

# A FATHER'S HEART

By Steve Zeisler

---

Consider all that has happened in the world since the first Sunday in May of 1989. Nations have undergone unprecedented political transformation. The Iron Curtain has been raised. The Berlin Wall has been torn down. Nelson Mandela has been released from prison. Institutions and ideologies that seemed immutable have been forced to change by people hungering for freedom and justice.

Our own church has also undergone a transformation this past year. The building looks different because of the refurbishing that has taken place. The elders of both campuses, PBC North and South, are now concentrating more on each local congregation. But the most profound change that has occurred undoubtedly has been the retirement from formal leadership of the founding generation of leaders of PBC. Bob Roe, Charlie Luce, and Ray Stedman have now stepped aside from their responsibilities. The remaining patriarchs have passed the baton on to the next generation. I don't know anyone who feels worthy or capable of carrying the baton for the next lap. But our feelings are unimportant. We serve a risen Lord, and no matter how we feel about things he is capable of continuing the work which he began here. The word of God itself to us, and the word of those who have gone on before us, remind us that Jesus is Head of his church, and "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

## Returning to roots

As we are entering a new era in this church, it behooves us to begin a study in one of the most wonderful documents in the New Testament, the book of 2 Corinthians. Ray Stedman's seminal work, *Authentic Christianity*, is an exposition of five chapters from the heart of this letter concerning what it means to be ministers of the New Covenant. He described that work as "the book I have wanted to write above all others." Thus I feel it will be helpful to us to address again some of those themes that have made us what we are as a church.

But we need to say that our drawing on 2 Corinthians is somewhat unusual, for Christians throughout the centuries have largely ignored this book. Of all the New Testament books, this is perhaps the most overlooked as far as personal or group Bible study is concerned. I think that is because 2 Corinthians is a bit of a hodge-podge. The apostle refers to a number of things which were clear to himself and his readers, but are unknown to us (e.g. the "zealous brother" in 8:22). Ideas seem to drop unannounced into the text without reference to what precedes or follows them. Unlike 1 Corinthians, for example, where Paul takes issues (the questions of the Corinthians themselves) and deals with them in an orderly fashion, 2 Corinthians seems disjointed. The book of Romans is a systematic presentation of the glory of the gospel, but 2 Corinthians leaves us grasping to catch the flow at times. Paul's journal.

In many respects 2 Corinthians is more like a diary than a letter. It is much more personal than any of Paul's other letters. He shares his heart in a profound way so that his readers can see exactly who he is. This book is more about the man himself than anything else. Here Paul depends more on his passion for Christ than on logic to persuade his readers.

Second Corinthians contains self-analysis, warnings, judgments, embarrassing admissions, all mixed together with things as mundane as the apostle's travel plans. Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church had been long and difficult. I'm convinced that his final appeal to them was intentionally the most personal document we have from the apostle's pen.

## The place of God

I will begin by reading sections of the book so as to give us a feel for the letter as a whole. Then next week we will begin working through the letter. First, the introduction:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth with the saints who are throughout Achaia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a familiar introduction, similar to other New Testament letters. The author first identifies himself, then the recipients, and then adds a word of blessing or greeting. But notice in these words the firm place which God occupies in Paul's thinking. The apostle introduces himself and Timothy, but he describes himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." He is writing to the church in Corinth, but the church there is the church of God. He speaks of grace and peace that should flow from heaven, but these things come in particular from God, the Father and Son. Thus at the outset Paul firmly implants the immovable place of God. He does that because the people to whom he is writing were having difficulty getting along together and getting along with Paul himself. To have any hope of resolving their problems they must be rightly related to God at the start.

### **Adolescent children**

The seven-year relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church was stormy. I think we could use the analogy of a father and an adolescent child to describe the relationship. In both Corinthian letters, Paul calls himself the "father" of the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 4:14-16, for instance, he says, "I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me." There are guardians, teachers, tutors, informed thinkers, etc., all around, but not many fathers, says Paul: "I have become your father through the gospel." In 2 Corinthians 6:13, he says, "I speak to you as my children." So it is common for Paul to describe those whom he led to Christ as his children.

But to Paul, the Corinthian believers were his adolescent children. Others of his letters are written to mature children who perhaps were in need of answers or help of some sort, but the Corinthian church for too long had been semi-rebellious, hard to get along with, and too impressed with itself-like an adolescent child. This is why Paul labored so long and agonizingly to help this church succeed in its spiritual walk.

The Corinthians were not persecuted, like the Macedonian and Asian churches. They were not destitute and deprived, like the church in Jerusalem. Their problems were self-inflicted. These people were brash, competitive, filled with a sense of their own importance, easily impressed with oratorical flourish, worldly credentials, and displays of mystical powers. They winked at indulgence, and argued for their rights.

