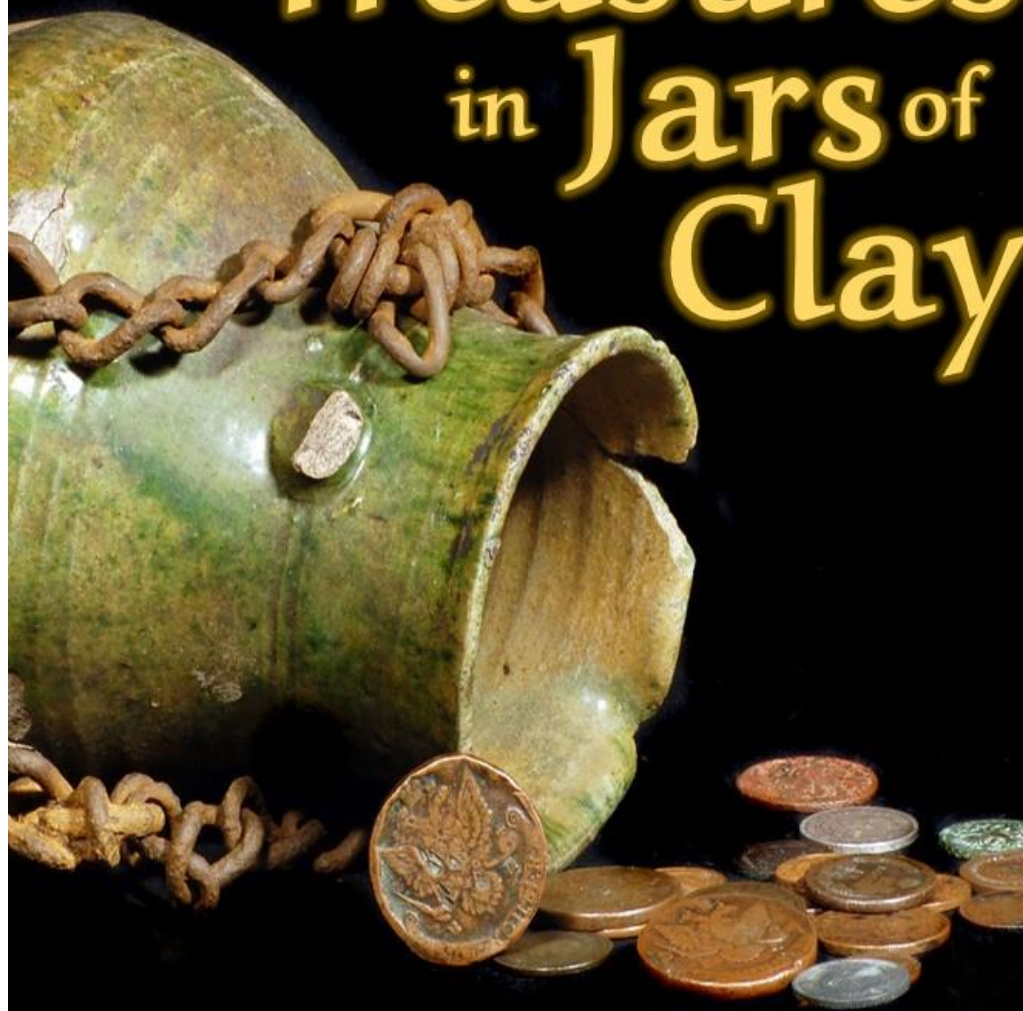


Treasures in Jars of Clay



Tabernacle Baptist Church, Penarth
7 Studies For Small Groups in 2 Corinthians

Treasures in Jars of Clay

7 Studies for Small Groups in Paul's Second Letter
to the Corinthians

"We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" 2 Corinthians 4:7

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Introduction

For most of my legal career I worked in the Government Legal Service. Sometimes we had to draft laws for debate in Parliament, and I used to find it rather frightening because there were many things that could go wrong. If, for example, a new clause 3 was inserted in a set of 30 clauses, we had to find all the cross-references and change them. Needless to say there wasn't much light relief. In fact I can only recall one occasion when the work content prompted a laugh. A team member emailed to say 'that cross-reference should be to clause 22 not 21. It used to be 21, but then so did we all'. Not exactly the joke of the year but when you're drafting laws anything qualifies as light relief!

