

## Under The Fig Tree



### WEEK 43

Luke wrote the Book of Acts. He wrote both his Gospel and Acts to Theophilus, so that all who are *beloved of God* might have an ordered account of the coming of Yeshua and what followed. The Book continues where the Gospel ended, recounting the spread of the Gospel up until the time when Paul was imprisoned in Rome. The Book is easy to read. As we read, let us ensure that we retain our link with the history of Israel and the Covenant that God gave to Abraham. A new day dawned with the coming of Yeshua, but He did not come to establish the Christian Church like the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD. He sent His Holy Spirit to gather the faithful remnant of Judah, to whom He added those from the Gentile world who responded to the call to saving faith. We now turn to letters written by the Apostles. The majority were written by Paul. We read a number of these letters during our study of the Tanach. You may want to reread some of these during the remainder of our studies. The notes will cover only the remaining letters. We will read them in the order they were written.

As we noted in our study of Acts, Paul made 4 apostolic journeys. In each town or city he visited, where possible, he spoke first in synagogues. He then ministered among the Gentiles, bringing together groups of new disciples. He left them with sufficient understanding of the Scriptures and God's purposes for them before moving on to another town. From time to time he would visit them again or send another apostle to visit them. At other times he communicated through letters, in order to bring greeting and encouragement, also to bring counsel on matters under dispute.

Paul did not establish a centrally controlled organization. As a reference point, he linked the new believers to Jerusalem, but mainly he entrusted them to the Holy Spirit, expecting local communities to grow together. Through the atoning Blood of Yeshua, the door is open for each disciple to have direct access to the Father in Heaven. The worldwide body of believers, together, is the Temple of the Living God in which the Holy Spirit dwells. New disciples were to learn to live together in families and communities, under the direct leading of the Holy Spirit. They were joined into the Covenant heritage of the Jews, but not dependent on a human organization. If, as Paul had hoped, the Spirit of God had brought the communities of Jews to faith, the Torah-based communities of Jews would have been transformed. These communities of Jews would then expand through inclusion of believers from among the Gentiles. Generally, this did not happen, so new communities of believers emerged from among the Gentiles. These communities needed

teaching about their biblical heritage and how to grow together in their new-found faith. This required additional input from Paul, which is one reason for his letters.

We must first read the letters as written to a specific group of Yeshua's disciples. We might also read the letters as written to us, because Paul's teaching applies to every new generation of believers. Paul discussed some difficult subjects in his letters, but did not set out to write a book of theology. His trust was in the Holy Spirit's ministry to each individual disciple, to their families and to the community of believers, each according to their circumstances.

Paul did not intend that his letters would turn into a new form of law, or doctrinal structure for the church. He did not address every issue that might arise, or the full range of issues that are to be found in Torah. He would be astonished at the way a large part of today's Christian Church has used some of his letters, forming itself into denominations with various doctrinal positions, while sometimes losing the life of the Spirit in the process.

## Day 1

1 Corinthians Chapter 1. 1 and 2 Corinthians were written either in 54 or 55 AD. Paul began his letters with a greeting according to the custom of his day. He addressed his letters to the group of believers in the city. In Verse 1, it says, in our English translations, *to the Church of God which is in Corinth*. Because the main language for communication in those days was Greek, the New Testament has come to us in the Greek language. Debate goes on as to whether there may be some Hebrew manuscripts that were translated into Greek, and there is a good case for this. Nevertheless, we must work with what we have. We must consider what is meant by the term *church*. The only word used for *church* in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia*. In using this word, both Yeshua and His Apostles would have in mind the community of God's people who were called out of Egypt, living under the family structure emphasized in Torah. We must, therefore, have that community in mind, remembering what we studied of Moses in the wilderness years.

Since the giving of the Holy Spirit, Torah was being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit and it was God's intent to bring new life to His existing community of faith. In this light, we note that the word *ekklesia* is formed from the root word *ek*. *Ek* or its derivative *ex* reminds us of the *Exodus*, the calling out from Egypt of the Children of Israel. Thus, *ekklesia* is a term that implies an *assembly* of God's people called out in a manner parallel to the coming out from Egypt. In modern days, the word *church* has come to mean a building where Christians meet. This was not Paul's original idea when he wrote to a group of disciples. His original intent was to encourage the disciples to grow together as a local branch of the worldwide "called out" community. The organizational structure we have today was not in his mind. There would be interaction between believers with elements of discipline and sharing, but much less building orientated than today. It was to such organic groups of disciples that he wrote his letters.