We can sketch the history of the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church using the book of Acts and the two letters which he wrote to them. In 50 or 51 A.D., the apostle came to Corinth, led people to Christ, and founded the church. Later, after he had left the city, he heard about a problem of sin and unrighteousness among them and he wrote them a short letter which is now lost to us, urging them to put away sexual immorality from their midst.

The Corinthians did not take kindly to this father figure admonishing them about how they should live. They responded by sending Paul a list of questions seeking clarification on what he had written. In reply, Paul wrote his 1 Corinthian letter to them. They were resistant to Paul's position of authority, and he was forced to defend his apostleship. They had other voices they would rather listen to-Greek philosophers, elite Jewish leaders who called on them, etc.

The letter we know as 1 Corinthians only succeeded in putting more distance between father and child, and Paul felt compelled to pay an emergency visit that again made matters worse. Paul left, we learn in 2

Corinthians, resolved not to return there again until matters had been cleared up between them. Yet, he wondered who would help them if he did not. So he wrote another (third) letter, which is also lost to us, in which he lowered the boom on them harder than he had at any time previous.

Not unexpectedly, the Corinthians did not receive this well. Finally, he sent his friend Titus to Corinth, hoping that he would return with hopeful news, but no news came. So he set out for Greece again and finally met Titus in Macedonia. Titus brought the good news with him that things were beginning to turn around in Corinth. It was at this point that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians. There are some tensions obvious in the letter, but there are also signs of growing hope for their relationship.

### **Communication struggles**

I have at times wondered if we should have a weekend retreat with fathers and their adolescent children, using the model of Paul's relationship to the church at Corinth for study and discussion. So much of what the apostle went through in his efforts to get this church to grow up is like what parents go through with their children who have come into a new potency and capacity. They have grown big and strong, bright and capable, but they don't know their shortcomings yet. They don't know what they don't know. They see opportunity on every side, but they have not lived long enough to recognize their own internal weaknesses.

I have often found myself saying almost the same things with regard to conversations I had with my children as Paul said to himself with regard to the Corinthians. I have regretted times when I intervened and times when I didn't; alternated between commands and persuasion. I concern myself with dangers they can't perceive, and yet I realize that growing up means a child must gain responsibility. Recently I had a conversation with my daughter in which I was trying to fix her life. Finally, she said, "If you would just stop talking about this, I would agree with you. Don't you realize that every time you put me in a corner, I am less likely to do what you want? I know what I need to do, and if you will just be quiet, I will do it." (I remember having the same kind of conversations with my parents!) I know I am right, and they know I am right, but this authority thing is what causes problems.

This was Paul's problem with the Corinthians. He sees them making fools of themselves. They were being seduced by a group of men Paul sarcastically refers to as "super-duper apostles." At one point (2 Cor. 7:8,9) he recalls regretting ever having written that third letter, and then immediately retracts the feelings of regret. In chapter 11 he says that what he is writing is foolishness, and he is embarrassed, but he doesn't know what else to do. At times I know that every word coming out of my mouth addressed to my children sounds like lunacy to them, but I know I must say it nevertheless. I wish, like Paul, that I could say it better, but find no better alternative.

### **The nature of the flesh**

The greatest danger facing teenagers is not what is outside of them but what is inside of them. They have adult opportunities, adult bodies, adult capacities and desires, but they are not yet wise enough to know how to handle everything. They do not know about their predilection to do wrong, or how to discern the difference between that which only claims to be beautiful and that which really is. To use the biblical term, what I am talking about is the flesh. The letter of 2 Corinthians is about spiritual adolescence, that period in their spiritual journey where people assume too much about themselves; when they want to run off and serve God before first asking him what he wants; where they feel they can charge into situations, unaware that their spiritual weaknesses are very real; to not take careful stock of what the Bible calls the flesh. Spiritual adolescents underestimate the power of the flesh, and this was the problem the Corinthian adolescent believers were foundering upon.

When I was learning to drive a car, I listened very carefully to my instructor. But my tentativeness did not last very long once I knew what the various pedals, etc., did. My sense of self-confidence just ballooned. I passed the driving test and imagined myself to be a terrific driver. What I did not realize was the fact that there were hundreds of situations I would face in driving that I had yet to become familiar with. I drove to school on occasion that first year, and everything went great until the first day it rained. The steep hill I drove down dozens of times without incident became quite a different test when the first rains of the season slickened the

pavement. I drove down in my usual way and crashed into a parked car at the bottom of the hill. I assumed driving in the rain to be no different than driving on a dry road, but there were certain subtleties about driving that I had not encountered before. Driving is a skillful test, and there are all kinds of situations that demand a defensive posture, good judgment, etc. Those must be learned by experience; driving school can't duplicate every situation. This is also true of spiritual adolescence. We are sometimes too impressed with ourselves.

