because now I have to pick a cane for my OWN backside! Raw sobbing sounds escape from my chest.

And then comes the worst part: the

sermon! It was sixty years ago, but I still remember every single word. The hiding hurts, but the words hurt much. Then I lay down in my room and cried. My mates had gone quietly. And I lay there crying with heart-rending sobs. "It's unfair!" I sob to myself, "very unfair!"

At dusk, Dad enters my room, where I still lie and sob. He talks to me soothingly, and then he explains what it was about. And I understand. It is as if a thunder cloud suddenly lit up and opens, and the bright sunshine enlightens my heart. I was bruised, but now life makes sense again, and I feel good about it. Everything is over, and I can laugh again. Dad was right all the time!

There were bitter tears in the Corinthian congregation following Paul's harsh letter to them. It also hurt Paul to write the letter. For days and weeks and months, he lived in agony to hear what

had happened after Titus had delivered the letter. "What is keeping Titus so long?" Paul wondered assuredly. And then, one fine day, he sees Titus frolicing in the dirt road. And then Paul knew that everything had worked out well in Corinth. His letter was harsh, but it had the right effect, and now they understood each other. Titus is excited, and Paul can laugh again. And the Corinthians? They set things right, and after Paul's chastising, which hurt a lot, they are happy again.

In church, we are often bitterly afraid of confrontation when things go awry. Personally, I shy away from any kind of confrontation, because it's not pleasant. Someone is going to get hurt in the process. However, we must remember that any form of chastisement must meet some requirements. In the first place, it must be scriptural. Secondly, it must

happen with the greatest love and compassion, and the one who performs it must do it prayerfully and constantly seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. You must also always remain aware of what the chastisement is all about. Discipline does not mean to “punish” someone, but to try to help someone who has fallen into sin to get out of the mess and return to the Lord. You must also make sure that person sees it in the same light.

Discipline is not pleasant for anyone, but often it is essential. We dare not neglect to do this, otherwise we ourselves are guilty.

Prayer:

Lord, please give us wisdom and courage to apply discipline again according to Your Holy Word.

Hidings of Life

2 Corinthians 7:8-16

Military service in the sixties was no joke. A poor troop could never do anything right, no matter how hard he tried. I remember my first introduction to the dreaded parade grounds very well. At school I got to know all the basics of drill, at least I thought so. Until the day I enter Potchefstroom's parade ground. I hear that a Bombardier is actually the artillery variation of a Corporal. He bombards our poor troops with orders that only himself could understand, and yells at us. Suddenly all my school cadet knowledge was erased from my mind. When he shouts, "Hêêêêêê ho!" Then I do a just around just there. And then he yelled at me to run around that tree. And off I go! Potchefstroom's parade grounds didn't have any trees right now, and the ones that were there

were very far away! And if you don't run quickly enough, then the whole platoon must do one hundred pushups, and then everyone is angry with you, and then you have to pay for it later as well.

We were drilled until we started to drop, one by one, out of exhaustion. The sun was hot and the Bombardier merciless. But the parade ground was nothing compared to the obstacle course, where you had to crawl through rolls of barbed wire and climb over walls and with ropes over a mud hole. The Sergeant in charge was worse than the devil himself, and every little mistake was ruthlessly exploited. His punitive measures caused many troopers to land in hospital.

And don't think that when the sun goes down you can relax. That's when you start to iron your bed so that the sheets look like starched napkins on a king's table. At midnight, room inspection is

done. One single fold or grain of dust, and the whole dormitory is in trouble. Then you work until dawn to get everything back to standard. But then of course it's time to get up again, and time for the parade ground. And in the meantime, you still have to stand guard!

Do you remember? The younger men will not know what we went through. The punishment was often so terribly unfair. There were often murder thoughts inside you when you only heard the name of a Sergeant or Bombardier.

The result, however, was that when the border war broke out, the discipline of these men, entrapped in them, often saved their lives. That discipline has worn them throughout the brutal Bush War, and today those troopers of yesteryear can tell of the most incredible situations they could survive simply because of the heartless training they

went through. Today, I can only thank the Lord for missing the Bush War myself. My military service expired before I could be called up for border service.

In your spiritual life, it is often the same as military training. Many times it feels so unfair to you, the things that happen to you. Sometimes you even feel angry with the Lord that He could allow such things to hit you. And then we want to ask the question: "Why does the Lord punish me like that? Were my sins then so great that I had to endure this punishment?" Moreover, it feels bitterly unfair when we look at others who are never "punished", people who only experience moonlight and roses!

One day, a lot of names are read out, of the fittest among our troops. They would receive further training as "Parabats," paratroopers. Their training made our

suffering look like a Sunday school picnic!

As a believer, the “punishment” that you have to endure is usually equal to your spiritual endurance. Those who can take the punch go through much worse trauma than the guys who can't handle it. Just look at what obstacles missionaries often go through. It all happens to make them even stronger and train them to overcome the huge challenges that the mission field presents.

Paul sent this "letter of tears" to the Corinthian congregation, not to try to punish them for the things that were going on, but to force them to repent. The letter hurt, and they cried bitterly about it. The result, however, was that their lives showed dramatic spiritual growth.

When you and I as believers are

"punished", we can know that it is not punishment at all, but that we are exercised by it, purified. First, to become spiritually stronger, but also to be encouraged to lead a life closer to Jesus.

