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Paul greets the Corinthians

Please read 2 Corinthians 1:1-7

Paul's greeting (1:1-2)

What do you do when you receive a letter through the post? No doubt the first question on your mind is: 'Who is it from?' The handwriting on the envelope may provide a clue. The postmark may also hint at the identity of the sender. But if the franking is blurred, you may have to rely on the address at the top of the letter. Sometimes, however, you may be kept in suspense until you reach the signature at the very end of the letter. It is not surprising that some people turn to the end of the letter first! In the ancient world, things were done differently. Letters usually began with the name of the sender, which is why Paul writes his name before he writes anything else.

Paul goes on to describe himself as 'an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God' (1:1). His main reason for doing so was probably that his position had come under threat. Certain elements within the church at Corinth were hinting that he was

not fit to be an apostle and, by implication, that others were better qualified.

In the first place, an apostle was someone *who had seen the risen Lord* (Acts 1:22; 1 Corinthians 15:5). In this respect, Paul was no different from the original apostles, given that he had received a vision of the risen and glorified Christ while on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–9).

Secondly, genuine apostles were those *who had received a commission from Christ to spread the gospel*. The original twelve apostles, with the exception of Judas, received their marching orders from the risen Christ just before he ascended into heaven. This solemn act, when the disciples were entrusted with the task of world evangelization, is known as the ‘Great Commission’ (Matthew 28:16–20). In Paul’s case, while the occasion was different, the nature of the event was the same. The Damascus-road experience included an element of setting apart. Paul would be God’s ‘chosen vessel’ to carry his name into the Gentile world (Acts 9:15). In due course, the ‘pillar apostles’, James, Peter and John, readily accepted that ‘the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed’ to Paul (Galatians 2:7). As the appointed messenger of the risen Christ to the Gentile world, Paul could rightly claim authority over the church in Corinth. Indeed, since his apostleship came ‘by the will of God’, the believers in Corinth would do well to treat him with proper respect and not be in too much of a hurry to question his credentials.

Paul includes Timothy in his greeting to the church, but although he was an acknowledged Christian leader who had already been to Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:17), he is described only as ‘our brother’. This was not intended to denigrate Timothy, but rather to point out that Paul’s position as apostle was unique. A letter from him carried weight. Over the years believers have sometimes called eminent Christian leaders ‘apostles’ in an

affectionate way, intending to highlight their contribution to the work of the gospel. This practice was probably harmless enough since there was no intention of ranking such men alongside Paul or the Twelve. On the other hand, there is a tendency in some parts of the evangelical world to claim that there is still an order of apostles, men who can rightly exercise jurisdiction over a number of churches. This is to claim far too much for the men in question and opens up widespread possibilities of abuse as well-meaning Christians needlessly place themselves under the authority of men who have no biblical right to it.

It was also a convention of first-century letter-writing to include a prayer, seeking the blessing of the gods on the recipient. No doubt this called for a considerable measure of tact. The reader would be better-disposed towards the author of the letter if it was dedicated to his favourite god. But which out of the many deities available was the preferred choice of the individual concerned? The apostle, however, did not need to ransack the enormous catalogue of pagan gods to find a point of contact with his readers. Instead, he expressed his desire that they might enjoy grace and peace 'from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (1:2).

In writing in this way, Paul echoes the conventional form of words in use at the time. Instead of the Greek word for 'greeting', he uses a similar-sounding word which means 'grace'. To this he adds the Greek version of the familiar Jewish greeting, '*shalom*', or 'peace'. This was much more than mere formal politeness. 'Grace' and 'peace' are two of the loveliest words in the Christian vocabulary.

'Grace' is the undeserved favour of God, his kindness to those who merit only his wrath and condemnation. Human sinfulness means that we are entitled to feel the weight of divine anger against sin. What a relief to know that God is merciful! Grace

prompted him to send his Son into the world to live and die in the place of sinners.

‘Peace’ follows on naturally from grace. Because God is gracious, it is gloriously possible for those who have offended him to be reconciled to him. Where once there was enmity and estrangement, now there is peace and friendship. And since God no longer has a quarrel against his people, they can be at peace within and among themselves. Moreover, the word ‘peace’ involves more than the absence of hostility: it includes what Leon Morris calls ‘a flourishing state of soul’.

