

2 CORINTHIANS  
*for*  
EVERYONE

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.  
WRIGHT

STUDY GUIDE BY SALLY D. SHARPE

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20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE  
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

*Matthew for Everyone, Part 1*

*Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*

*Mark for Everyone*

*Luke for Everyone*

*John for Everyone, Part 1*

*John for Everyone, Part 2*

*Acts for Everyone, Part 1*

*Acts for Everyone, Part 2*

*Romans for Everyone, Part 1*

*Romans for Everyone, Part 2*

*1 Corinthians for Everyone*

*2 Corinthians for Everyone*

*Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone*

*Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone*

*1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone*

*Hebrews for Everyone*

*James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone*

*Revelation for Everyone*

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright  
2022

## INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

## INTRODUCTION

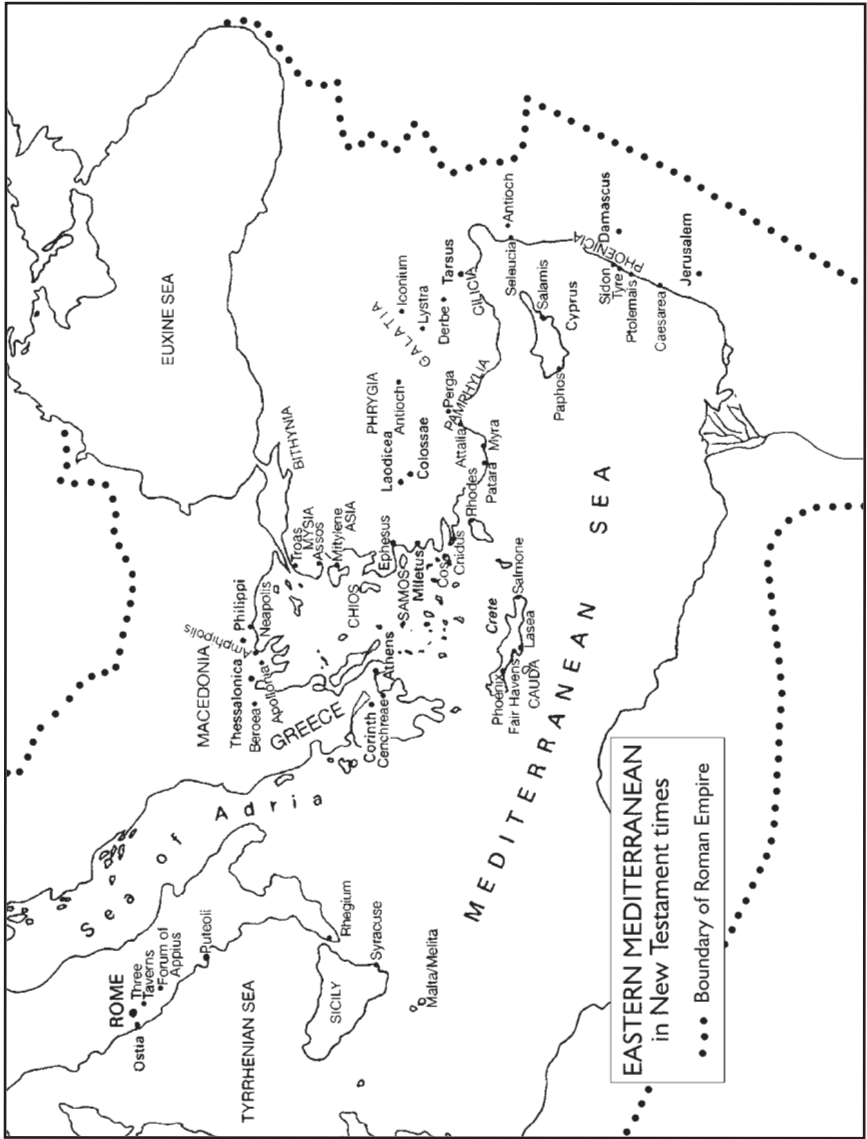
There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have tried, naturally, to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