One thing we really need to realize is that it is a great honour to endure hard beatings of life. It shows us that the Lord has confidence in us, that we have the potential to grow to great heights in our spiritual lives. If it wasn't, we would never have gotten these beatings.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for considering me worthy that I can endure beating for You. I praise You for that, and pray that it will have the right effect in my life.

Give to the Lord

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Our congregation's finances were in dire straits. The finance spokesman was then given the unenviable task of telling the congregation that there were insufficient funds to meet our obligations. I feel sorry for the poor man when he stands in front of the congregation!

He starts with a graph on the screen that paints a very dark picture. He explains that our income is just enough to cover our fixed expenses. So there is nothing left for missionary work, Bible distribution, evangelism, the old age home, the orphanage and compassion contributions. Every bit of extra that the congregation contributes goes directly to these projects.

Suddenly, people start to realize what a difference an extra thanks offering

makes. Within a few months the picture changed completely, and there was enough to meet many needs outside.

It is tragic that the church is the first institution affected by a weak economy. Members first start cutting their thanks offerings. This trend results in a very tragic chain reaction. A congregation's administration must go on, so the preacher and officials are paid first, and so are the usual expenses like water and lights. What is left is used for evangelism, mission, care of the poor, Bible distribution, etc. It is precisely these things that are then neglected when members no longer give their contributions. This causes the situation of impoverishment, both financially and spiritually, to be further aggravated.

The economy is making it very difficult for the poor, and there are more and more people losing their jobs. Here the

church has a very big role to play, to help people in need. But without money, the church's hands are cut off. If we give up, we increase the need.

In Paul's time, there was also such a crisis situation. Here it was the believers of Jerusalem who were in great need, for as soon as they exchanged the Jewish faith for the Christian faith, they were cut off from the community. They no longer had any income because no one wanted anything to do with them. This led to a terrible impoverishment.

These believers' only hope for help was from the ranks of the heathen countries such as Macedonia. The problem, however, was that most believers here were also the poorer class of people, who often struggled to stay afloat. Yet, from Paul's letter, we see that these people, despite their own hardships, still made contributions to help alleviate

Jerusalem's need. "Though they were poor, they were rich in abundance," Paul writes of them in 2 Cor. 8: 2. They didn't just give what was left, no, they gave even beyond their ability.

Giving from your abundance is not a thanks offering. To give more than you can really afford, when it actually hurts to give, you truly give a thanks-offering to the Lord.

And that brings us to the very reason why we give contributions to the Lord: it is out of gratitude for what He has done and has done for us. We read from the Macedonians that they had suffered greatly in the oppression, but that their joy abounded. Joy arises out of gratitude. And gratitude also opens up your hand and heart.

You might say this morning that you really have nothing to give. I know what it feels like to have nothing you can give.

But then you still have something to give - your time, your willingness and your hands. Even the poorest man can still generate money for the Lord by giving a little of his time. In our congregation, for example, there is a team of people who bake pancakes and cakes every Saturday and sell them to the public. Another team bakes cookies and koeksisters, and they simply can't keep up baking. It sells like wild fire! These two actions generate valuable funds for Bible distribution, among other things, all because of people who are willing to sacrifice their free time for the Lord.

However, it is not only on a financial level that the Lord asks for our sacrifices. He also asks that we give our love, kindness, patience, joy etc. It does not help if you give beyond your financial abilities, if it is lacking in love. Jesus was the perfect example to us here: Humanly

speaking, He had nothing but He gave in abundance. His actions of love have sent thousands of people to Him. Out of gratitude for what Jesus has done for you and me, we must also demonstrate our love by spreading the Gospel and showing love to other people. He gave each of us talents. Exercise those talents!

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, for Your great love for me. Help me to also live out my love according to Your will.

Temptations

2 Corinthians 8:16-24

Ceremoniously, the group of 34 is dispatched to an outreach in Mozambique. A small Indian congregation in Shakaskraal organizes the outreach every few months. A few members of our own congregation join them, as well as a Baptist congregation in Phoenix and several other churches. In a very emotional ceremony, we have hands laid on us and are being prayed for. This would certainly not be a holiday on the golden beaches of Mozambique! The area we go to is bitterly poor and there are no luxuries, not even a hot shower at night! There is no power, no running water, no shops and no housing. But we have a big task resting on our shoulders, because the need is very great in the area we visit. Food and clothing are very luxurious items, not to

mention Bibles! Very few of the people there have the privilege of owning a Bible. In addition, the gospel was only spread in a small area, and a large fallow land still exists where the Word has not yet been heard.

A mountain of clothes and tons of food were collected to go along. A huge pack of medicines and plasters should help alleviate the loneliness and ailments of people who have probably never seen the inside of a clinic in their lives. And of course a few crates containing Bibles, because without it the outreach would be meaningless.

Exhausted after a grueling outreach, we return a week later. The group must report to the congregation. It is a group of bubbling, radiant people, some still schoolchildren, who cannot stop bubbling about the wonderful experience, where more than 70 people

gave their hearts to the Lord. In addition, the lives of those who participated in the outreach have changed forever.