I would guess that almost everyone reading this introduction 'used to be 21'. It's a reminder that we can't stop time, and that once we leave our twenties behind, our bodies have passed their physical peak, as all sports men and women start to discover.

When the apostle Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthian church he was way past 21 years of age, and there are indications that he was less than physically fit. He was certainly aware that time was taking a heavy toll on his body, and the bodies of his fellow believers in Jesus. In chapter 4 of his Second Letter to the Corinthians Paul refers to our bodies as 'jars of clay'. It's a very apt description because there is precious little value in our bodies as such. Someone has estimated that the elements in our bodies might be worth £1,000, but the cost of separating them out would be prohibitive, so the real value is nearer £10.

But Paul's real message is something far more amazing. He tells us we have 'treasures in jars of clay'. That's us—the real you and me! Our bodies may be made of clay but God's Spirit has given us life—a life of a kind unique in all His Creation, and indescribably wonderful when we know our Creator as the God who loves us.

God's Spirit has uniquely touched humankind in a way that evolution cannot explain. Stop and think for a moment. Don't you think it's a bit far fetched

that you—*the real you*—are just a series of chemical reactions? Yet that's all we are without a creator. But praise God we have this treasure in jars of clay, and God's Spirit working in us means that despite our own weaknesses we can share in His abundant life.

It's a message about our real value that we need to remember time and again as we walk the Christian pathway through our earthly life. Our 'jars of clay' will take some buffeting from time to time, but Paul goes on to say *'though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all'* (chapter 4, verses 16 & 17).

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians doesn't expound major doctrinal truths like Romans, or deal with controversial issues of church practice like his First Letter to the Corinthians. And yet in its own way it's a very wonderful letter. Paul wants to share with the Corinthians the pressures of his own life and ministry, to begin to mend broken fences, to forgive, and to seek reconciliation with those he may have hurt by his manner when he last visited them, or what he said in a letter that hasn't survived. It seems too that Paul's integrity and ability had been challenged by false teachers who were undermining the church – and he has to take them on towards the end of the letter.

There's a burning passion in Paul's heart throughout. In no other letter does he open his heart like this one. He loves the Corinthians. It's an emotional download, but it's not a pulpit sermon. In parts it's almost like a fireside chat. For the most part Paul is adopting what you might call the Aquila and Priscilla method of coming alongside people and meeting them where they are. You end up almost wanting to give Paul a hug and say, 'no worries mate, we're still friends'.

So now is our chance to study this 'letter of the heart'. These seven studies will take us to the end of chapter 5. My thanks go to our team of writers and my prayer is that you will discover more about *'the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles'* (chapter 1, verse 4).

Cedric Longville

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Study 1.

The God of All Comfort

Read 2 Corinthians 1:1–11

The apostle Paul experienced many kinds of trouble (you can read about these in 2 Corinthians 11:16-29, in group or at home). At the beginning of his Second Letter to the Corinthian church, he writes about the comfort that he has found in God and the comfort that we should give to one another.

The Bible is full of words of comfort and encouragement. In this passage the word comfort is mentioned ten times in seven verses and God is called “the God of all comfort”.

In verses 8 to 10 we see an example from Paul’s own experience of how God came alongside him and rescued him and his companions from the deadly peril they were in in Asia. He says in verse 9 *‘in our hearts we felt the sentence of death’*. But he says as a result they learned to rely on God *‘who raises the dead’*.

