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# Death at Work in Paul

by John E. Wood

*Mr. Wood is always a welcome contributor to our pages, and we have pleasure in presenting his brief study of 2 Corinthians against the background of Paul's experience of bearing the cross.*

Let it be said at once that 2 Corinthians fills much the same place in the New Testament as does the book of Job in the Old. It is a letter written by one whose heart has been broken by the many intolerable burdens heaped on him: a man struggling with a recalcitrant Church and a malignant foe. If in Romans and Galatians we see the apostle *proclaiming* the cross with might and main, in 2 Corinthians we see him *bearing* the cross, and bearing it triumphantly.

Many of the sufferings listed at various points in the letter are thoroughly explicit, though we would like to know more about the surrounding circumstances. At 7:5-13 Paul writes of the anguish he suffered as a result of the very severe letter he had written to them. It led him to cancel a campaign at Troas (2:12f.). At 6:5 he summarizes the privations he suffered in the course of his travels as a missionary. And at 11:23-29 he lists the sundry shipwrecks, dangers, betrayals, and anxieties endured at the hands of anonymous assailants throughout his ministry. But on other occasions it is difficult to be precise about the suffering he bears, if only because we do not know the full story behind this particular letter, and his allusions are often ambiguous. For example, we do not know what he means by 'the serious trouble that came on him in the province of Asia' (1:8). We know he faced a riot there, and that it was the pagan organizers of the local games, the Asiarchs, who came to his aid, and that a speech by the self-important town clerk at Ephesus doubtless saved him from being lynched (Acts 19:23-41). But it can hardly be said that the riot was 'a burden too heavy to bear', as he puts it at 2 Cor. 1:8; and it was certainly not the *continuing* burden which the following verse implies it to have been. The riot appears to have been a one-off situation.

Again we do not know what Paul means by 'the answer of death' in that particular verse. Colin Hemer has given good reason for rejecting the idea that it was a 'sentence' of death, as some translators put it, at least in any *legal* sense, for the word is never used that way.<sup>1</sup> But the fact that Paul was delivered from that mysterious 'answer' of death, according to 1:10, and expected to be delivered from it yet again in the future, counts against Hemer's view that, whereas Paul had previously expected to live until the parousia, God had now given him the answer of 'death' because he was certainly going to die before that event. Moreover there is still an element of doubt in Paul's mind as to whether he would live or die before

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<sup>1</sup> C. J. Hemer, 'A Note on 2 Cor. 1:9'. *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972), 103ff.

Christ's coming, according to 5:1 where Paul appears to be making use of the saying of Jesus recorded in Mark 14:58.<sup>2</sup>

My own conclusion, for what it is worth, is that the crushing burden he bore, and the answer of death he received, arose from the deep opposition he faced from his fellow Jews. This finds support in Acts 20:18f., where Paul reminds the Ephesian elders of the troubles he had faced in their midst, and says:

You yourselves know how I lived among you all the time from the first day I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which befell me through the plots of the Jews.

The fact that, according to Acts, those plots continued both before and after the writing of 2 Corinthians (20:3; 21:11), shows that it was precisely this opposition from which Paul needed to be delivered again and again (2 Cor. 1:10).

Paul is opposed and threatened with death by the very people he calls his 'kinsmen according to the flesh', and for whose conversion he weeps and prays (Rom. 9:2; 10:1). Like Jesus in the final crisis of his earthly life, Paul is being hounded to death by the people he loved, so his description of that conflict is coloured by the passion narratives so familiar to him and us. In 2 Cor. 1:5 he says that 'the sufferings of the Messiah' flow over into his life: he shares in the very sufferings of Jesus. And just as Jesus stumbled beneath the weight of the cross, or at the very least required the assistance of Simon of Cyrene, so Paul is crushed 'way out beyond his strength' as the original suggests at 1:9. The cries of the crowd which called for the death of Jesus, have their echoes among the opponents of Paul: 'we have the answer of "death"' he says in that verse. And therefore Paul faces the threat of 'so great a death': the death which Jesus died on Calvary (v.10). 'We are always being given up to death for the sake of Jesus' Paul says at 4:11, and the verb he uses is precisely that employed elsewhere for Jesus being handed over to the cross (Matt. 26:16; Rom. 8:32). Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Paul had prayed three times to be spared some great ordeal (12:8). But like Jesus crowned with thorns and nailed to the cross, he was called to bear the thorn or 'stake' in the flesh (12:7).<sup>3</sup>

Yet throughout this crucial conflict in his life, Paul knew the dynamic

<sup>2</sup> But while there are close verbal similarities between Paul and Mark at this point (note the words: καταλύω, οικοδομή, and ἀχειροποιήτος), the theology of 2 Cor. 5:1 is closer to that of John 2:19, for it is the resurrection body and not the new community which predominates in Paul's thought at this point.

<sup>3</sup> The word derives from a verb which means 'to be impaled'. In the LXX the noun is usually used in a context where opposition of one kind or another is encountered (Num. 33:55; Ho. 2:6; Ezk. 28:24).

of Christ's overwhelming victory. He is cast upon God who raises the dead (1:9), therefore he confidently expects to triumph in the future, as in the past (1:10). Indeed he has reached the stage when he is glad to welcome every new experience of trial, since it enabled him to prove 'the transcendent power of God' (4:7; 12:9b). He experienced the life of Jesus in his flesh (4:11). The plots may thicken, the cross may cast its shadow across his path, and the final crisis may be near at hand, as a number of prophets in the early Church were to warn him shortly after the writing of 2 Corinthians (Acts 20:38; 21:4,11,36). But he relied on God, requested prayer, and rejoiced in hope (2 Cor. 1:9,11; 4:16; 5:1).