Paul was overjoyed when Titus returned from Corinth at that time. He was already worried that Titus might run away, because the problems in the congregation were overwhelming. Titus, however, passed the test with distinction, and now he sends him again. He is already well known in Corinth, and things are back to normal now. This time, his job is to fetch the money raised for Jerusalem. This is a very responsible and extremely dangerous task, as it can easily fall into the hands of robbers. In addition, people may distrust him, because who will ever know if he keeps back some money for himself? Therefore Paul sent two more reliable men with him.

Years ago we visited Marloth Park. In the

morning, Mosbolletjie and I would take a walk bird watching. It's warm, and we leave the windows wide open to allow fresh air to pass through the house. However, this action of ours caused to be a great temptation. In Marloth Park, wild animals roam around the houses, including baboons. A decent baboon simply cannot walk past an open window. And in addition, their small stealthy eyes are so sharp that they can recognize an open window a mile away.

The burglar bars did not stop Baboon & Co. having a big party in our house. They plundered the food cupboards, and what they could not eat, they scatter over the furniture and on the floor. Flour and mielie meal caused lots of fun and was thrown into the air to make giant white clouds in the house that that covered everything in a white snow layer.

When we returned from our walk, they fled, leaving our home in chaos! It took many hours of work to get everything back to normal!

Whose fault would you say this disaster was? The rogue baboons? No, it was my own fault because we tempted the rogues! If we had closed the windows, nothing would ever have happened!

Paul did not send the two reliable men with Titus to handle the money without reason. Although Paul trusted Titus with his life, he could not risk someone pointing a finger. As believers, we must be very careful not to put temptations on anyone's path. If the person falls into the trap, then I was the cause of his sin.

I have often heard someone say that his domestic worker is so reliable that they can leave money lying around openly in the house, and know that nothing will ever disappear. By doing so, however,

you are tempting that person, who is often in financial need.

Sending matrices at the end of their school year alone with their friends to the sea for a holiday is a huge temptation. Every year I see in Ballito how the children give way in large numbers under group pressure, while their parents are under the impression that they are behaving responsible while on holiday. Alcohol abuse, wild parties, drugs and sex orgeys are the norm - everyone does it! Dear parents, do not expose your children to those dangerous temptations!

Prayer:

Lord, please give me a responsibility toward others so that I will never tempt anyone.

Give with the Right Attitude

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Do you feel a little unhappy about the devotional I sent two days ago about giving gifts to the Lord? Unfortunately, some churches "deceive" their members by forcing them to give their tithes. Often, members' emotions are worked on in such a way that they give out of pure guilt more than they can really afford, and then end up in trouble. People often give with a heavy heart. And then there is the other side of the matter, where congregations enrich themselves and do unnecessary luxurious construction work or their preachers live in opulence while the congregation becomes impoverished. The tithe is thus abused. There is often also the feeling that one should rather not talk about money when it comes to faith. The idea has also been expressed

to me that one only gives out of the abundance for the church, and that it should not affect you financially. Isn't giving "tithes" keeping the letter of the law?

I'm not going to comment on all these questions and thoughts. But I still want to make a few comments, and I want you to think these things over and sort the case out for yourself with the Lord.

First of all, I want to emphasize that we are working on a series on 2 Corinthians. Paul writes certain things with a purpose in this letter, and if we decide that we want to skip a chapter because we would rather not hear it, then I'm afraid, we only read the parts of the Bible that suit us, and the others we discard. The whole Bible is the Word of God, and we dare not omit anything. Yes, even the Old Testament! Read again what is written in Revelation 22:

18,19.

That the compulsory giving of tithes is legal, I wholeheartedly agree. A believer does not give because the law requires him to give. You express gratitude to the Lord for what He has done for you. How much should you give? No, I can't tell you that - you have to decide it yourself, and sort out the case with the Lord. And if you give with a heavy heart, you should rather leave it, because then the Lord is not pleased. When I said in the devotional that a true sacrifice should actually hurt, I didn't mean to give while you really don't want to, or while you can't afford it at all. It could have easily been misunderstood. You have to give because you want to give to the Lord. But sometimes it can cause you to dig very deep into your pocket.

Should I give to the church? No, not necessarily. But you have an obligation

to your congregation. The congregation is the channel through which missionary work, evangelism, and assistance are given to the poor, and in addition, there is an essential administration that a congregation must run, and salaries to be paid. However, if a congregation abuses members' contributions, I would think twice before giving to that congregation. A congregation has a very great responsibility and obligation to use the contributions only for the glory of the Lord and for the extension of His Kingdom. Some believers have a problem with giving to the church. Rather, it must be given to the Lord. The church is the representative of the Lord on earth, and if you give to the church, you are actually giving to the Lord! Provided, of course, that congregation does not abuse it. And naturally, I can also give a part of my sacrifice of

gratitude to other persons or institutions, as the Lord presses it on my heart.

The questions that have come up actually fit very nicely with today's scripture, which once again speaks about our contributions. And no, I'm not going to skip this one either! In the opening sentence, Paul writes: "Actually, it is redundant for me to write to you about the help of the believers in Judea." It shouldn't be necessary for a minister to preach about our thanksgiving, because it must come naturally from your life of love. A believer who truly lives his love will naturally have an open hand and purse, and recognize and help others in need. This congregation to which Paul writes is ready. They are excited to give because the contributions they make will make a huge difference to the quality of life of the people of Judea, who are truly

suffering from poverty.