- ✠ What images come to mind when you think of the word comfort?
- ✠ How does God comfort us? Look together at the following verses and discuss how they describe God’s comfort:

Psalm 119:76

Isaiah 66:13

Psalm 23:4

Psalm 119:50 and 52

John 14:18 and 26

The rod and staff of Psalm 23 were used to:

- Count the sheep into the fold
- Defend the sheep from danger
- Discipline the sheep and to keep them on the right path

This is in contrast with our usual idea of comfort. It is not just showing soothing sympathy but encouraging a person to keep going in the face of trouble. This idea is also seen in the Bayeux Tapestry where one of the panels shows Bishop Odo “comforting” the troops by shouting and brandishing a mace to encourage them back into battle.

✠ How are these pictures of belonging, defence and discipline an encouragement to us in our times of trouble?

Jesus told His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to be their Comforter when He returned to heaven

✠ How does the Holy Spirit bring comfort to us? (John 14: 15-27 and 16: 5-16 will be a help here).

✠ As we have experienced the comfort of God how should this affect our attitude to others? (2 Corinthians 1:4 and Philippians 2: 1-4)

In what practical ways can we be a comfort and encouragement to each other?

Going deeper (in the group or at home)

Do you agree/disagree with the following statement, and why:

“Troubles and suffering are to be taken as a gift from God. They not only give God the opportunity to show us His goodness in strengthening us but they also give us the opportunity to help others.”

(E H Robertson, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, *J B Phillips Commentaries*).

Study 2.

Paul's Change of Plans

Read 2 Corinthians 1:12-17

As our passage indicates, Paul has had to change his plans. We all know what it's like to have to change our plans, often at the last moment. Why not share with the group the most memorable occasions when you've had to change your plans? Hopefully after some discussion we will gain some sympathy with Paul's situation. Even apostles sometimes need to change their plans!

In chapter 2, verse 1 Paul talks about 'a painful visit' he had made to the Corinthian church, apparently to try to put a stop to the errors, disputings, and immorality that had infected the church. His visit was followed by a letter which had hurt the Corinthian Christians, and Paul began to worry that he had gone too far, so he set off to find Titus who was able to give him an update on how the church was behaving. The result of all this was that Paul decided to cancel his planned return visits to give the church time to put things right.

But the false teachers who had infiltrated the church tried to use Paul's change of mind to push their case that Paul wasn't reliable. They would tell the Corinthian Christians that Paul couldn't be trusted and he didn't care about them. Paul fights back in verse 23 where he says he changed his mind to spare them from getting another severe rebuke. And then he tells them that his earlier letter was also intended to let them know how much he loved them.

Now read chapter 1 verse 23 to chapter 2 verse 4

- ✘ Do you think Paul could be rightly criticised for changing his plans? If a minister promised to visit Tabs to help us, would we be right to criticise him if he changed his mind? What issues would affect your decision?
- ✘ As we have read, Paul's decision to cancel his visit was all to do with sensitivities following his earlier rebuke. How important do you think it was that Paul wrote as he did in chapter 2, verse 4?
- ✘ In what way does chapter 2, verse 2 contain a reminder to us of the cost of falling out with our fellow Christians?

Now read chapter 1 verses 18 to 22

Paul's defence against the accusation that he is a 'yes/no' man has allowed him to contrast that accusation with God's character.

- ✘ What do those verses tell you about God's character? What different features of God's character do the verses highlight? How would you sum them up?
- ✘ What special assurance do we have from having God's Spirit in our hearts?
- ✘ What does Paul mean when he says that his message (from God) is not 'yes' and 'no'?

Now read chapter 2 verses 5 to 11

So here is someone who has caused grief to Paul and most of the Corinthian church by his behaviour. It is possible that Paul is referring to the man he censured in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, and who was excommunicated because of his sexually immoral behaviour. Whoever he was Paul now takes the view that he has been punished enough, and it's time for forgiveness.

- ✘ The sin Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 was clearly very serious. Could you forgive someone who behaves like that?

- ✘ Would you need to see the offender repent before you could forgive him?

Romans 3:23 reminds us that we have all fallen short of God's standards. If we can't leap across the chasm between us and God it doesn't matter how near or far we get before we fall to the bottom.

- ✘ Does Romans 3:23 help us when faced with the task of forgiving someone? How does focussing on the cross help?
- ✘ Paul relates the challenge of forgiveness to the need to be aware of Satan's schemes. How would you explain that?

