

Corinthians Receive Second Letter

Although Paul did not write poetically like David and Old Testament prophets, he had strong and deep emotions which he expressed in prose. Some of his second letter to the Corinthians is comparable in feeling to some of the Psalms.

After he wrote his first letter to them, he went through some terrible times, like the life-threatening riot in Ephesus, which made him realize that his life might be taken at any time. He confided, "For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers" (1:8-11).

Only in passing does he mention "the day of the Lord" as a time when they could be happy with one another (1:14). Many other passages tell of his distress and feelings, but for brevity we will quote only one more: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (4:7-12).

In the next allusion that Paul makes to the presence (parousia), he depicts himself as being, not among those who "are alive and remain" as he had done before, but as one who has died enjoying the assurance "that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence" (4:14).

Previously, he had included himself as possibly being one of those still alive at the coming of the Lord: "...that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord" (1 Thes. 4:15). He had also written, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51). But in this passage before us, Paul included himself as possibly being among those who would have died whom God "shall raise up ... and shall present us with you."

God had made known to Paul the sequence and imminence of the event (1 Thes. 4:11). He was given assurance that some of his readers would still be living and involved at the Lord's coming. But the exact time, "the day and the hour," had not been revealed. Likewise, without giving specific dates, Jesus had told of events his listeners could observe leading to his return, advising, "When you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates" (Matt. 24:33). Knowing that the time was near, Paul had

confidence that he would be among those living; however, by the time he wrote this second letter, he was not as confident. He knew his enemies had marked him for death which could come at any time. Also, some of Paul's expressions suggest that he was having health problems.

Luke wrote to Theophilus presenting the case that Jesus came to be a spiritual king over a spiritual kingdom composed of believers in all nations; that Christianity, though originating from the Jews, was separate from Judaism and Jewish nationalism; and, hence Paul and Christians were not involved in the civil unrest in Palestine so as to deserve persecution. As a matter of interesting conjecture, some have suggested that Luke wrote *Luke* and *Acts* to this Roman official, Theophilus, who was to be in charge of Paul's trial so he would understand Paul's case better. We cannot prove that to be true, but it is an intriguing thought that fits well with the abrupt ending of Luke's historical account. Whether written for that specific purpose or not, his record presents Paul and the disciples in that light.

The ominous threat to Paul's life dimmed his hope of living until Jesus' return so that he now thought of the possibility that he may die before that anticipated event. Does that mean that Paul was misinformed or mistaken about the imminence of Christ's coming? We dare not be so bold. The nearness of his return had been revealed to Paul though the exact date had not. When it was revealed to him that some then living would still be alive at the time of Jesus' second coming, Paul had great hope of being among those living. But that was not a part of the revelation.

Over half a century ago I began to hear people "explain" that Jesus came to establish his earthly kingdom, but because of the Jews' rejection, he postponed it until he would come again. To say the least, that did not put the King of Kings in a very favorable light! And it put those interpreters in an even less favorable shade. If he failed in his first try, who could trust him in a second attempt?

With similar mindset, some have declared that, yes, Paul expected Jesus to return in his generation, but he was mistaken! They argue correctly that inspiration did not make him perfect in character and understanding, but we are not dealing with character and perceptions here. Inspiration had to do with truth. The truth given Paul was that Jesus' return would involve persons then living. Whether Paul thought he would be among that number or not had nothing to do with the truth revealed to him concerning the nearness of the event.

If Paul was mistaken about this matter, then so were other persons whose words we have learned to trust and respect -- like Jesus! He declared plainly, "For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste of death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Matt. 16:27-28; see Mk 9:1; Luke 9:26-27; Matt. 24:1-34). Whom do you trust, Jesus or some modern "prophet"?

Peter urged, “The end of all things is at hand...” and “For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God...” (1 Peter 4:7, 17). John also warned, “Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). James also is urgent: “Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.” .. “For the coming of the Lord is at hand.” .. “Behold, the Judge is standing at the doors.” (James 5:7, 8, 9). These are but a few of the many references we have pointed to in previous lessons. It seems that a person would be a bit timid about declaring that Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, and John were all mistaken in their understanding and teaching. Whom does that leave for us to trust?

When a person has trouble connecting all the logical dots from Scripture to prove his point, he sometimes resorts to another tempting tactic, that is, the claim that the Spirit revealed his message to him. That, supposedly, lifts him above Scriptural authority and puts him out of range of his critics. His critics just do not have the Spirit. They are not of the spiritually elite!

The first question we would ask is why the Spirit would let Paul be mistaken and let his mistaken views prevail in Scripture for centuries before correcting the message through modern "prophets." And why would the modern Spirit-directed "prophets" teach conflicting things which they claim to have received by revelation?

Questioning Paul's authenticity is nothing new. In the very Corinthian church under consideration in this essay, there were those who were disturbing the congregation by denigrating Paul's apostolic authority. He addressed those challengers very sternly in his second letter. For example: “If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. If any one does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (1 Cor. 14:37-38). In similar clarity he had written, “For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thes. 4:15). That should silence any and all who claim that Paul was mistaken in his teaching about the imminent return of the Lord or any other teaching.

Out of curiosity, we would like to know if Paul died before the coming of the Lord or if he lived to see the development of those events which he mentioned so often. In 5:1, he leaves us with an expression of uncertainty: “IF the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,” rather than “WHEN the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,” as we would state the certainty of death today.

That uncertainty of prospect did not affect Paul's confidence in the ultimate outcome. In his beautiful expression (4:16-- 5:1-10) he declares himself the winner either way, and he had the Spirit as a guarantee of it. He already had the Life within him; he only awaited the change of habitation for it. Surely, the hearts of the Corinthians must have been touched deeply by Paul's personal and intensely emotional outpouring of feeling.

(Cecil Hook, October 2001) []