Of course, there is also a bonus for those who are willing to give to the Lord. I actually say this with hesitation, because once again it can easily be misunderstood. “Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly; and whoever sows in abundance will reap abundantly,” Paul writes in 2 Cor 9:10. Getting something back for what we give may never ever be a motive for us to give. But often you get a lot more back than you give. It may not be materially, but spiritually it does wonders for you if you are willing to give.

In conclusion: Verse 7 must be the norm for a believer to give: “Everyone must give as he intended in his heart, not unwillingly or under force, for God loves the joyful giver.” (2 Cor 9: 7)

Prayer:

Lord, give me an open hand to give, and
joy in my heart.

Harsh Words

2 Corinthians 10:1-6

Before a big church meeting, I take the opportunity to say a few things that grieve me: "I'll say straight out what is bothering me. This matter must be rectified!" However, when the meeting came, my courage failed me, and I could not speak, no matter how hard I tried. I was so scared I might step on someone's toes! I didn't want to offend anyone. This may be one of my many weak points. If I have to speak in such a situation, I stumble over my own words, causing them to come out wrong. Then I'll rather write a letter to the man, explaining my problem on paper, with that I'm comfortable. On paper I can formulate my thoughts calmly, and if I make a mistake, it is easy to change before I press the "SEND" button. The problem is that you easily say the wrong

thing in a moment of weakness, and then you hurt someone unintentionally.

Whenever I write a serious letter, I prefer to wait a day before I send it, so that I can first make sure that I do not say something that should not be said.

Perhaps Paul had the same problem, or so the Corinthians thought. They accused him of being very courageous when he wrote to them, and sometimes he said very harsh things to them, not being afraid to chastise them. However, when he faces them, he is as tame as a lamb - not a crooked or harsh word from his mouth!

However, someone who is harshly attacked usually retaliates immediately by fighting back. All he is thinking about at that moment is to defend himself, and of course, attack is the best defence strategy. Usually you get nowhere by harassing someone. Hard words are not

the work of the Holy Spirit, but the product of your own human thinking.

If you want to talk to someone about something he did wrong, then it truly requires Solomon's wisdom. Attack is definitely not the answer. Have you seen what happens to a child when you argue with him? He gets scared of you, and then plans to do the same trespass next time in such a scary way that he won't be caught again. However, if you speak to him softly and calmly, and explain why it is wrong to do what he did, he may consider coming to other insights out of his own free will.

However, there is one very important factor to consider when starting such a conversation: The work and place of the Holy Spirit. No spiritual conversation can take place without the Holy Spirit being involved. Personally, you and I are simply too weak to convince anyone of

sin. The Holy Spirit is the only One who can do it. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that when we talk to someone, we will do it in prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to be the speaker in the conversation. “The weapons of our struggle are not the weapons of man, but the mighty weapons of God that can destroy strongholds,” writes Paul 2 Cor 10: 4.

However, it still remains difficult to convince someone orally. My own experience is that every time someone takes me on a challenge like that, I am clueless. I want to settle the matter myself with the Lord. However, if I have the conversation on paper, then I have time to think it over and pray about it. It also gives me the opportunity to go and see what the Bible says about it.

It is perhaps for this very reason that Paul, and I myself, find it much easier to

deal with a difficult situation in writing. When it happens that I have to write to someone, then I write the letter in prayer. I read it again and again, making very, very sure that I understand the voice of the Holy Spirit correctly, and that I am not writing for human reasons, but that my mind is guided by the Lord. At the same time, I also have to make one hundred percent sure that the things I write are absolutely scriptural, and that they are not just things that I feel, or make up. Of course, it is also easier to say a thing in writing, because the chances are much smaller that the person will cut the conversation and not listen. And even if he does, he can always go back and read what you wrote later, when the Holy Spirit first started working with him. Of course, the advantage is that he can read the message over and over again.

And then you wonder why I write devotionals? The Lord has given me this wonderful opportunity and method to talk to you. And the bonus is that you can respond to this and write back to me after you've read it and pondered over it. I thank God for that every day.

Prayer:

Thank You Lord, for giving me the opportunity to talk to many people like that. Please help me to write only what you command me.

Humbleness

2 Corinthians 10:7-18

The two rugby teams run onto the field and stare at each other challengingly. The Caracals are confident they can win this game, after all, they have worked hard to get where they are, and they have done all the right things so far. The Jackals, on the other hand, were not so successful. But they had a trump card. Before that, they had been plotting with the referee, and a few things had been agreed upon which only they knew about. They were arrogant and full of self-confidence.

The whistle blows, and the Caracals kick off as they are drilled to do, exactly onto the right spot. When the man jumps to grab the ball from the air, the referee blows his whistle hard. Penalty! "What for?" The Caracals' captain wants to know. The referee grows angry, and he

moves the penalty-kick twenty paces closer. Once again, the Caracals are totally confused, how could the rules change so suddenly? As the game progresses, the Caracals find that everything they know about rugby rules does not count at all in this match. They are definitely the best team on the field, but nothing they do is right. The rules are twisted every time, and they have no idea why?