Going deeper (in the group or at home)

God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are of course very different in terms of what they achieve; but they are often linked in the Bible. You might like to prayerfully consider some of the following passages:

Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 6:37; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13.

Study 3.

Ministers of the New Covenant

Introduction

One of the central tenets of the Baptist way of 'being church' is a belief in the principle of the ministry of all believers - essentially an understanding that each member of the church has a gifting, and that if the church is to undertake its mission effectively then each must play their part. There is a danger that the relatively recent introduction in Baptist churches of 'professional' or paid ministry might serve to dilute the operation of this principle. As someone fortunate enough to be training for what is likely to be full-time paid ministry, this represents something of a challenge. Paul is clear that if the church is to function as he believed it should, then it is imperative that each and every member needs to be engaged in the ministry of the church, not disabled by it. The local church can be a thing of utter beauty when understood and allowed to function in this way - even through us, flawed though we are. There is truly treasure to be found within jars of clay!

What does the Bible say?

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12 - 3:6

Paul is never afraid to mix images and metaphors in the course of his writing. Here he spends some time reflecting on his apparent shortcomings, but then speaks of his triumph in Christ (chapter 2, verse 14).

- ✘ How is Paul able to hold these apparently contradictory positions in balance?

The images Paul uses in chapter 2, verses 14 to 16 have their origin in the practice of Roman victory parades that would follow a successful crusade. The burning of incense was a common part of such celebrations. Obviously the aroma of the burning incense would have different associations for the victorious returning soldiers on the one hand, and the defeated prisoners paraded as part of the celebrations on the other.

- ✠ How do you understand Paul's suggestion that the church can be the smell of death to some and the fragrance of life to others?

Tom Wright makes the point that if we were to write our own reference in support of a job application, it would carry very little value for our prospective employer. This is not dissimilar to some of the criticism that was being levelled against Paul by some in the Christian community at Corinth.

- ✠ Paul suggests that the lives of the Corinthian Christians serve as his letter of reference. What do you think he means by this?

In chapter 2, verse 16 Paul questions whether anyone is capable of fulfilling the task of ministering the gospel.

- ✠ On the basis on chapter 3, verses 4 to 6, what is Paul's answer to this dilemma?

In his writings, Paul constantly draws comparisons between how things were before Christ and how they are now.

- ✠ How does Paul suggest our ministry under the new covenant differs from how it was under the old? Consider especially chapter 3, verses 3 to 6.

How does this apply to me?

Paul's experience as related here is of Christ enabling him to triumph even in the midst of personal struggle.

- ✠ Can you recall any instances of when you have experienced this in your own walk of discipleship? What steps might you take to make this your own experience either now or in the future?

- ✠ Picking up on Paul's imagery of the gospel permeating its surroundings like a fragrance, what sort of aroma do you believe the gospel is forming in your life, in the life of your small group and through the church as a whole?
- ✠ What can each of us do to ensure that the fragrance of the gospel we spread brings an atmosphere of life and not death?
- ✠ How well equipped do you feel to undertake the task of being a minister of the gospel? What can you or others do to increase your confidence and ability to be good news to those around you?

Study 4.

The Glory of the New Covenant

In our technology-driven society, the pace of change has been dramatic, even for people who are still (relatively) young. In the late 1990s, an internet connection was an exciting novelty that required exclusive use of the phone line and a great deal of patience!

If you had been told that 20 years later people could be wandering around with the equivalent of a supercomputer in their pocket, able to wirelessly download full-length movies, or have a video chat with relatives on the other side of the world, it would have seemed like science fiction – yet this is entirely normal for many people in 2016. There has been such a massive transformation between the internet that I experienced as a young person, and the superior one that is available today, that it can be a struggle to explain to a present day teenager why we ever bothered with something so inferior!

