

What a send off. With so many of their questions to answer and some extremely serious matters to confront them with Paul has wisely reserved **the truth of the resurrection** till near the end of his rather lengthy letter. Even though it is truth crucial to Christianity he does not hit on it first. They were in no condition to receive it. Think of them hearing this letter read to them while gathered together. It would take 45 minutes or so. Would they have grasped all of it at one reading? Have we grasped all of it in the year and one half study since September 2002? But those that had questions would have heard the answers and others would reflect upon their spiritual state and respond with repentance and humility, and action. We will read of that in the second letter to them which followed Timothy's return from a visit delivering the first letter to them. He would observe their response and be ready to clarify any questions that arose upon hearing the letter read. Thankfully we find in the second letter Paul rejoicing over their response, which was by and large positive. How we are blessed to be given these two inspired letters so we are able to learn from their mistakes and questions, without having to learn from painful experience. How often we still suffer unnecessarily because we haven't heeded, perhaps never even read, the passages of God's word that would not only spare us much, but bless us greatly.

Paul now takes up one last item, perhaps a question from them, regarding a collection of a relief package to send to deprived saints of a far distant community, over 800 miles away from them across the Mediterranean Sea. These were citizens of a different country, although also under the domination of a ruthless foreign power, Rome. They were of a very different culture and spoke a different language as well. They were believers who were descended from Jacob, Jews who had received Christ. A few had been His disciples and many more were those converted after His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, and especially beginning with the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was shed upon the believers baptizing them and us into one body. The Corinthians, many with pagan roots, would naturally have no affinity for the Jews and perhaps even despising them, although probably there were now some in their congregation. Now here is a test of their acceptance of Christ and of Paul's letter they have just received. Are they one body, ch.12? With all the believers on earth? Do they lovingly share all of their wealth, ch 13:3? Will they be toward those of other cultures as Paul was, ch 9:19-23?

There are a number of other tests of their faithfulness here. Will they receive Timothy and read the letter he brings from Paul? Will they listen to Timothy after they read the letter he brings? Will they heed the letter? Will they anticipate Paul's planned visit with pleasure and welcome him? Will they prepare in advance

a love offering to the foreigners who are Lord's people? Will they allow it to be sent with Paul? Will it get there safely? Will it ever get there?

Note the time table we are dealing with here. An urgent need elsewhere is met with a process taking literally years. Letters were hand carried, there was no postal service. No phones, e-mail, Fed-X, everything moves at a snail's pace, yet God moves to meet needs in His own good time, even now. The "delays" are not Satan's victories but God allowing His own to rely implicitly upon Him in faith despite natural feelings of impatience that might arise. James writes earlier from Jerusalem,

*James 1:1 James, bondman of God and of [the] Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which [are] in the dispersion, greeting. 2 Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into various temptations, 3 knowing that the proving of your faith works endurance. 4 But let endurance have [its] perfect work, that ye may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (DBY)*

But Paul is not coming immediately, even by their customary travel times. He has other plans. He is going to remain in Ephesus, where he is writing from, until Pentecost. This was a Jewish not a Christian holiday. He mentions it merely as a reference to the time of year he expects to begin his journey to them. Perhaps he prefers not to mention Rome's calendar using months and days named for their pagan gods and emperors. (Calendars today do also.) A "great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries" at Ephesus. He wants to exploit the opportunity. He also wants to allow time for them to absorb what he has written and take appropriate action before he comes. This is borne out in the second letter he writes, before he ever comes. And when he comes it will be the less direct way, by way of other assemblies in Macedonia, the northern province of Greece, where Philippi Berea and Thessalonica are located. When he does finally come he plans to tarry a while with them if the Lord permits. He wants to visit them and stay through the winter before he goes to Jerusalem with their gift. Though he properly makes wise plans for what he desires to do he also leaves the commencement, progress and success to the Lord's will and enabling.

*James 4:13 Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: 14 Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. 15 For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. 16 But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.*

We should follow Paul's example. Make wise plans, prayerfully before the Lord, then get moving, but remain flexible for His leading along the way as we conduct the

work He has given us to do. Planning doesn't destroy the adventure when God is involved, it merely enables it. There will be plenty of changes and "on the spot" decisions to make despite careful planning.

*Luke 14:27 And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? 29 Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, 30 Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.*

We go ahead, walking in faith, dependent upon God for safety and success.

Now, back to the preparations of the relief package for Jerusalem and getting it there. They were to lay aside every week what they were prayerfully moved to contribute. No suggested amounts, no goals, no comparisons, no "if you give more than \$xx you will receive a gift of a \_\_\_\_\_ at no charge," no pleading or cajoling, no record keeping, certainly not publicized. Nothing for show, as Annanias and Sapphira had attempted, Acts 5, with such unhappy results. The amount was strictly up to the individual even though it was to be part of a gift from the assembly as a whole. The gift was a mark of their unified love for the Lord and His people. As the Lord prescribed, our alms are to be done in secret.

*Matthew 6:1 Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. 2 Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 3 But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: 4 That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.*

No earthly rewards expected here. The admonition as to amount is beautiful: "as God has prospered him." No, no "faith promises" allowed. No collections under duress of a celebrity visit. There were to be no collections when Paul came. All was to be completed before hand, beginning months, if not years in advance. Also this collection on the first day of the week was the only collection authorized in scripture. It was a normal part of their worship. No "free will offering" to be taken at different occasions, especially where outreach is concerned, 3John 7. Although apparently this passage does authorize a special collection on the first day of the

week to be dedicated to some specified purpose, such as the needy saints in Jerusalem. We do this for the building fund, the Living Word Bible Camp, etc.

Note that Paul also takes great care to assure he is not the one delivering their gift, and getting credit for it. Nor would he allow any occasion for false accusation against him that he would take from it himself and run. He would not even subject himself to that temptation. By having one of their own choosing take it to Jerusalem he avoids both personal temptation and occasion for false accusation. This is why we have a practice of two persons counting and preparing the morning collection for deposit. This is why we have three trustees appointed to deal with legal matters to do with the meeting building and property. Note here the local assembly has authority to select and approve representatives, such as deacons, to do things like this for it. On the other hand it is never given authority to select or appoint overseers (elders, "bishops"), pastors, teachers, leaders, preachers or the like. Ordination of men to positions within or over the local assembly, or over groups of assemblies, is simply not found in New Testament scripture. And we are specifically told repeatedly we are not under the Old.

Note again that the collections were taken on the first day of the week. It is given priority over other personal expenses. And is associated with the normal weekly gathering to remember the Lord in His death on the first day of the week, the resurrection day, Acts 20:7. The collection basket is given its proper place with the emblems of His body and shed blood. It is intimately connected with the verbal expression of our worship in Hebrews 13:15-16. We give to the Lord the fruit of our lips, of what God has given us spiritually over the week and the fruit of the prosperity God has given us over the week. Simple! We are spirit, soul and body, and all three are to participate in our worship and service.

The order and meaning of such a simple thing as a collection for the Lord are not left for our imagination. We are given specific instruction here and elsewhere.. The Corinthians (and we) receive more encouragement and further instruction in the second letter, ch. 8-9, where Paul says,

***Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!***

2Corinthians 9:15.

By Ron Canner, March 3, 2004