Paul's second letter to Corinth is very different from the first one. Something terrible had happened, and we feel his pain from the very opening lines. In this letter he goes down deeper into sorrow and hurt, and what to do about it, than he does anywhere else, and he emerges with a deeper, clearer vision of what it meant that Jesus himself suffered for and with us and rose again in triumph. The letter itself comes through the tragedy and out into the sunlight, and has a lot to teach us as we make that journey from time to time ourselves. So here it is: Paul for everyone – 2 Corinthians!

Tom Wright





## 2 CORINTHIANS 1.1-7

### The God of All Comfort

<sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Messiah Jesus through God's will, and Timothy our brother; to God's assembly in Corinth, with all God's people in the whole of Achaea: <sup>2</sup>grace and peace to you from God our father and the Lord, Messiah Jesus!

<sup>3</sup>Let us bless God, the father of our Lord, Messiah Jesus; he is the father of mercies and the God of all comfort. <sup>4</sup>He comforts us in all our trouble, so that we can then comfort people in every kind of trouble, through the comfort with which God comforts us. <sup>5</sup>Just as we have an overflowing share of the Messiah's sufferings, you see, so we have an overflowing share in comfort through the Messiah. <sup>6</sup>If we are troubled, it's because of your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it's for the sake of your comfort, which comes about as you bear patiently with the same sufferings that we are going through. <sup>7</sup>And our hope about you remains firm, because we know that, just as you've shared in our sufferings, so you will also share in our comfort.

The weekend I began work on this book was the weekend when Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother died. She had become a unique British institution. She was 101 years old, one of the few people ever to live in three centuries.

The message was flashed around the world in news bulletins. The Queen Mother had been a familiar figure to millions, and had won the affection, admiration and love of people around the world, not least through the comfort she brought to thousands who lost homes, loved ones and livelihoods during the Second World War.

Now it was the turn of her own family to feel the loss, and they felt it keenly. The television showed pictures of them getting together to comfort one another. And the weekend when it all happened was the weekend of Easter. The Queen Mother died on Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Day, the day when the church quietly and sorrowfully remembers Jesus lying in his tomb. It is an extraordinary moment, poised between sorrow and comfort.

The Queen Mother was known for pithy, and often funny, sayings. But one of her most-quoted lines was from the height of the war. She had made many visits to the East End of London which had suffered most from bomb damage, but finally her own home, Buckingham Palace, was hit by a bomb, causing a good deal of damage. 'At last,' she said, 'I can look the East End in the face.' She had suffered something of what they had suffered, and the comfort she brought them by her continued presence was all the stronger.

Paul's theme throughout this letter is the strange royal comfort that comes through the suffering and death, and the new **resurrection-life**, of Israel's **Messiah**, Jesus, the Lord of the world. This is the letter above all where he explores the meaning of the cross in terms of personal suffering – his own, and that of all the Messiah's people. If in Galatians he is angry, if in Philippians he is joyful, in this letter his deep sorrow, and the raw wounds of his own recent suffering, are very apparent. He is still capable of humour, and some of what he writes here is quite sparkling. But he writes, so to speak, as one who has just emerged from the ruins of his own house after a bombing raid; and he is all the more able to speak of comfort because of what he himself has just gone through.

What has happened? What has caused such intense suffering as to leave a mark not only on his body but, as we shall see, on the very way he writes? How has it affected his relationship with the lively but often muddled church in Corinth? We shall explore all of these as the letter proceeds. But what we have in this opening passage is the lens through which Paul was determined to view all suffering, all the troubles of the world, his own included. It is the lens of the **gospel**; and here the gospel is turned into prayer.

The gospel, as he summarized it in 1 Corinthians 15.3–8, is about Jesus the Messiah: that he 'died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures'. It matters vitally to Paul that these were real events which really took place. But it matters just as much that they become the lens through which the whole world can be seen in proper focus, the grid on which all reality and experience can be plotted. And here, turning his thoughts into prayer, we see what that might mean.