The apostle Paul is making a similar comparison between the superior and the inferior in this part of his letter to the church in Corinth - his focus is on the two 'covenants' (which we can understand as 'the relationship between God and his people'). Paul's contrast is between the superiority of the new covenant in Jesus Christ, and the old covenant of the law that God gave to Israel through Moses.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:7-18

Do not worry if this passage seems quite confusing – some Biblical scholars consider it to be one of the most complicated passages in all of Paul's writing! Before continuing with the study, why not read Exodus 34:29-34 to see what Paul is referring to.

- ✠ How helpful do you find this Exodus account to understanding what Paul is saying?

Paul is building his argument around a series of comparisons, between things that are lesser and greater, a technique that was common to Jewish rabbis at the time. There are three main points of comparison, summarised below:

Lesser (Old Covenant)	Greater (New Covenant)
Ministry that brought death (v.7)	Ministry of the Spirit (v.8)
Glory (vv.9-10)	Even greater glory! (vv.9-10)
Temporary (v.11)	Permanent (v.11)

- ✠ In what ways do you think the old covenant (i.e. the old relationship) between God and Israel through the law brought 'death', had 'glory' and was 'temporary'?
- ✠ Similarly, what is it about the new covenant (new relationship) that is 'of the spirit', is even 'more glorious', and is 'permanent'?
- ✠ What are the problems with people under the new covenant trying to please God through the demands of the old covenant, e.g. through good 'works'?
- ✠ Why not read Matthew 5:48 to see how Jesus sums up some of the requirements of the new covenant. If this creates a problem for us, what is our solution?

Glory and Transformation

Paul uses the word 'glory' many times in this letter to the Corinthians, but nowhere more frequently than in this passage. In the Old Testament, God's 'glory' (in Hebrew: *kabod yhwh*) describes God's visible and active presence, which is sometimes accompanied by a light and fire so intense it has to be covered by a cloud (e.g. Exodus 24:17).

However, in the New Testament the word 'glory' is used more often in the language of God's 'image' (in Greek: *doxa*). Paul's argument, which we see in part in this passage, but more fully in his letter to the Romans, can be summarised like this:

Humans were originally created in God's image.



God's image in humans has been damaged through Adam's sinful rebellion.



By becoming united with God 'in Christ', the image of God in humans can start being restored, with the process being completed in the new creation after Christ's return.

- ✠ Do you identify with this process of being transformed into God's image?
- ✠ What has changed in your life since you gave your life to Jesus?

One of the additional reasons that the new covenant 'of the Spirit' is so superior is that God's transformative presence is freely available to all, and is not limited to specific people and places as it was in the days of Moses.

- ✠ What is your experience of God's presence – are there particular activities (e.g. prayer or worship) that help you to experience it?
- ✠ How would you describe it to other Christians or to non-believers?
- ✠ Given how 'transformative' God's presence was for Moses, and how transformative Paul suggests it is for us, what are some of the ways we could experience more of it on a daily basis?

Going deeper

Why not set aside a short time e.g. 10 minutes each day this week to actively pursue God's presence? You can let the rest of your group know how transformed you feel in a week's time!

Study 5.

Treasures in Jars of Clay

TV programmes such as Flog It, The Antiques Road Show and Fake or Fortune reveal some great treasures. A picture covered in dust in the attic found to be worth thousands of pounds; a valuable item used as a door stop turns out to be a priceless piece. Or think of hoards of old coins being dug up in a field covered in mud. Hidden treasures unrecognised by their outward appearance.

- ✠ How do you define 'treasure'?
- ✠ Have you ever found hidden treasure?
- ✠ What would you say your treasure is?
- ✠ How does the Bible describe treasure? Think of some Scriptures. For example - Luke 12:33-34.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-18

'We have this ministry....' verse 1

Pick out the words and phrases that Paul uses to describe his ministry in verses 1-6.

- ✠ Are we able to say the same about our ministry?
- ✠ He is also aware that we have an enemy. Who is the 'god of this world' and how does he 'blind people to the truth'?

‘We have this treasure....’ verse 7

- ✠ What is the treasure that Paul refers to in verse 7?
- ✠ What makes it a treasure?