After a dignified salutation, he addressed the main issue that had come to his attention. Paul had entrusted these disciples to the leading of the Spirit, just as the letter from the Council of

Jerusalem intended, but they had already begun to form into various sects. They were forming doctrinal positions based on the teaching they had from one Apostle or another, instead of living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They were also in danger of complicating the simple Gospel message and so losing its power.

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Chapter 2. Paul went on to strengthen his exhortation to live by the Spirit and not to descend into lifeless doctrine based on human logic. These disciples were beginning to consider Paul, Peter and Apollus as great theologians, so putting them on conceptual platforms, and honouring men rather than God. Paul told them how foolish this was. He was a learned man, everyone knew this, but his real authority was directly from God. He was just a weak man, ministering in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Corinthians were to do likewise.

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Chapter 3. Paul continued to strengthen his exhortation. These Corinthians were becoming carnal, sinking into the ways of man rather than the ways of God. He urged them to depend on the life of the Spirit and so become co-workers with Him. They must not depend on Paul or anyone else, but build on the true foundation of Yeshua HaMashiach, recognizing that they were the Temple where the Holy Spirit dwells.

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Chapter 4. There is no room for pride, but only humble service to one another. The Corinthian disciples had already strayed into shallow application of what they heard, focusing over-much on human logic. *You might have ten thousand instructors in Messiah, yet you do not have many fathers*, declared Paul (Verse 15). Bible teachers may bring us theory but fathers bring us to birth and nurture us to grow into maturity. Paul pleaded with these disciples, whom he loved, as a father. They had come to new birth through the Gospel and received the Holy Spirit. Now, he wanted to see them grow in the Spirit not turn his teaching into human theory.

This exhortation echoes over the centuries to every generation of Yeshua's disciples. If we read Paul's letter with the same mind as the Corinthians had adopted, we may miss the real point he is making – an exhortation to live the life of the Holy Spirit. Consider this prayerfully.

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## Day 2

Chapter 5. It is hard to accept that disciples of Yeshua can be found committing sexual immorality. This was addressed directly in the letter which went out from the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). The Holy Spirit inspired this letter to the new groups of disciples scattered throughout the Gentile world. God knew that maturity would not be achieved immediately and that satan would set up traps. Some Corinthians fell into the traps because their carnal nature had taken over. They had departed from their walk in the Holy Spirit.

Paul drew reference to the Passover (Verses 7 and 8), showing that this Feast was to be fulfilled in us. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was also to be fulfilled in us through a sinless life.

The life of the Spirit does not detract from the need for order and discipline in the communities of believers. Paul urged the Corinthians to bring such discipline to the problem that had arisen (Verse 9 to 13).

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Chapter 6. Now came a further step in Paul's exhortation. The believers were not to compromise with the world in other ways. They were not to put themselves in a position where divisions among them would be settled by law-suits under the authority of those in the world. This was followed by more teaching that requires careful consideration: *all things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any* (Verse 12). These disciples were at the early stage of learning how to live by the Spirit, who would gradually take the principles of Torah and write them on their hearts. They were at a stage where they were exploring their freedom to learn without bondage to legalism. In pursuit of this, they had shown vulnerability, some of them already slipping into sexual immorality. Paul showed them that though they were not legally bound to the written Torah, they must, nevertheless, learn to resist the power of sin and temptation. This is an important point of meditation for us too. Freedom is not license: it is freedom to learn. Freedom to learn still requires discipline.

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Chapter 7. From this Chapter, it appears that Paul was unmarried. Despite this, in several places he called himself a father. For example, he called Timothy his son. This was because he was a *spiritual* father to him and to those whom he had brought to faith through his preaching. He remained single in order to fulfill his special calling as an Apostle; he was content with this. He recognized, however, that God's purpose was to build families through strong marriages.

His teaching was completely Torah founded. He had learned to live the life of the Spirit: he also knew how to interpret Torah in the light of the Spirit. His letter to the Corinthians encouraged them to grow in spiritual maturity. They also needed help, at that time, to interpret Torah in regard to certain questions.

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Chapter 8. The letter from the Council of Jerusalem had mentioned the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. Paul did not change what had been written, but put the matter in balance. Eating meat sacrificed to idols can be a trap which allows satan to seduce us into spiritual adultery, but neither the meat nor the idol were to be feared of themselves. The disciples were encouraged, however, to be careful how their eating practices might appear to others (Verse 9-10). A mature believer learns to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, but someone else might be led astray through what is perceived in our practices. Sharing meals was an important aspect of community life in Paul's day. The same principle applies to many ways we might see our lives as believers. We must be careful not to let our freedom to become license to sin or to bring poor witness to others.