The opening greeting (verses 1–2) follows the pattern which Paul adapted from regular letter-writing in the ancient world. But he filled it, of course, with the particular meanings of the gospel. We notice, to start with, that the circle of readers has widened. In his first letter to Corinth (1 Corinthians 1.2) he simply addressed the Christians in Corinth itself – though reminding them that they were part of a world-wide family. But in the short space of time, perhaps at most a couple of years, between the first letter and this one, the gospel has spread out from Corinth to the other towns and villages of southern Greece, known as 'Achaea'. The very address thus bears witness to the power of the gospel which was still at work. 'All God's people in the whole of Achaea': an increasing number, not many known to Paul personally, but all of them beloved by God, and all of them, sooner or later, in need of the comfort of the gospel.

Paul often begins the main part of his letters with a prayer in which he lays before God the main theme he wants to get across to his readers.

There is no problem here in discovering what it is. He repeats the word 'comfort' in one form or another ten times in five verses. To say that this is obviously what's on his mind doesn't put it strongly enough; it sounds almost like an obsession.

Actually, the word he uses is a bit more many-sided than 'comfort'. It can mean 'to call someone to come near', 'to make a strong appeal or exhortation', or 'to treat in an inviting or friendly way'. The whole idea of the word is that one person is being with another, speaking words which change their mood and situation, giving them courage, new hope, new direction, new insights which will alter the way they face the next moment, the next day, the rest of their life. And when you put all that together in a bottle, shake it up, and pour it out for someone who is in the middle of deep suffering, the best word we can come up with to describe the effect is probably 'comfort'. If we said 'console' or 'consolation' that would pick up one aspect of it; but when you 'console' someone you simply bring them back from utter despair to ordinary unhappiness. The word Paul uses here, over and over again, does more than that. It meets people where they are, and brings them right on to the point where they are strong enough to see new hope, new possibilities, new ways forward.

At the heart of this prayer, and of the gospel, is the fact that *what is true of the Messiah becomes true of his people*. This is a central principle for Paul, not simply as a powerful idea and belief but as a fact of experience. The letter returns to this again and again, in what some have called a pattern of 'interchange': the Messiah died, so his people die in him, sharing his sufferings; the Messiah rose again, so his people rise again in him, knowing the power of the resurrection to comfort and heal, already in the present time, and cherishing the hope that one day they will be given new, resurrection bodies like the one the Messiah himself now has. This is basic to a good deal of the letter.

But as well as the interchange between the Messiah and his people we also see, here and throughout the letter, a similar interchange between the **apostle** and the churches to whom he writes. When he suffers, the churches are comforted; when he is comforted, that comfort is passed on to them too. The idea of the isolated individual, living his or her own life in a sealed-off compartment away from the rest of the world, is totally foreign to Paul. Precisely because the gospel is about love, the love of God going out to embrace the world in the Messiah, the love of the apostle going out to the communities 'in the Messiah' that have come into being through his work, this pattern of interchange operates in a thousand different ways. What happens to them, and what happens to Paul himself, are intertwined.

And all is from God himself. Paul's prayer highlights God as 'the father of mercies and the God of all comfort', and throughout the

letter Paul emphasizes that God himself is at work in and through the strange and troubling things that are happening. What happens in and through the Messiah, and the gospel, is what God is doing. We should not miss the sense, throughout this letter, that Paul's deep experience of pain and sorrow has led him to a new vision of God. And that vision, shaped by the Messiah, is a vision of light and love. Light enough to see how to move forward from tragedy to glory; love enough to know that one is held in the divine embrace which will not only comfort in the present but remain faithful and victorious into the future.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1.8–14

### Unbearably Crushed

<sup>8</sup>You see, my dear family, we don't want to keep you in the dark about the suffering we went through in Asia. The load we had to carry was far too heavy for us; it got to the point where we gave up on life itself. <sup>9</sup>Yes: deep inside ourselves we received the death sentence. This was to stop us relying on ourselves, and to make us rely on the God who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup>He rescued us from such a great and deadly peril, and he'll do it again; we have placed our hope in him, that he'll do it again! <sup>11</sup>But you must cooperate with us through prayer for us, so that when God gives us this gift, answering the prayers of so many, all the more will give thanks because of what's happened to us.