In a sense, preaching the Gospel is also a game. However, this is a very important "game", involving human lives. Every believer who spreads the Gospel does it to the best of his ability. Unlike today's rugby, there is no payment for the "players". They play for the love of the cause. But as with rugby, there are also certain rules. However, these rules were not set by people, but by the Lord Himself. So we play the game according

to God's rules.

And here Paul was facing a serious problem, because in Corinth there were certain evangelists who began to lay down their own rules. They were not unbelievers, but believing Christians, just like the others. However, they began to preach certain heresy. And it caused many problems, because the people no longer knew what was right and wrong, and how they were supposed to act. Moreover, these false preachers were also whipping up the believers against Paul, claiming that his preaching was not factually correct.

What was going on? In the first place, these people had a very high opinion of themselves and set their own measure. They exalted themselves above men like Paul. To exalt oneself above others is not Biblical. The Bible teaches us to be humble. Paul also says that he will not

boast beyond his limits. Paul certainly had every reason to boast. After all, he was the founder of the Corinthian congregation, as well as many other congregations. Yet he did not boast beyond his limits.

I once had to present a course at a Voortrekker camp. I noticed a man with an old faded cap standing joking with the kids. Later he was helping in the kitchen washing dishes and frying sausages. "I'm Piet," he introduces himself to me, telling me that he works with students. To my shock and shame, I later learn that he is the leader of the Voortrekker movement, and also the moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church! This humble man progressed to a very high position in life, but still he was down to earth! He had every reason to elevate himself above the riff-raff below, but he decided to be an ordinary human being.

As at any camp, things went awry, but I never heard him criticize. In this way, he crept deep into the hearts of the children and all the other people he had contact with. He radiated the message of love and genuine care all the time.

When a believer begins to grow strongly in his faith, and possibly attains certain faith milestones, perhaps a leadership position, preacher, or pastor, then the danger is that he will see himself as a little elevated above the rest who have not yet "arrived!" I've had to deal with a minister who addresses you arrogantly. But thankfully, most of the preachers I know are ordinary people, down to earth, and who realize that with a pompous attitude, they will never win souls for Jesus. I often get the opportunity as an "ordinary" member to sit around the table with the learned men and women, and time and time again I experience

that all of them are humble, and have only one purpose in mind, namely praising the Name of Jesus and expanding His Kingdom on earth. As a regular member, I am always treated as someone very special.

Paul concludes this argument by quoting from Jeremiah 9:24: "He who glorifies must glory in the Lord." Today, let us give all the glory to Jesus the Savior, Redeemer, Creator of heaven and earth - the Risen Lord!

Prayer:

Lord, my prayer today is that You will keep me humble, and that Your wonderful Name be glorified.

The Mission Field

2 Corinthians 11:1-15

Missionaries are frequently criticized for their way of life. Once a missionary gets lost in the unknown places amongst hordes of heathen suffering in their misery, it is so easy to forget about them completely. That is when missionaries struggle to keep their heads above water. "God will provide," you hear them say all too often, and then they are laughed at by many. "How can anyone be so foolish? What kind of guarantee do they have that they can survive that way? It's not going to last long - they'll be back soon!" These kinds of comments hurt!

I've heard so many stories of missionaries who gave up absolutely everything in life to go and work in the unknown in the most primitive of circumstances. Maintenance from the

“congregation” where they work is insignificant, because usually those people also have nothing. Help from elsewhere is also scarce. Malaria and other tropical diseases are a reality they face daily. But if you ask how they are, then they are bubbling with joy. Every convert is a huge milestone, and the day someone completes their community training as an evangelist, there is unprecedented joy. It's like Lourens Lauretti, in the unacceptable jungle of Papua New Guinea and John Leach in the farthest corner of Zambia.

I think Paul also experienced some of this. Yes, just like the missionaries, he also often had to face severe criticism. We read about it in 2 Cor. 11, where certain hypocrites laughed at him. Why, for example, did he not ask for a salary from the Corinthians? Why would he go to work for them without any

compensation? In Corinth he did humiliating handiwork, made tents to stay alive so he could preach to them. A decent resident of Corinth does no manual work! That's work for a slave! However, Paul did not in any way want to be a burden to the believers of Corinth, not even when the hunger pangs began to gnaw and the food was meager. Although he was surely the most successful missionary of all time, he certainly would not get rich from this work.

There was someone who remembered Paul, and sometimes the congregations in Macedonia sent money to keep Paul going. At those times, he could spend more of his time preaching the Gospel.

We often ask the question: What made Paul such a successful missionary? When we read between the lines, it seems that he was not a wonderful

speaker. From verse 6 you find that there were excellent orators with smooth tongues against whom Paul had to compete. With their sly reasoning and breathtaking sermon skills, many people have run after them. They got rich from their sermons!

For Paul, however, it was about something much greater than money and honour. He wanted to prepare this bride (the congregation) for the Bridegroom (Jesus) so that she could go to Him spotlessly. It was about an "undivided and pure commitment to Christ" (2 Cor. 11: 3). And he uses all the knowledge he has accumulated with blood sweat over the years to lead this congregation there. With their clever words, however, the heresy preachers were misleading the congregation to follow a different path - worshipping a Jesus other than the Jesus he preached,

a Jesus who might be more acceptable. Yes, this is something that the missionaries still had to deal with today. After their hard work in bringing the Gospel to people, converts are often coaxed away by smooth-tongued speakers who make Jesus more acceptable to them. To name an example: The whole idea of ancestor worship/adoration has traditionally been hammered into the lives of many of the people of Africa. When the Gospel is preached to them, they must make a choice between it and Jesus. Breaking with your old traditions that you grew up with is definitely not easy, and it sometimes takes years for such a person to accept Jesus as their only Saviour. And this is precisely where the danger lies, because there is an easy way out of the trouble. Someone struggling to make a choice is easily

tempted to accept both. You are told that you can serve Jesus and still cling to the ancestral spirits. There is a popular religion embroidered around this thought, and many rural Africans are misled by this. For the poor missionaries, this is a nightmare, just as the hypocrites were a nightmare for Paul.