After all that it seems incongruous to descend to talk about mere money as Paul does in chapters 8 and 9. But quite apart from the fact that the idea of this collection is present even in the more joyful sections of chapters 1-7 (2:17; 4:2; 7:2), it is clear from those verses which deal with the topic in these central chapters, that it is the self-giving of Jesus which sets the standard for the giving which Paul both asks and shares (8:9; 9:15). For just as Jesus impoverished himself 'to enrich the humble poor' (and 8:9 is reminiscent of Phil. 2:6-11), so he Paul must spend and be spent in the service of Christ (*cf.* 12:15), and the Corinthians too should give of their substance to help the poor in Jerusalem. Paul cites the example of the Macedonians who begged to be allowed the privilege of sharing in this act of fellowship, and who gave themselves first to the Lord and then to the apostles 'by the will of God' (8:5). And he does so because he wants the Corinthians to be likewise consecrated body and spirit to the Lord, and yoked with the apostles in their service for Christ in this matter of the collection (7:1,2; 9:13).

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Throughout this section, as in the earlier chapters of the letter, Paul is conscious of his opponents. That is why he finds it necessary to avow his integrity in money matters, and to forestall the inevitable criticisms that would be levelled at him. Hence he takes the precaution of appointing accredited supervisors of the fund: some appointed by the churches, and others proposed by himself and his colleagues (8:6,18ff.; 12:16-18). The fund was of fundamental importance. It not only contributed to the needs of believers in Jerusalem, it afforded Jewish and Gentile Christians a magnificent opportunity to demonstrate in tangible terms their oneness in Christ (Rom. 15:26f.). Therefore it needed every possible safeguard. The glory of God in the gospel was at stake (9:13).

It is against this background that we should view the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians. Most scholars are so taken aback by the vigorous attack Paul launches on his opponents in these chapters, they are convinced that they must be part of another letter written either *before* 2 Cor. 1-9, as H. A. A. Kennedy argued so passionately at the turn of the century, or very

shortly afterward, as C. K. Barrett and F. F. Bruce have recently maintained. One does not normally insult people just when asking them to contribute to a fund being raised! But that is to miss an important aspect of this 'act of fellowship'. The collection raised the ire of Paul's Jewish opponents, who saw in this fund a possible rival to, or replacement of, the temple tax levied annually from among Jewish people at home and abroad. It represented a shift of emphasis away from the shrine at Jerusalem to the increasingly Gentile-dominated Christian ecclesia,<sup>4</sup> therefore his rivals both within and outside the Church were pledged to total opposition. 2 Cor. 10-13 represents Paul's vigorous counter to their radical assault on the fund and its architect.

Lest it should be thought that this is merely a neat device for dodging a difficult problem in 2 Corinthians, it is well to recall the situation in Romans 15 where Paul goes into considerable detail about this collection, and where he says at the close of his explanation of the fund:

I appeal to you brethren by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf (*cf.* 2 Cor. 1:11), that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints (vv. 31ff.).

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Such words, set in the context of a passage which provides a kind of apologia for Paul's collection could not be clearer. Paul knows that the whole idea of this collection is vehemently opposed by both non-Christian Jews and pseudo-Christian believers. So it is incumbent upon him to defend this project with utmost vigour against those at work in the Church at Corinth, as elsewhere, who were dedicated to the defeat of this ecumenical offering.

It is no part of our purpose to attempt yet another identification of these elusive opponents of Paul in 2 Corinthians. But clearly they were Jews who gloried in their Hebrew ancestry (11:22). Moreover they were also Christians (at least by name) who rejoiced in 'signs and wonders and mighty works' as well as in 'visions and revelations' (11:23; 10:7; 12:1,12), and who claimed to work on precisely the same terms as the apostle Paul, posing as 'servants of righteousness' (11:12,15; *cf.* Mt. 7:21ff.). Yet they were violently opposed to Paul, dismissing him as a mere nonentity who was unskilled in speech and devoid of the Spirit (11:6; 13:3). At 5:13, they or their friends in the Church at Corinth, regard him as being 'beside himself', not because he is a charismatic, for they too were that, but presumably because he was always involved in

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<sup>4</sup> Note the emphatic pronoun at 6:16: 'we are the temple of the Living God', Paul says.

conflict and calamity.<sup>5</sup> So far as their preaching was concerned, Paul says that they preached 'another gospel, another spirit, another Jesus' (11:4; 5:16b), and he knew that if ever they should win the day in the Church at Corinth or anywhere else, the fellowship will have been beguiled by Satan as surely as was Eve in the Garden of Eden (11:2f.). For all their claim to be the servants of righteousness, Paul recognized them as servants of Satan whose devices were astutely disguised, but whose doom was inevitably sealed (11:13-15).

In the light of such a situation, is it surprising that after *reaffirming* his reconciliation with the Corinthians in chapters 1-7, and *sealing* that reconciliation by involving them once more in his collection for the saints in Jerusalem (chapters 8, 9), Paul should *defend* that reconciliation against those 'false apostles and deceitful workmen' who opposed his mission and threatened his life in chapters 10-13?

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<sup>5</sup> Paul was in any case reluctant to talk about his ecstatic experiences (1 Cor. 14:19; 2 Cor. 12:1). The phrase 'to be beside oneself' is used in Mark 3:21 of the way in which Jesus and his disciples were too busy to eat. While at Hag. 14b a comparable phrase means 'to come to grief' or 'be stricken'. Paul's opponents were triumphalists. But throughout the whole of 2 Corinthians Paul stresses the paradox of 'life in the midst of death'.