<sup>12</sup>This is what we boast of, you see; this is what our conscience is telling us: that our conduct in the world, and in particular in relation to you, has been marked by holiness and godly sincerity, not in merely human wisdom but in God's grace. <sup>13</sup>We are not writing anything to you, after all, except what you can read and understand. And I hope you will go on understanding right through to the end, <sup>14</sup>just as you have understood us already – well, partly, at least! We are your pride and joy, just as you are ours, on the day of our Lord Jesus.

You watch from a distance as a friend walks down the street. You see him turn and go into a house. He strides in cheerfully and purposefully. You wait for a few minutes. Then you see him come out again – only now you see, to your horror, that he is limping, staggering along, with bruises on his face and blood trickling from one arm. You are filled with pity and sympathy, but also with puzzlement: *what on earth happened in that house?*

The historian, particularly the ancient historian, is often in the position of the puzzled spectator. We may have evidence about an early phase of someone's career, and then again a later phase; but what happened in between is often hidden from us. So it is with Paul. He has

gone into the house, striding cheerfully along; we have watched him do so in 1 Corinthians. Now we see him emerge again, battered and bruised. Even his style of writing seems to have changed. But we don't know what happened inside.

Nor does he tell us. Like many people in the ancient world, he was more interested in what illness or suffering *meant* than in giving us a detailed account of his symptoms. Most of what we know is in these verses; we can glean a little from things he says later in the letter, but it doesn't amount to much. He simply refers to 'the suffering we went through in Asia' (the Roman province of 'Asia' was roughly the western half of modern Turkey, with Ephesus in the middle of its west coast; Ephesus was where Paul was staying when he wrote 1 Corinthians). What had happened?

Acts doesn't help at this point, either. Perhaps, if Paul was imprisoned and ill-treated in Ephesus – as seems likely – the author of Acts was anxious not to draw too much attention to it. He has Paul getting into enough trouble as it is. But the riot in the theatre in Ephesus, which Acts describes in chapter 19, may have been part of it. In that passage, things are quietened down by the city officials. But people had woken up to the fact that if the message Paul was announcing was to catch on, their businesses would suffer; so would their civic pride in the great temple of Diana. And the opposition may well have continued in new and nastier ways, leaving Paul feeling, as he says here, that he's received the sentence of death.

In fact, his description sounds much like what we would call a nervous breakdown. The load had become too heavy; all his natural human resources of energy and strength were worn down to nothing. It's bad enough to hear a magistrate declare that you are sentenced to death; it's far worse when a voice deep inside yourself tells you that you might as well give up and die. That is the point Paul had reached, the point where the night had become totally dark and all hope of dawn had disappeared.

Does that mean he'd been relying on his own resources up to that point? That sounds strange for someone who could write, in the previous letter, about his work being done not by his own efforts, but by God's grace (1 Corinthians 15.10). But maybe, beneath this conscious sense of God's help and grace, there was still more that Paul had to learn about the meaning of the **resurrection** – the very thing that he had made the climax of the earlier letter (chapter 15)! Here he says it plainly: the fact that he came to the point where he despaired of life itself was somehow intended – intended by God, he must mean – to make him rely on 'the God who raises the dead'. This old Jewish belief in the life-giving God, the God whose power created the world and

will recreate it, came home freshly to Paul as he found himself stripped of all other resources.