Thus, here we see Paul, the founder and patriarch of the church in Corinth, trying to put this spiritually adolescent body in a position where they can succeed on their own. We in PBC have benefitted from godly fathers. The patriarchal generation has now gone on. I am convinced that if our fathers could give us a warning it would be exactly along these lines: Beware of what the flesh can do to you. Do not assume too much. Do not be overly impressed with the appearance of things, with money or degrees, etc. Do not make the mistake that God's work can be accomplished without him.

## **What is eternal**

Finally, to make this theme clear we will look briefly at three different passages from this book that set out the apostolic witness as to what is of God and what is of the flesh. Chapter 4:16-18:

Therefore we do not lose heart. 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. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

"We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen." It is that work of God upon human hearts that cannot be seen. The outer man decays--the hair falls out, the body sags, the eyesight becomes dim--but we do not look at these things. What we look at is the unseen work of God in the heart. But we are in danger of failing to believe that. Everyone is following the news these days of the Hubble telescope, its solar panels, lens cap, etc. The scientists say they will be able to see farther than ever before--even back to the past, to the "Big Bang." But, says Paul, "what is unseen is eternal." Stars and planets will not last. We fix our gaze on what God is doing in human hearts. That is the most important thing. A local scientist who is dying wants to have his head severed from his body and have it frozen, so that at some point in the future, when medical science has found a cure for his disease, his head can be revived again. This poor man has no idea that there is an eternity available to him that has nothing to do with preserving the tangible things of this life.

Adolescent Christians must be careful to not fall in love with the externals. Jesus did not die on the cross with the goal that we should be happier participants in this culture, to make us more secure financially, to make us look better, to make our children more successful. We should not fix our gaze on any of these things. Many of us are too concerned with what we look like and how we are doing--"looking at what is seen rather than what is unseen."

A second passage which helps set the theme of 2 Corinthians is found in chapter 10, verse 17:

"Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the man whom the Lord commends.

What is it about you that speaks well of you in your own mind or in the minds of other people? If we are mature in our faith, it is the commendation of the Lord that counts. Have I served my Lord? Have I heard the inner words of the Spirit saying, "Well done"? Have I been willing to follow his calling and care not at all about what other people think? Human evaluation does not count, nor do degrees, company standing, displays of power, or claims to mystical authority. We must stop seeking credit for what we do and letting others know about it. If we are overly concerned about these things, then we are still adolescents in the faith. We have not yet learned to live life with healthy values and mature, grown-up spirituality.

Strength in weakness

A third passage is taken from chapter 12, verse 9:

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I confess that I would have a difficult time writing, with any sense of honesty, the sentence, "I delight in my weaknesses." I do all that I can, sometimes unconsciously, to put myself in a position where my strengths can be counted upon. One of my responsibilities as a pastor is visiting people who are in the hospital. I would usually rather teach a home Bible study, however, because I feel unsure of what to say when I visit someone who is ill. I feel very inadequate in this area, and occasionally I try to avoid it. But here the apostle proclaims the positive value of letting God put us in situations where our background is of no use to us. When we recognize we are weak, then God's power can strengthen us for his service.

Scripture tells us that the world, the flesh, and the devil are enemies of the faith. Christians who at last are free to come out from behind the Iron Curtain are appalled at our fleshliness in the West. They have suffered under cruel, worldly dictatorships that have crushed and brutalized them for a generation. Last week, I had a conversation with a friend from Ghana. He grew up in a village in Ghana, a place of shrines to demon gods, where the spiritual battle was fought directly with the devil. This man is astonished at our inability to deal with the flesh. Those who have fought against the world, and those who have fought against the demonic, have learned lessons about the faith that some of us have never learned. We are too pleasure-oriented, too arrogant, too much impressed with ourselves. As this generation begins our role in Peninsula Bible Church, the book of 2 Corinthians has a great deal to offer us.

### **What God intended.**

In his book, *Authentic Christianity*, Ray Stedman writes:

This, then, is the primary characteristic of the flesh: it is self-serving...it can have all the outward appearance of the life of God: loving, working, forgiving, creating, serving-but with an inward motive that is aimed always and solely at the advancement of self...This is why fallen man, working in the energy of the flesh, can do many good deeds-good in the eyes of himself and others around. But God does not see them as good. He looks on the heart and not on the outward appearance, therefore he knows they are tainted right from the start. Thus Paul can say, "For the mind of the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law; indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:6,7)...But the glory of the new covenant is far greater. It derives from the activity of Jesus Christ at work within man-directly and without Satanic twists. Thus it is perfectly acceptable to God. It is a delight to him, for it is the activity of his well-beloved Son, and will ever be characterized by his life: genuine love, faithful work, unreserved forgiveness, freshly creative, serving without calling attention to it. That is man as God intended him to be.

Perhaps this truth was most succinctly stated by John the Baptist when his followers questioned him. He realized his own role in life, and that is why he said of Jesus, "He must increase; I must decrease." As we will discover in 2 Corinthians, this is our calling, too.

First Message  
Steve Zeisler  
May 6, 1990

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.