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## Day 3

Chapter 9. Occasionally, in Paul's letters, there are glimpses into his understanding Torah in the light of the Spirit. Here, he drew reference to Deuteronomy 25:4 (Verse 9), taking the spirit of the law and applying it to a circumstance that had arisen. We all should have this maturity in the application of Torah. Our Bible studies, under the inspiration of the Spirit, apply to various circumstances of our lives.

Paul had possibly been accused falsely by some of the disciples. He defended himself and his rights as an Apostle.

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Chapter 10. Paul continued to refer to the Torah in order to exhort the Corinthians to realize their privileged call and consequent responsibility, both to God and to one another.

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Chapter 11. The teaching in Verses 1 to 16 has been a matter of some discussion among Christians. The western world, in our day, is far different from the world of Paul's day. Modern-day women dress far less modestly than in those days. Paul would be shocked at some things he might see in our day. Paul taught modesty in dress, even by the standards of his day. He also maintained that the authority structure of the family was to be built on the foundation going back to the creation. He taught that God called men to have spiritual authority and for women to submit to this authority. This does not mean that a man is more important to God, but that there is order in our families and society in general. Nor does this mean that man is to be dominant: he is to be in submission to God. The matter of head-coverings is so that the external beauty of women be brought to submission for the sake of the ministry of the Word. Paul recommended this as a good practice, but not to cause dissent (Verse 16).

Clear teaching about how to conduct the Lord's Supper is also in the Chapter. This is an excellent reference for assemblies of disciples, in our day as well as Paul's.

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Chapter 12. The Holy Spirit writes the Torah on our hearts. Torah is not intended to be passive, so the Spirit mobilizes us all to minister within the community of believers and into the world. God sees us as individuals and also as a body together. Therefore, when we are together we experience the way He moves us together, each with particular manifestations of His Spirit. Paul's teaching is profound. Consider it carefully, because the same principles must be learned by every new generation of disciples, whom the Lord draws together into a community.

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## Day 4

Chapter 13. The same issues come up in our modern-day assemblies as were in the Corinthian fellowship. In recent years there has been a renewed seeking after Spiritual gifts. Just as in Paul's day, carnality can take over and gifts are perceived as an end in themselves, for power and status. 1 Corinthians 13 brings correction to human ambition, bringing balance to our perspectives.

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Chapter 14. The gifts of prophecy and tongues have been awakened in our day, bringing with it the same confusion as in Paul's day. Some modern-day Bible teachers think that these two gifts have ceased, but there is nothing in the Bible to say so: the same Holy Spirit ministers among us as in the days of the Corinthians. Note carefully the discipline required for exercising these gifts. God still speaks, but we must be careful not to prophesy from our imagination. The days of Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah are over, because now we are a body scattered across the face of the earth being ordered by the Lord, wherever we are. Prophecy is generally for the local body when disciples meet together. Tongues is a gift that helps us when we pray rather than when we prophesy (Verses 12 and 13).

The order that Paul taught to the Corinthians is applicable today. Read carefully what Paul wrote on these matters.

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Chapter 15. Paul ended his exhortations by reminding the Corinthians of what Yeshua has done for us. Yeshua was the reason for all Paul had written. He reminded the Corinthian disciples of their eternal hope, as well as their present responsibility. How important this letter was for the Corinthians to receive! Paul was a spiritual father indeed! We need the same exhortations today in a deceptive world that can so easily lead us astray.

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Chapter 16. So, with a final summary, Paul sent off to the disciples in Corinth his carefully prepared letter. We might imagine how he labored prayerfully over this letter. This produced such profound teaching that it is worthy of inclusion in our Bibles. Oh that we could do the same!

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## Day 5

Between Paul's letters to the Corinthians, it seems that doubt was cast on his authority. The disciples may have been influenced by visiting preachers who claimed superior status as apostles. Paul sent Titus to bring correction and stability. The second letter was a result of Titus' encouraging report, when he returned to Paul. Paul had been accused of various weaknesses. From the way Paul wrote to the Corinthians, it seems that he wrote more strongly than he spoke, but that seems unlikely. It is more likely that he wrote as he did, pretending to be weak and unimpressive in appearance, to emphasise an important point. He preferred to be strong in the Spirit than in the flesh. He did not seek to dominate the disciples, but to entrust them to the Holy Spirit. The more he submitted to the Holy Spirit himself, the more effective was his ministry. He encouraged the disciples to be like him. This had led to problems because of immaturity in Corinth. Until disciples become mature in the Spirit, they may remain carnal, judging themselves and others by external appearances.