Paul begins his letter by telling them this much, not simply in order to gain sympathy, though no doubt that is part of it, but for two other reasons as well, one which he mentions and one which he doesn't. The one he mentions is that he wants them to be bound to him all the more tightly in a fellowship of prayer. When two people or communities pray seriously for one another, a bond is set up between them which transforms their relationship when they meet again. In addition, Paul sees in verse 11 that something else happens, which is what he is really interested in: when lots of people are praying for something, and God then grants it, there is all the more thanksgiving.

For Paul, when human beings give thanks to God, something at the heart of the universe comes back into proper shape. Humans thanking the creator for his goodness are a symptom of the way the world was meant to be, a sign that one day it really will be like that. And such signs are themselves powerful in helping forward the work of the **gospel** through which the great day will come. This theme of thanksgiving, to which Paul returns two or three more times in this letter, is one of several things that 2 Corinthians has in common with Colossians, which was perhaps written while Paul was in prison in Ephesus, shortly before his release. Then, some time after his release, he began to make his way round through Macedonia, intending to come south through Greece to Corinth. That's when he's writing this letter.

The thing he doesn't mention explicitly, but which would be an important factor in his mind and that of his readers, is that illness and suffering in the ancient world was regularly regarded as a sign of divine displeasure. Whatever it was that Paul had gone through, it would have been easy for his enemies, or those who were jealous of him, to think to themselves that it probably served him right, that God was most likely punishing him for something or other. Not so, says Paul. These things come not because God is angry but because he wants you to trust him the more fully. Many of the greatest saints and mystics (insofar as we have any idea what 'greatness' means in such cases) have spoken of a sense of darkness in which they discern the call of God to trust him beyond what they can see or imagine. This is something the ancient world had not thought of. Paul was breaking new ground. He wanted the Corinthians to understand that this, too, was part of the earth-shattering implication of the gospel.

He also yearned that they would abandon any lingering suspicions about his motives in preaching to them in the first place and in writing to them subsequently. We shall see later that some in Corinth have

attacked him bitterly, sneering at him and implying all sorts of things about his character and secret aims. At this point he simply lays down a first statement of how things have been. His conscience is clear; he isn't trying to hide anything; he wants there to be complete understanding between them. After all, on the day when the Lord Jesus is revealed, the day Paul spoke of so often in the first letter, the churches in Greece will be his pride and joy, the sign that he has been faithful to his Lord and has discharged his commission. And he longs that they will see him that way too: their loyalty to him as their founding **apostle** will be the sign, on that day, that they really were and are following the Lord of whom he had spoken.

We have learned a lot about suffering, especially mental suffering, in the last century or so. Psychologists and psychiatrists, though sometimes producing some peculiar theories, have given us real insight and brought much help and understanding to people in need. But this passage, though brief, goes as deep in its description of the problem and its solution as any modern theory. At the centre of everything are the issues of life and death. To face death, a sentence of death coming from one's own being, is as low as one can get. To trust in the God who raises the dead, with that **faith** anchored in the resurrection of Jesus himself, is the best therapy anyone could discover, in the first century or the twenty-first.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1.15–22

### Paul's Plans and God's 'Yes'

<sup>15</sup>I was quite sure of this. That's why I wanted to come to you again, so that you could have a double blessing. <sup>16</sup>I intended to go on to Macedonia by way of you, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judaea. <sup>17</sup>Was I just fooling around when I was making plans like this? Was I concocting schemes in a merely human way, prepared to say 'Yes, yes', and 'No, no', at the same moment? <sup>18</sup>God can bear me faithful witness that our word to you was not a mixture of Yes and No. <sup>19</sup>The son of God, Jesus the Messiah, who was proclaimed among you by Silvanus, Timothy and myself, wasn't a Yes-and-No person; in him it's always Yes! <sup>20</sup>All God's promises, you see, find their Yes in him; and that's why we say the Yes, the Amen through him when we pray to God and give him glory. <sup>21</sup>It's God who strengthens us with you into the Messiah, the anointed one; and he has anointed us, too. <sup>22</sup>God has stamped his seal on us, by giving us the spirit in our hearts as a down payment and guarantee of what is to come.