....‘in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.’ verse 7

Paul turns from the message of the Gospel to the messengers.

In 1946 a shepherd came across a large number of huge earthenware jars hidden in some caves in the hills in the Eastern Judean Desert. Now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls they were found to contain some of the earliest manuscripts of some of our Scriptures and many other books as well. More were discovered in the following years. They contained extracts from every book of the Old Testament except Esther. So they are of great historical and religious significance. Treasure in jars of clay.

- ✠ Why is it so important for the Gospel message to be entrusted to such ‘jars of clay’ as us?

Think about the characteristics of such vessels and what they would have been used for in Paul’s day.

....‘struck down but not destroyed.’ Verse 9

- ✠ How do you understand the verse *‘We always carry round in our body the death of Christ, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body’?* Verse 10.

Paul was aware of the problems that he faced in his ministry and how they might have broken him.

- ✠ In his weakness and frailty what was it that sustained him?
Verse 7. See also 2 Corinthians 12:9-10; Philippians 4:13.
Verses 12 and 15
Verse 13
Verse 17.

....‘an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.’ Verse 17

Paul refers to his problems as *‘light and momentary troubles’* in comparison with the eternal glory to come. Most of us would not consider the hardships that Paul faced as *‘light and momentary’*. See 2 Corinthians 11:23-29.

- ✠ How do we view our problems? How can we see them in the same perspective as Paul?
- ✠ Think about our persecuted sisters and brothers and other people suffering so much in the world today. If we were in their situation, would we view our troubles as *‘light and momentary’*?

Pray that we might value this amazing treasure we have been entrusted with and be faithful in sharing it with others as we seek to fulfil our mission purpose.

‘To Reflect God’s love in the church, community and world’.

Going deeper (in the group or at home)

Read Psalm 116 from which Paul quotes in verse 13.

- ✠ How does Paul see his situation like that of the Psalmist?
- ✠ How does faith sustain him?

Study 6.

Our Heavenly Dwelling

Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Are you familiar with the notion of a parallel universe, a hypothetical self contained reality co-existing with one's own? Modern fantasy often presents the concept as a series of planes of existence where the laws of nature differ, allowing spectacular or magical phenomena of some sort on some planes. In other cases, in both fantasy and science fiction, a parallel universe is a single other material reality, and its co-existence with ours is a rationale to bring a protagonist from the author's reality into the fantasy's reality, such as in, *The Chronicles of Narnia* by CS Lewis, in which some wonderful biblical truths and principles are played out.

Despite thinking on occasion of a fictional parallel universe or alternative reality, the fact is that there exists a reality now which is not of this world but heavenly and eternal.

Paul has already established in chapter 4, verse 18, that we should fix our eyes on what is unseen and eternal rather than on what is seen and temporary.

In our verses we are introduced to our heavenly dwelling, which is a spiritual body that awaits us beyond this life, which has been crafted by God, not built by human hands. Paul explains that our preference should be to depart this life and be at home with the Lord, and while we wait for that to happen we should make it our ambition to please Him in every aspect of life, as we contemplate the other better place. For that's where an assessment of our current lives will be undertaken by the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a parallel reality and it should affect our lives, thoughts, actions and practices in our current reality, which is only temporary. We are encouraged to think more about the unseen eternal things than about the seen temporary world we live in.

- ✘ Paul starts this section with the words, 'For we know...' What is it that we know from verse 1 and by deduction what sort of things are we not told?
- ✘ Why do you think Paul describes our bodies as earthly tents in verse 1?
- ✘ Paul contrasts our current bodies with our promised new bodies in heaven. What are some of the differences between the two bodies? See also 1 Corinthians 15:35-58. Consider how amazing our new spiritual body will be.
- ✘ In verse 2 it says we groan longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling. Can you resonate with that statement? Why do you think there are times when such longing might not be part of your present reality?
- ✘ We groan and are burdened in this life (while in this tent or body). What forms do these groans and burdens take and where appropriate what can we do to lessen the effects of them?
- ✘ List a couple of things that the Bible teaches us about the Holy Spirit. For example read:

Matthew 28:19;

John 14:26;

Acts 1:5, 13:52, 20:23;

Romans 5:5, 8:16;

1 Corinthians 6:19;

Galatians 5:22-23;

Ephesians 4:30

Hebrews 2:4.