Paul included several important points of teaching in the letter. The teaching and the context of the letter are relevant today. In our day, there is a tendency for big platform speakers with impressive claims to gather great crowds. Some of these claims are shallow and we might wonder what Paul would think if he were here today. Whether in large crowds or in small groups, we all must learn from Paul that the New Covenant is founded, not on external glamour, but a transformed inner life.

2 Corinthians Chapter 1. Paul's constructed his letter to give glory to Yeshua, and priority to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Study the gracious way he defended his own status as an Apostle while maintaining focus on Yeshua. The letter was developed step by step. This chapter brings some background; Paul described his many trials. Through these trials he maintained trust in God and care for those for whom he felt responsible.

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Chapter 2. Next, Paul showed his sorrow for the Corinthians and also his love for them. Verses 3 to 11 wonderfully express the grace whereby Paul, through Titus, brought correction to certain problems so that forgiveness might follow. Paul recognized the spiritual battle and the need to be aware of satan's devices (Verse 11). Verses 14 to 16 bring understanding of the way the Gospel separates those who believe from those who reject the invitation to salvation. Verse 17 bears strong warning to those who seek personal gain from the preaching of the Gospel.

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Chapter 3. This Chapter contains further insights worthy of careful meditation. Consider Verses 1 to 3. In our day, there is much temptation to gain academic qualifications to validate ministry. Paul made it clear that a ministry is validated, not in such qualifications or through letters of commendation, but through the way the Lord has used our ministry to benefit the lives of others.



Even more so, the care that he had for the Lord's disciples is like a letter written on his own heart, far more meaningful than any academic qualification.

Verses 7 to 18 are the result of clear insight into the ministry of Moses compared with the ministry of the New Covenant. Without the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Torah of God has no lasting effect. This was illustrated through the way Moses' face shone when he was in God's presence but with glory that then faded away. The Children of Israel could not even look at this fading glory, and now the glory of the New Covenant is as if behind a veil. The glory of the New Testament is far greater than the temporary external light on Moses' face. Without the light of God through the Holy Spirit, Paul saw the Torah written on stone as a ministry of death. The reason for this was that the laws simply revealed sin, without a permanent remedy for sin. By contrast, to live in the light of the New Covenant was to live in freedom from sin. Consider carefully what Paul said in these verses.

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Chapter 4. Paul continued to consider the Gospel, as light shining in darkness. Through this he emphasized the necessity of letting the light of the Spirit shine through us, comparing us with broken earthen vessels. The more we submit ourselves to God, the more dead we are to human ambition and the more available we are to be used by God for His purposes.

The broken earthen vessels through which light shines recalls the victory that Gideon had over the Midianites (Judges 7:19-20).

Paul was conscious that the Corinthian disciples had been tempted to look on outward appearance rather than inner character. They had compared him with some "super-apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:5) they had encountered. Therefore, Paul corrected these perceptions through a careful argument about true priorities. This reiterated what Titus had taught them on his recent visit.

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## Day 6

Chapter 5. Paul continued to build on the foundations set at the beginning of his letter, emphasizing Yeshua's central purpose in our lives. Our earthly bodies are temporary: He is preparing us for eternal life. We have been given the Holy Spirit to secure us for that future. This was why Yeshua died for us. Now we have responsibility to be His ambassadors during our pilgrimage on this earth. We have been given direct access to the Father. Read the details carefully. Just as the Corinthians had slipped into carnality, so can disciples in our day. We all need to understand what Paul wrote to these disciples.

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Chapter 6. Here Paul pleaded again with the Corinthian disciples to consider carefully what he has said. He recounted the cost of apostleship. His purpose was not to seek sympathy, but to demonstrate the importance of what God had done for them. As a consequence they were exhorted to be holy. Holiness is to be separate from the sinfulness of the world. Verse 14 is often read as applying to individuals: *do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers*. Paul's exhortation is to the disciples *as a group*, together to be separate from the world. Individually, this has a bearing on marriage and such things as business contracts, but the implication is more than that: as a body, a community of disciples is to be untarnished by the world. So often, in our modern-day, the life of faith is seen entirely as applicable to individuals. We have emphasized the "I" rather than the "we", the "my" rather than the "our". From the time of Creation, God has shown that He is building a *community* of individuals built into families and communities, so that there is one family of faith throughout the entire earth. Yeshua taught us to pray "Our Father, in Heaven...." Not "My Father in Heaven...." Paul addressed his letter to the community of disciples and not to individuals.