Paul’s friends in Corinth had already experienced the grace of God in their lives, together with the peace that flows from it. Had this not been the case, they would not have been Christians at all. Even so, it was his earnest longing that they might enjoy these blessings to a much greater degree. At this point, it is worth reminding ourselves that everything that was true of believers in first-century Corinth is equally true of Christians today. We too have been on the receiving end of wonderful grace which lavishes blessings that we could never earn and which we certainly don’t deserve. We too may enjoy the enormous sense of relief that comes from knowing that a holy God is no longer angry with us. We can be at peace within ourselves because the Lord of the universe is at peace with us.

Paul and his God (1:3–4)

‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ...’ (1:3). This ascription of praise is reminiscent of similar phrases in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms. Even today, Jewish liturgies often begin by invoking blessing upon God. Paul, however, made his praise distinctly Christian with his frank declaration that the God of his Hebrew ancestors is also the Father of Jesus Christ.

A number of phrases follow that tell us much about the way that Paul understood and appreciated the God who had called him into his service. To begin with, God is described as ‘the Father of mercies’. ‘Mercy’ is sovereign pity shown to a defeated foe; it is the compassion shown by a great king to a beaten enemy who did everything in his power to overthrow his rightful lord. By its very nature, mercy is for the undeserving. It is pardon for rebels. Paul’s phrase, ‘Father of mercies’, reminds us, on the one hand, that mercy begins and ends with God and, on the other, the plural, ‘mercies’, tells us that the readiness of God to pardon helpless sinners is not in short supply.

Paul understood the wonder of mercy from personal experience. He was painfully aware of his past, the wasted years spent eaten up by malice, when he did everything in his power to stamp out the Christian movement. Yet when he was at his worst, God befriended him. The apostle never got over it. It is alarming, to say the least, when a Christian becomes blasé about his status. It is no small thing to receive mercy from the King of the universe. There is also encouragement here for people with fragile and oversensitive consciences. Some people despair of enjoying God’s forgiveness, but Paul’s experience of matchless grace ought to put heart into us. The compassion of a merciful God is greater by far than our wretchedness and misery. However great our need, a merciful God is able to meet it: ‘When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take care of me’ (Psalm 27:10).

Secondly, Paul makes much use in these verses of the word ‘comfort’. Indeed, the apostle Paul mentions ‘comfort’ in connection with God more than any other New Testament writer. To modern people, ‘comfort’ brings up images of soft cushions or a warm bath. That is an example of the way that a word can alter its meaning with the passage of time.

It was originally a tough, invigorating word. It describes the way in which God comes alongside us and puts new heart into us. Those who enjoy watching football¹ have often heard commentators use the phrase, 'a game of two halves'. The team that went in at half-time looking dispirited came out after the interval like tigers. The spectators are all asking, 'What did the manager say to them during the interval?' In biblical terms, he comforted them!

Paul begins by noting that God is the 'God of all comfort'. Encouragement begins with God. He is the origin, the source of it. The apostle goes on to observe that God comforts us 'in all our tribulation', which then makes it possible for us to comfort others 'who are in any trouble'. It is worth observing that Paul saw God not so much as the one who gets his people out of trouble, but as the one who comes to them in the middle of it all and re-energizes them. He does so by using those who, like Paul, have suffered themselves, but who have also been strengthened and helped in their sufferings and can pass on the comfort that God has already given them. Paul has a dynamic process in mind. Those who have received this kind of help from God pass it on. They comfort others 'with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God'. We can see the same logic at work in verse 6. Paul's statement that 'If we are afflicted, it is for your consolation,' suggests that the comfort and encouragement of his friends in Corinth and elsewhere was the very reason why God allowed Paul to suffer.

We tend to think that comfort is the opposite of difficulty, even the absence of difficulties. By contrast, Paul saw it as the infusion of divine encouragement, which helps us to confront and master our difficulties. Does this in some measure put a new face on the trials that we face as believers? Without minimizing the horrible reality of pain or suffering, God not only helps

us through the dark times, but he can use our experience of his sustaining grace as a blessing to others. One outstanding example of this process at work is the ministry of Joni Eareckson Tada, an American lady who became a quadriplegic as a result of a swimming accident. Her joyful contentment, hard-won in the early days, and the many books that she has written have been a blessing to large numbers of believers in many parts of the world.