Do these things affect you and me? Very definitely! In the first place, we must never forget our missionaries. Not only do we have to support them in prayer, but also with our finances. And then we also have to be careful that we also are not deceived by false preachers who proclaim that we must still cling to our old traditions, traditions that are contrary to the Word. Serve Jesus with love!

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to never forget our missionaries.

Suffering

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Paul was a very serious man. It was not that he was angry or unfriendly, but serious in the things of the Gospel. For him, there was only one way, and that was the right way, according to biblical guidelines. However, he was not without his little humour. Some of it shines through as he takes on the errant preachers. Paul felt that it was pure folly to boast of any human milestones in your life. Fame and glory are worldly! But now, if the foolish preachers can boast about great things, then he can also become a fool for once. After all, he can boast about many more things than them! If they can boast, he can do it much better! But first, he wants to put it into perspective: He certainly does not approve of such bragging, because it is not something that comes from God.

Paul "boasts" that he is a thoroughbred Jew, with all the necessary genealogical trees and flourishes of a pure bred Jew.

But that's not all Paul could boast about. Of the most horrific hardships he went through, we can only shake our heads and say, "Shame! Poor man!" Of course, if there was one man who knew about suffering, it was Paul! On five occasions, the church punished him innocently by beating him 39 times. Deuteronomy 25 prescribes that someone convicted in a court case must lie on the ground and be beaten with a whip. However, he may not get more than forty lashes. Fearing that they might be in violation of the law, the Jews only inflicted 39 blows, just in case someone might have mistakenly counted wrong. This was a cruel punishment, and the poor man was beaten half-dead, because the authorities did not fool around!

In addition, Paul also survived a stoning. On such an occasion you are not thrown with small stones, but large stones that were meant to be thrown to kill. Stephen was put to death in such a cruel way. Paul, however, rose again and did not stop preaching!

And then the public transport of those years wasn't exactly safer than today's minibus taxis! On three occasions the ship on which he sailed sank. Once he had to cling to a wreckage for a day and a night in the open sea before he was rescued.

Paul's travels across land were often even worse. Robbers, rivers in flood, bitter cold, scorching heat and wild animals were commonplace, and he often had to sleep in the veld at night. His worst danger, however, was the people. Jews as well as heathen wanted to get him out of the way!

But as if that wasn't enough, Paul often had to work nights to stay alive so he could preach the gospel during the day. Often he had to go hungry. On occasions, he almost froze in the bitterly cold winter, without any shelter. And through all this hardship, where he had slaved himself for the people to whom he brought the Gospel, some of them still turned against him as well.

However, Paul does not tell us about all these terrible hardships so that we should be sorry for him. On the contrary, he merely sees it as part of life. In spite of all this, he is overflowing with gratitude and joy. In doing so, he also says that there are people who endure such hardships on purpose so that people should feel sorry and honour them.

Today, we often hear about people who go through the most terrible dangers

simply to see their names in the news' headlines. Or those who go through the most terrible suffering to try to win God's favour, like the people in South America who walk and chastise themselves during Easter until the blood pours down their bodies. Or worse, are crucified like Jesus.

Paul gives all the glory to God alone. It is not about his hardships, but rather that God kept him standing through all the hardships and dangers, despite his own weaknesses. Paul was willing to open his heart to the Lord completely, and the Lord did not disappoint him. When he and Silas were chained in a dirty prison with hurting, bloodied bodies, they did not lie there and cry from self-pity, but sang hymns of praise! This is what happens when you surrender yourself unconditionally to God's hands. Your whole life is filled with a joy that just

overflows, even though your circumstances are so horrible.

If the misery hits you, you have two choices: you can choose to surrender yourself to the misery, by sitting in a corner, crying and pitying yourself. Or you can choose to surrender all your worries to the Lord, and praise Him and give thanks for His grace, and become a practical instrument in the hands of God to spread the message of His love and grace.

Prayer:

Lord, I thank You for the hardships in my life. Teach me to use it in Your honour.

Rapture and Thorns

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

I once experienced a "rapture". It was December 26, 2003. We were on our way very early in the morning from Ballito to the Lowveld travelling through Zululand. There I experienced a feeling, a rapture - call it what you will - that I will never forget, and the wonderful promises God gave me that morning gave me a warm feeling in my heart. Read it at bit.ly/dsGenade

I also had the privilege of talking to a person who had a near-death experience, where he had a glimpse into heaven. He saw the gates of heaven open, and he experienced the glory of heaven. However, it was not yet his time, and he was brought back. One wants to ask if he (his spirit) was physically there in heaven, or whether it was just a vision the Lord gave him? We

won't know, but for him it was a reality.