One of my students once arrived very late for a tutorial. I was working on an extremely tight schedule, and I wasn't amused at having the day disrupted. I thought the student needed to know how far out of line his behaviour was.

I had just finished my little moral lecture, and we were beginning the tutorial, when the telephone rang. It was a publisher, wondering why I had not sent the writing I should have finished the previous month. I heard myself making the same kind of excuses the student had made to me a moment earlier.

I put the phone down, and we looked at each other.

'I feel a bit better now', he said, with the hint of a smile.

I was reminded of this when imagining how frustrated the Corinthian church must have felt at Paul's various changes of plan. He seemed to be switching to and fro and they didn't know why. Recently I found myself caught up in a small-scale version of the same thing: my plans to travel to a speaking engagement next month were almost finalized, but a new opportunity arrived for something else as well, and maybe I should change the arrangements and stay on for two more days . . . As I made the necessary calls I thought how much easier it would have been if Paul had had a telephone or even email.

The Corinthian church had clearly been upset to get messages saying – so it seemed – first one thing and then another. To get from Ephesus to Corinth by sea wasn't difficult (see the map, page xi). It's about two hundred and fifty miles, more or less due west, with the boat no doubt stopping here and there on the way through the Greek islands. Traders made the journey all the time. Paul himself had done it not long before, as we shall see, making a quick but painful visit which still reverberated through his memory and that of the church.

He had originally thought that he would go that route again: straight across to Corinth, north by land to Macedonia (to his dear friends in Thessalonica and Philippi), and then back to Corinth again, before setting off for Judaea once more. But something had happened to make him change his mind; and now he was coming the long way, by the land route around the northern Aegean. Travelling by land was usually slower and more dangerous than by sea, and Paul must have had good reason for the change of plan. Maybe his terrible experiences in Ephesus had left him unwilling to face a sea voyage just at the moment. But there may have been another reason too. If he travelled by land, he could send messengers ahead to prepare the Corinthians for his visit. After the disaster last time, he didn't want to risk just showing up and finding them unprepared.

But, though he has good reasons for his change of plan, the Corinthians have got the impression that he is vacillating, unable to make his

mind up, perhaps deliberately sending mixed signals about his intentions. He's like a person who says 'Yes, yes,' out of one side of the mouth and 'No, no,' out of the other. Not so, Paul declares: I have always had Yes as my answer to you. It may come out in different ways, but I have been completely consistent. He has lived, prayed and planned on the basis of the **gospel** itself; and the gospel is all about God saying Yes to people through the gospel of his **son**, the **Messiah**.

There is a triple Yes involved in the gospel. First, there is the Yes to all the promises God made in the Bible. For over a thousand years Israel had lived on those promises, trusting that the God who had called Israel to be his people would lead them forward, and accomplish in the end what he had planned and purposed. Paul's whole life was built on the belief that in Jesus of Nazareth God had done exactly that: Jesus was the Messiah, the culmination and crown of Israel's long story, the answer to all Israel's hopes and prayers, the fulfilment of all the promises. God had finally said Yes, and had said it so loudly through Jesus' **resurrection** that it was now echoing all around the world.

The second Yes is the one that those who believe in Jesus say when they pray. The Hebrew or Aramaic word for 'Yes' is 'Amen.' 'Amen' is one of the few Hebrew words spoken around the world today, though most people don't realize where it comes from. When someone says a prayer, and other people want to associate themselves with it, they say 'Amen' at the end: it means 'Yes!' or 'I agree!' or 'That's what I want to say, too!' But Paul goes further. When we pray to the one true God, and give him glory, he says, we say the 'Amen' *through* Jesus the Messiah. When a prayer today ends with the words 'through Jesus **Christ** our Lord, Amen', the church is continuing a tradition which was well established when Paul was writing this letter, a mere twenty-five years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection, and which has continued in an unbroken line ever since. And the point of it is based on the first Yes. If the one true God has fulfilled his promises through the Messiah, Jesus, then when his people pray to him the appropriate way to ask is 'through Jesus the Messiah'.