Paul himself (1:5)

Paul's experience of the Christian life was twofold. For him, it was a matter of suffering and consolation, both at once and both to the full. We have already noted that, according to Paul, Christians need comfort from God and also from one another. The Christian life is not without its struggles and hardships. In verse 5, he speaks of our trials and difficulties as 'the sufferings of Christ' abounding, that is to say overflowing, among believers. Paul did not mean that when believers suffer they have a share, along with Christ, in paying the price for human sin. Christ, and he alone, has redeemed his people from their sin. Nor was the apostle thinking here of the believer's suffering for Christ. Instead, he had in mind the essential solidarity between Christ and his people in that the world will react to the followers of Jesus in much the same way that it reacted to the Lord himself (John 15:20). If we are Christians, we cannot expect preferential treatment. We are not guaranteed a smooth ride. The world hated our Saviour; it is more than probable that it will hate us too.

Jesus himself told us exactly what it would be like, and a brief review of the life of Paul gives us ample proof that the Saviour's predictions were accurate. When Paul spoke of sufferings 'abounding', he was not exaggerating for the sake of effect. This was not a case of over-dramatization. The apostle's

account in 11:22–29 of some of the challenges that he faced is breathtaking. But equally, for all that the trials were numerous, the consolations were too. The greatest consolation of them all was undoubtedly what he called ‘the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord’ (Philippians 3:8).

It is worth observing Paul’s focus. He was not engaging in a subtle form of self-promotion, talking about his sufferings and his blessings as a way of ensuring that he was the centre of attention. In part he could endure the sufferings and enjoy the consolations because he knew that his friends would benefit. Should the apostle be persecuted or maltreated, he could bear up under it all, knowing that there would be a valuable spin-off. The time would come when his friends in Corinth would face the same pressures and Paul would be able to come alongside them and point them to the source from which he had received help when he was going through the mill. And his words would not be the empty words of someone who had never known hard times himself.

In the same way, the joy that he experienced in Christ was not to be hoarded like miser’s gold, not hugged to himself, but shared. There is a sense in which tribulation and joy can pose a subtle danger. Both of these things are liable to drive us to turn in on ourselves. Trouble can make us prone to self-pity, whereas pleasure can make us self-absorbed. The apostle, however, is a challenge to modern Christians. Instead of giving way to introspection, he was always looking for ways of using his own experience to help others to greater maturity!

Paul and his friends at Corinth (1:1, 6–7)

Paul addresses his letter to ‘the church of God which is at Corinth’ (1:1). He must have felt wonderfully excited that there was a church in Corinth at all. The mere fact that a Christian

church existed in pagan Corinth was cause for profound gratitude. It was not the sort of place where you would expect to find one. It is not much different from saying 'the church of God in Soho'. Soho in London is a seedy area of strip clubs, massage parlours and the like. But in spite of all the odds, there is an evangelical church in Soho, just as there was in first-century Corinth. Corinth was a bustling seaport, a cosmopolitan city with a vigorous commercial life as well as an unsavoury reputation. It was a Mecca for athletes because it hosted the biennial Isthmian games, but it also attracted those who were on the make. Fortunes were made and lost in Corinth. On the one hand, it was located where a number of trade routes met. A business concession in Corinth was a licence to coin money. On the other hand, the flourishing red-light district meant that opportunities for squandering wealth were numerous. How amazing that there was a Christian church in such a city, an oasis of purity and wholesomeness in the moral wilderness!

People today often fail to appreciate what a fine word 'church' is. This is partly due to the fact that its original meaning has become blurred with the passage of time. Most of us use the word in two ways, either to describe places of worship ('turn right at the Methodist Church') or to refer to religious groupings, such as 'the Church of England'. Paul meant neither of those things. In his day, Christians met in homes or rented public buildings. Special premises set aside for Christian worship still lay a century or two in the future. In the same way, there were no denominations. The only categories that mattered were 'believers' on the one hand, and 'unbelievers' on the other. In Paul's mind the word 'church' meant something very simple and very noble. It described a gathering of people who had responded to the call of God. They had heard the insistent summons of the Holy Spirit and had separated themselves from

the broad mass of humanity. In coming together they indicated a desire to belong to Jesus and to each other.