God has backed up the promise of heaven with a down payment right now of the Holy Spirit. How amazing is that! In what way does the Holy Spirit guarantee our eternal house (spiritual body) in heaven?

- ✘ Verse 7 says we live by faith, not by sight. What does this mean for you? In which areas of your life are you guided more by your senses than your faith? How can you bring a faith perspective into those areas? How might verse 7 change for us beyond this life?

- ✘ What sort of goals do you set for yourself in life? Is goal setting a helpful thing to do? What does Paul say about goal setting in this section? How can you implement and develop Paul's comment? Give examples.
- ✘ Who will appear in front of the judgment seat of Christ in the future? What is the purpose of appearing before the judgment seat of Christ? What impact should the knowledge of this matter have on our every day lives now?
- ✘ It has been said that Christians are saved (receive God's forgiveness and salvation) not only from the penalty and power of sin but also from the presence of sin. Please discuss. In what way are we saved from the presence of sin?

Going Deeper (in the group or at home)

1. We are encouraged to be and do many things in the Bible as believers. List as many things as you can from one book of the Bible (or more). The book of James may be a good place to start. Meditate on what you have gleaned and consider ways in which these qualities can become more evident in your life and pray for God's help in this process.
2. Compare and contrast the detail of the judgment seat of Christ in 2 Corinthians 5:10 and the judgment situation recorded in Revelation 20:11-15. Consider other references to judgment in the bible and consider why a God who loves people deeply also has to act as a judge. Find Bible verses to back up your thoughts.
3. Gather as many details from the Bible as possible on what the future beyond this life will look like. Sketch a word picture of what the Bible says. Also list any areas you can think of, on which the Bible is silent. Consider why we are told some things about future arrangements but not others. Are there any practical benefits or lessons for life now that present themselves from your research?

Study 7.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

Read 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

In these verses Paul writes to the Corinthians about a new life, verse 17, and a new purpose, verses 18-20.

He explains that our reconciliation to God gives us a life worth living and a work to do for Christ here on earth.

He gives us two reasons why Christians should serve Christ in verses 10 & 14.

- ✠ What are these reasons?
- ✠ Which of these reasons motivates you in your service for Christ?
- ✠ Is one more important than the other?
- ✠ Verse 15 tells us that those who belong to Christ should no longer live for themselves but for Him. What does this mean in practice?
- ✠ Paul writes in verse 16 about judging people from a “worldly point of view”. What does this mean and how should it affect our attitudes to other people?
- ✠ Paul reminds his readers that believers in Christ are new creations, verse 17. What is the old that has gone and the new that has come?

Read together verses 18 – 20

- ✠ What does it mean to be reconciled to God?

- ✠ Why are people alienated from God in the first place?
- ✠ What is the message of reconciliation?

In verse 20, Paul says that Christians are Christ's ambassadors. An ambassador is a representative of one country living in another. He or she has been given the responsibility of representing their ruler or government. As Christians we represent God's kingdom and take His message into the world. When we do this we should remember that people will judge God and His kingdom by the way we represent Him.

- ✠ How do we put this responsibility into practice?

Remember the words of the old song "if you are a Christian you are a sermon in shoes!"

At the end of this passage Paul concludes that Jesus died and bore our sins so that we might be:

Righteous

Reconciled to God

New creations, and

His representatives on earth

Let's pray that we represent Christ in such a way that God is honoured and those we meet would be reconciled to Him.

Going deeper (in the group or at home)

Verse 21 says that God (the Father) made Jesus 'to be sin for us'. That's a difficult phrase to understand. Look it up on Bible Gateway in other versions, particularly the New Living Translation. Does anything you can recall from the study series on the Cross of Christ help us to understand it?

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