The third Yes, therefore, is the one that reaches out from God to individual people today. What we need, if we are followers of the Messiah and learning what it means to belong to him, is to grow up 'into' him. The Messiah, as God's anointed king, represents his people, sums them up in himself, so that what is true of him becomes true of them. Christians need, therefore, to be strengthened 'into' the Messiah, and God's Yes to us today is what does that.

Paul even declares that, as Messiah means 'the anointed one', so God has 'anointed' the Messiah's people, too, by giving them his own **spirit**

(verse 21). There are three ideas here, each of which is important for what comes later.

First, all God's people are 'anointed'. That is, they are themselves marked out by God, just as a king or a **priest** might have been. This is another way of saying what Paul says elsewhere when he sees Christians as the younger brothers and sisters of Jesus the Messiah.

Second, God has stamped us with his seal. Until comparatively modern times people who sent important letters would often seal them with molten wax, into which they would press a stamp or signet ring so that whoever got the letter would know who it had come from, and that it hadn't been tampered with on the way. God has 'sealed' his people with the spirit, and the stamp which the world will see on them is the mark of the Messiah himself, whose death and life they now share.

Third, the gift of the spirit is a first payment of what is to come. When people make large purchases, they often do so by putting down a lump sum in advance and thereby agreeing to pay off the rest in due time. When God anoints someone with the spirit, Paul declares, this is the first part of the gift which will be completed in the resurrection itself. If the Christian hope is founded on Jesus' own resurrection, that hope becomes a real possession within us through God's gift of the spirit.

Paul has moved from the Corinthians' puzzlement about his travel plans to the very centre of the gospel and the hope it brings. This is quite deliberate. He doesn't want the Corinthians to think of him, his travels and his forthcoming visit in purely human terms. He is anxious that they should learn to think of him, as they should learn to think of everything, in the light of God's great Yes in the gospel and the spirit.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 1.23—2.4

### Painful Visit, Painful Letter

<sup>23</sup>For my own part, I call on God as witness, against my own life, that the reason I haven't yet come back to Corinth is because I wanted to spare you. <sup>24</sup>This isn't because I am making myself the lord and master over your faith; your faith is the reason you stand fast! Rather, it's because we are cooperating with you for your joy.

<sup>2.1</sup>You see, I settled it in my mind that I wouldn't make you another sad visit. <sup>2</sup>After all, if I make you sad, who is there to cheer *me* up except the one who is sad because of me? <sup>3</sup>And I wrote what I did so that I wouldn't come and find sadness where I should have found joy. I have this confidence about all of you, that my joy belongs to you all.

<sup>4</sup>No: I wrote to you in floods of tears, out of great trouble and anguish in my heart, not so that I could make you sad but so that you would know just how much overflowing love I have towards you.

I was trying to hang a picture and just couldn't get it right. I didn't calculate the height accurately enough, and when I stood back I realized it had to be about an inch higher up. Then when I tried to move the picture-hook some of the plaster in the wall came away; and when I put the hook where it should be, and began to hammer in the hook once more, another whole piece of plaster came loose. I stood back again in frustration. I had been trying to put things right, and what I had done seemed instead to have put them completely wrong. I had to get some filler and mend the hole, and then wait a day or two until it had hardened, before, this time, calculating the exact spot and nailing the hook extremely carefully where it should go.

I am (as this story will make clear) an amateur when it comes to do-it-yourself home improvements, even hanging pictures. But Paul was an **apostle**, called and equipped by God . . . surely he wouldn't have made basic mistakes? Part of what he's saying in this passage is that sometimes when bad things happen it doesn't mean that anybody's made a mistake: I couldn't have known that bit of the wall had some loose plaster; Paul couldn't have imagined that the Corinthians were in the wrong frame of mind for the kind of visit he planned; many things happen that are not what we would have expected or wanted, and we have to do the best we can with things as they are.