Paul also tells of such experiences that "a man" had. He actually refers to himself, and he too cannot say with certainty whether he was physically carried away to the "third heaven" and whether it was merely a vision. Anyway it doesn't even matter. According to Jewish beliefs, there were seven heavens, including the sky, the starry heaven and the third heaven, which is the abode of God and the redeemed. The third heaven would thus indicate the presence of God. Would such lofty experiences of Paul make him an exalted Christian? After all, he had a spiritual experience that few people had been granted! Paul, however, emphasizes that he might well boast about it, but it does not make him any better than any other person. And just to remind him that he can't boast about his experiences, he got a "thorn in

the flesh." He says that it is like "a messenger of Satan to strike me with fists." (Verse 7)

There has been much speculation about what kind of thorn this could be. It was probably some kind of health problem, possibly something to do with his eyes. We often see that he only signs his letters, and then "in large letters", because he sees very badly. Someone wrote all his letters for him all the time as he dictated. This may have been the aftermath of his Damascus experience, when he was blind for a few days. It could also be something else, such as malaria or speech or epileptic seizures. It could even be the aftermath of an injury, possibly during one of the many times he was chastised. However, everything is only speculation. What we do know is that this thorn in the flesh was a constant suffering that kept him

from any self-exaltation.

Three times Paul had prayed for the Lord to remove the thorn from him. The Lord did not take away his thorn, but gave him the power to live with it. He reminds Paul that His grace is enough for him. The blessings God gives us in Jesus Christ are sufficient in prosperity and adversity. God's power becomes visible when we are completely dependent and weak. The less I rely on my own abilities and power, the more the power of God becomes visible! The power of Christ is part of Paul's life. His weakness is precisely why he so obviously experiences the power of Christ.

Therefore, Paul realizes that he should not oppose his weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties. He experiences all this precisely for Christ's sake. When he himself is at his

weakest, the power of Christ comes to its fullest. Only when he learned not to rely on his own power did Paul discover the power of Christ working through him.

Maybe you are sitting with such a "thorn in the flesh" this morning, and you wonder why you should be so "punished". Praying to God for an answer. Paul did so, and the Lord's answer was clear that it should keep him humble so that he might not become proud. Your answer may be something completely different. Just look at how the Lord often uses severely disabled people to inspire others. Over the past few years we have seen several disabled athletes rise to the top, and even compete against normal athletes. The bubbling joy of a girl with muscular dystrophy, trapped in her wheelchair, is an inspiration to the whole world. And what about the young man who wrestled

up Kilimanjaro in his wheelchair? In his "pathetic" state he has progressed to where you and I will not even dare. He carries the message that we must look beyond our problems and face the challenges that life presents to us. A one-legged swimming champion; a long-distance athlete running the Comrades on crutches. And then there's our beloved singer, Mathys Roets! All thorns that make people bloom.

Paul's thorn had to keep him humble. The thorn in our lives may have a completely different purpose. Accept the thorns with joy!

Prayer:

Lord, there are also thorns in my life - my prayer today is that You will give me acceptance.

Unhealthy Criticism

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

It was the year 1933, for thousands of South Africans a happy day when the Bible could be read for the very first time in Afrikaans, our native language. Now we could read the Word in a language we understand. High Dutch has not been spoken in South Africa for years, and the children in particular did not understand a word when Dad or the Reverend read from the Bible. But one old man was certainly not happy with this new evil. He sat and brooded and brooded, and then he summoned the preacher: "Reverend," he confronted the preacher when he arrived, "If the Bible was good enough for Moses and the Prophets all those years in High Dutch," the old man tirraded forth, "then it is still good enough for us today in High Dutch!" According to him, it was pure heresy that

the Bible should be so "dishonoured".

Criticism can be a very good thing, as long as it is healthy and well thought out. The big problem is that it happens all too often that people criticize without looking at the whole picture, or acquainting themselves with the true facts. I think we may all be guilty of it to a greater or lesser extent. It's like rejecting the Bible because there are contradictions. But if you do, you will regret passing by the message of the Bible! Take for example the story of Jonah - some people dismiss it as a mere story because there are things in the story that don't make sense, such as the time the story takes place. But does it really matter if Jonah really lived, and whether he was a fictional character? No, that's not what it's all about. What really matters is the strong message for each of us today from this timeless story. And by the way,

whether you agree with me or not, I believe that the story of Jonah is true unless someone can clearly prove the contrary! Of course, there are things in the Bible that seem contradictory to us, and of course there are things we do not understand at all. But the message of God's grace, love, and salvation is the central theme of the entire Bible, and that is what it is all about. Forget about the things you can't understand, one day we'll get the answers.

When you preach the Word of God, in whatever way, there are going to be people who are dissatisfied with the way you do it. I've been ridiculed many times over these daily devotionals. Only a few months after I started writing it, I said something that a reader took up personally. I was briefly instructed by our minister to stop writing to keep the peace, but barely a week or so later a

chorus of voices began to come up enquiring after the sudden drought, and I was instructed again to continue despite the criticism.