The same thinking lies behind Paul's choice of another word—'saints' (1:1). The church at Corinth was a collection of saints. To the modern mind, a saint is a spiritual high achiever who has received an accolade from the pope. Paul's use of the term was far more down to earth. It translates a Greek word which means 'holy'. Saints are holy ones. This means, in the first place, that they have been set apart by God for his own use and, secondly, that they will, as a consequence, take on something of his holy character. Understood in that way, every believer is a saint.

To sum up, a church is an island in an ocean of blackness, an oasis amid a desert of wickedness. Anyone who has read 1 Corinthians may be surprised that Paul was willing to use such a splendid word to describe his friends at Corinth. Party spirit had almost brought them to the point where dividing into rival fellowships had been a real possibility. They had a defective grasp of Christian basics. In particular, their understanding of the resurrection of Christ and its implications was woefully inadequate. Immaturity and self-preoccupation went hand in hand with a shocking readiness to overlook flagrant lapses in sexual morality. Many of us would have washed our hands of a group like that. Yet although Paul was far from blind to their failings, he was able to see what the grace of God might yet make them. Weakness, adolescent self-absorption and even downright sin had not obliterated the fact that God had done something in their lives and might yet do more. Because God is gracious, there was hope for the church at Corinth and there is hope for the churches of today, including yours and mine!

Many people have an over-romanticized view of the early days of Christianity. Read Paul's letters to the believers in first-century Corinth and you will soon learn better. In many ways,

they were a sore disappointment to their founder. None the less, Paul was encouraged (1:7). He was filled with hope about their present status and their future happiness. This means that he was confident of a successful outcome. In modern English the word ‘hope’ usually includes an element of uncertainty (‘I hope it won’t rain when we hold our picnic—but you can never tell in an English summer.’) ‘Hope’ in Paul’s vocabulary is not speculative, nor is it an exercise in assessing the probabilities. Hope, for the apostle, was unshakeable, ‘steadfast’ confidence.

The apostle could write in such a positive manner because, for all their failures, there was something authentic about the discipleship of the believers in Corinth. That was because Paul could see something of his own experience working out in their lives. In verses 5–6 he speaks of being afflicted and enduring ‘sufferings’ while at the same time knowing the reality of comfort and ‘consolation’. In verses 6–7 he describes his friends’ experience in exactly the same terms. They endured ‘the same sufferings’ and Paul confidently expected that they too would also ‘partake of the consolation’. They too had suffered, just as Paul had, because, like him, they had publicly identified with the cause of Christ. They too knew something of the rich delight that God bestows on his chosen people when he gives them the opportunity for endless satisfaction simply through knowing and loving him. They were obviously in Christ, as Paul was. They knew the pain and the passion, the sorrow and the joy as he did because they were bound by faith to Jesus just as he was. Would the apostle reach the same verdict about us?

Conclusion

A number of things stand out as we look back over this passage.

In the first place, we need to ask ourselves whether we share *Paul’s sense of privilege* at being Christians at all. Do we warm

to the sense of excitement that pervades his awareness of God? He had received so much: 'grace' and 'peace' (1:2), 'mercies' and 'comfort' (1:3). Of course, the same blessings have come the way of every modern believer, but it is fatally easy to allow the thrill to become muted. Perhaps it is time to take stock. Has what ought to be a source of amazement and deep joy become rather humdrum? In that case, we need the help of God to recapture the wonderment that ought to go with being a Christian.

Secondly, it is challenging to reflect on *Paul's attitude to the suffering* that he saw as an inevitable consequence of Christian discipleship. All his focus was outward. Far from being self-absorbed and bitter, he struck a positive note, convinced that his experience of suffering could be put to good use. How we need to pray for one another when trouble comes, because our natural reaction is to focus on ourselves and our distress, rather than on the way that others might be helped in the future as they see both the reality of our trials and the reality of the comfort that God has brought to us in the thick of it all.

Finally, it is also worth reflecting on whether we share *Paul's high view of the church*. The citizens of prosperous Western nations live in what are termed 'consumer societies'. Increasingly they tend to function as consumers in every area of life. They approach their involvement in a local church in much the same way that they would give their custom to a local shop. Their own enjoyment, tastes and preferences are at the forefront, and if the product is not just right they can always take their custom elsewhere. But if we see ourselves as Paul saw his friends at Corinth, as a society of 'saints' (1:1) whose hopes for the future are rock solid (1:7), perhaps we ought to be less ready to ask what our church can do for us and more ready to ask what we can do to help our church mature and grow.