What Paul is beginning to do in this passage is, as it were, to put some new filling into an ugly crack in the wall, in the hope that it will set firm and enable him to make a fresh start with the work of building up the church. Last time he came, and last time he wrote, it all seemed to go horribly wrong.

Precisely what had happened is once more a matter of informed guesswork. Paul had made a brief visit to Corinth, coming, we assume, by the short sea route rather than the long way over land. He had hoped to be able to sort out some of the problems he had written about in the first letter. But instead of the church welcoming him with delight, and co-operating in putting things straight, there was opposition. Many people resented his intrusion. Some of the teachers who had arrived since he had left mocked his speaking style, his insignificant appearance. The tension between the cultural standards Corinth prided itself on and the strange new world of the Christian **gospel** were pulling at either end of the relationship between Paul and the church, and they came unstuck. We don't know the details, but we do know that it was very painful for everyone.

Paul returned to Ephesus, we assume, in deep distress, and wrote another letter, with tears rolling down his cheeks as he did so. Some people think that this 'painful' letter is actually now part of what we call '2 Corinthians', perhaps all or part of what we call chapters 10 to 13.

That seems unlikely to me. It's more likely the letter wasn't preserved. We don't know what exactly he said, but we know what he hoped for. He hoped the letter would do the trick and make them see that he had acted out of deep love, not wanting to treat them as his private property, or to patronize them, or to upset them for the sake of it. And we know what it achieved: nothing, or rather worse than nothing. That, presumably, is why it wasn't preserved. Paul, by trying to make things better, had made them worse. He had now knocked a lump of plaster out of the wall, and was going to have to do some serious repair work.

Meanwhile, the storm that had been brewing in Ephesus, whatever it was, had begun to break over his head. This was all he needed: trouble on the spot, and rebellion across the sea. No wonder he found himself sinking into the blackest depths of despair. And then, when he did get a message to them again, it was first to say that he was coming soon, then that he wasn't. And they just thought he was making it even worse.

No, he says: it was to spare you that I decided not to come after all (verse 23). Paul, emerging from the dark tunnel of depression, clinging for dear life to the God who raises the dead, still knows that this God has given him authority, with the spiritual power to back it up, to build up the church; and that means, if necessary, confronting evil wherever it occurs. He comes back to this theme at the end of the letter, in chapter 13, but we are aware of it at several points on the way as well. What he says, and the way he says it, speaks volumes about the nature of power within the Christian community.

We who live in a world that has known both violent revolutions and cruel tyrannies have grown cynical about all power. We always assume that anyone who says 'I'm doing this for your own good' is in fact manipulating us, twisting our arms to make us do something for their good rather than ours. Some have even suggested that Paul was up to the same trick. But Paul's whole point, throughout this letter, is that this is not the kind of power he has, or wants to have. He has no intention of playing the high-and-mighty lord and master over their **faith**; the faith they have is the faith by which they stand fast as genuine Christians, and it isn't his business to interfere with that, to come between them and the Lord himself. Rather, as a servant of the Lord on their behalf, he has a responsibility to work together with them, to increase their love and loyalty, and thereby also their joy.

This is because the kind of power that matters in Christian circles is the power of love. Paul's understanding of his relationship with the Corinthians is a rich interweaving of love and sorrow – which inevitably reminds us of the love and sorrow which met in Jesus himself at his death. He has acted, he says, not as part of a power-trip but because he loves them, and wants to see the sorrow turn to joy. He knows and

believes that this can and will now happen. But, as Paul knows, and every experienced pastor knows, there is often a long, anxious moment when, to return to the picture hanging on the wall, we stand back and wonder whether this time it's going to be all right.