It seems to me that Paul was constantly in trouble about things he said or did. No matter which way he inclined, he would be criticized. The fact that he received no compensation for his work in Corinth caused some people to question it. However, if he had received compensation, other people would have questioned it as well. Paul, however, did not hesitate to mention the problems in the congregation by name. Paul was not a man to scare easily, but these things truly frightened him: strife, jealousy, uncontrollability, selfishness, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorderliness. So is impurity, prostitution and dissoluteness. These bad things of which he writes in verse 20 occurred in

the congregation, and it frightened Paul immensely. Woe to the poor minister who would dare to say such things today about his congregation. And yet these things occur daily in the church. But if you talk about it, then you're in trouble, because then you are saying so-called blasphemous things about the congregation!

But it's not just the preachers who are criticized for things they say. You and me, the ordinary believers, must also learn to speak the Word fearlessly, and not to be petty when people start criticizing us. Criticism and even rejection are expected if you are serious about living the gospel and talking about it. Timely and untimely, we must preach the Gospel and defend the good Name of God. In Paul's time, people were even killed and brutally tortured if they did, but they still continued and fearlessly lived

out their faith.

In some parts of the world it is also no different today, and people are cruelly persecuted for their faith. You and I have it very easy, and the little bit of sacrifice we have to make is small. Don't be scared! Speak out and live your faith. And know that Jesus is with you every moment of the day to hold your hand, and that the Holy Spirit within you will give you the power and words in your mouth. All He asks of you is your willingness.

Prayer:

Lord, I confess this morning that I criticize too often without reason. Please put a guard in front of my mouth.

The Strength Within Us

2 Corinthians 13:1-13

One day, many years ago, a missionary invited me to attend a Hindu festival with him. It is not my custom to hang out at such festivals, nor do I recommend it to any believer, because there the devil is literally crowing his presence! You can smell and feel and see his disgusting presence! However, we wanted to see for ourselves what happens there, because no one can describe it to you. We also well realized that we would be dealing with the commander of evil there, and that is why we prayed throughout our visit. However, what I experienced that day, I could not have imagined in my wildest dreams. It's burnt into my memory, and every time I think about it, I shiver once more.

It is a cold, wet day and the rain is gently pouring down. A colourful cart

somewhere between the dancing worshippers caught my attention: it is two meters high and decorated with flowers and pictures of gods. There is an animal with a human face and an elephant trunk. A man with a monkey face, and a seductive woman with six arms, Hindu idols adorn the cart. A dull, pathetic, skinny male, dressed only in shorts, was soaking from the rain and shivering from the cold beside his cart. A priest in a white robe come gliding in. He is singing an incomprehensible rhyme while he and the skinny male light an oil lamp. Already shivering and groaning, the pathetic guy began walking around his cart. I am frightened when I see how the perplexed figure gradually undergoes a metamorphosis, from trembling weakling to a confident being. A being, no longer a human being! His wild, rolling eyes spit fire at me, the eyes

of a wild animal. He flexes his muscles. The cold had suddenly disappeared for him.

Somewhere from the depths of his white robe, the priest brings out a handful of fishhooks, not the kind you catch sardines with - the big one's meant for sharks! I close my eyes as he pierces the hooks one by one through the man's back. I shudder! He doesn't blink an eye! Not a drop of blood. His face is wild and his eyes are rolling. He stretched out his tongue far, like a cow with rabies. The priest presses a thick knitting needle through his tongue, and another half a dozen, also through his cheeks. A nausea rises from my stomach. The heavy cart is attached to the hooks by rope, and he begins to walk with it. He was already dragging his wagon over the hump and disappearing.

I've had enough of this disaster! I want

to go home. I worm my way through the dancing masses. I see women with coconuts hanging from their breasts as they jump up and down. Wild faces that look but don't see, and animal creatures with quills like porcupines, stare at me from all directions. Each is filled with an unprecedented evil power that has completely taken over their bodies.

The devil is a reality you must not underestimate. Hindus constantly live in fear and trembling. because they know that demons can overtake them at any time. And they are very scared!

If you and I allow Him, the Lord will fill our lives too, but in a totally different way! The Hindu no longer has control over his life because the devil dominates him. However, the Lord gives me full control of my life. I can decide for myself to what extent I want Him to control me. The devil gives the Hindu outward power

- the Lord fills us with inner strength. The Hindu god fills him with fear - God Almighty fills us with peace, love and joy of life. The power of the devil is limited - the power of God is unlimited, and absolutely nothing is impossible for Him!

You can also determine for yourself how much the Holy Spirit can fill your life. Yes, indeed the Holy Spirit is within you if you are a child of God, but you must make room for Him if you want more of Him in your life. The more sin I get rid of in my life, and the more intensely I serve God, the more space there is for the Holy Spirit in me.

We have seen that the devil is a reality, but is God a reality? Yes, a thousand times YES! Paul says that Christ speaks through him. For example, this is one proof that God is a reality. Just like that, these meditations don't just happen by chance, but God has a purpose for each

of them, even if it's just to touch a single person's heart. No, I'm not the good writer. I just allow the Holy Spirit to use me to convey the message. Isn't that enough proof that He is a reality?

Paul concludes his letter to the congregation in Corinth, as well as to you and me, with an admonition: "Rejoice, strive for spiritual maturity, accept exhortation, live in peace and harmony." And then he greets with the wonderful words: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

Prayer:

Lord, I pray for every person who has read this series of meditations on Corinthians. My deepest prayer is that it will be a great blessing in everyone's life.