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Chapter 7. Paul now commended the Corinthians for listening to Titus and repenting of the issues he had addressed. Up to now, Paul's letter had reiterated the strong exhortation that he sent with Titus: he ensured that they were clear on his matters of concern. Having done that, he encouraged them.

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Chapters 8 and 9. Paul reminded the Corinthians about the way God had fed the Children of Israel in the wilderness (Verse 15). He emphasized that God gave enough for all. This was still so, but some must share with others to ensure this equality. He referred to the poorer disciples in Macedonia who had given liberally for the care of others. Now he exhorted the Corinthian disciples to consider what they might give to others. When next visited, he hoped that a gift to help other believers might be already collected so that it could be administered by the Apostles as they visited other assemblies of believers. A collection was made for the believers in Judea on

account of a famine. There were other needs among communities of disciples from time to time, and Paul encouraged disciples to help one another through times of need.

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## Day 7

### A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

Chapter 10. Paul returned to the central purpose of his letter, moving beyond personal application of life in the Spirit. He reminded the Corinthians that there is a spiritual battle raging. It is not a battle that can be won through physical weapons, but through spiritual authority. Read Verses 3 to 5 carefully. The battles recorded in the Tanach were between human beings. At that time only Israel was God's community of chosen people. When they entered the Promised Land they were to destroy completely other nations who, by that time, were totally demonised. Even though the powers of satan had taken over these nations, the Bible describes the physical conflict more than the spiritual battle. Yet there always has been a spiritual battle raging. Daniel had a brief insight into the spiritual battle when he was visited by the Angel Michael (Daniel Chapter 10). Yeshua confronted satan directly during 40 days and nights in the wilderness (Matthew Chapter 4), and later delivered many people who were possessed by evil spirits. The battles of this world were spiritual from the start, beginning with Adam and Eve's deception by the serpent. The spiritual aspects of our struggles were not, however, fully emphasized until the New Testament. This may be for a number of reasons. One reason is that we were not fully equipped for this battle until the Holy Spirit was given to us. Secondly, now we are in an era when the Gospel is going to the *entire* world. This is a time when God offers salvation and deliverance to all people, rather than bringing total destruction to ungodly nations. The fullness of the spiritual battle is revealed through the Book of Revelation. Paul's emphasis in these few verses of his letter to the Corinthians has many applications. We, like the Corinthians, must reflect on what Paul wrote.

Paul raises our perspectives above the visible world and above external appearances. Verse 12 is a telling reminder of what happens when we judge matters from external appearances – we measure one another by human standards, comparing ourselves with one another and not with the higher standards of God through the life of His Spirit.

Chapter 11. Once more Paul reminded the Corinthians that they had wrongly judged him on account of their tendency to look on the outward appearance. Paul's authority was not through human attainments, though there were many of which he might have boasted. His authority came from the Lord and was the result of many trials which brought his flesh into submission of the Spirit of God. This is a lesson for us all to learn, particularly in an age that glories in academic achievement or physical prowess, even in some Bible Colleges!

Chapter 12. Paul spoke of himself, when he recounted the experience God had given him (Verses 1 to 6). He described this in the third person so as not to give the impression of boasting. His purpose was to emphasize his authority, not for human gain but so that his strong exhortations would be taken seriously by the Corinthian disciples.

The nature of the thorn in Paul's flesh remains a mystery. Paul may have had a human weakness that God allowed so that he had a constant reminder of the need to be strong in the Spirit. It reminds us of the limp with which Jacob walked after his wrestling at Peniel (Genesis 32). Every one of us has a human nature with which we continue to battle during our path of discipleship.

Sometimes God leaves a physical weakness that causes us weakness in the flesh but strength in the Spirit. If Paul's "thorn" was a physical defect, he also saw it as coming from satan. His powerful apostolic ministry required him to be humble. God had spoken clearly to Him about this: *My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.* (Verse 9) Possibly Paul's "thorn" made him vulnerable to satan's attacks ("buffeting"). He learned to fight such battles but realized that they were not to defeat him but to make him stronger for ministry. He may have been vulnerable through physical defect or a mental attitude, such as pride. We don't know. Because we don't know, Paul's teaching may be generalized to our own circumstances, should it be applicable. We, too, may need to be humbled by God, so that we serve Him more effectively.

The result of Paul's humility was that He was powerful in ministry. God had shown many *signs and wonders and mighty deeds* (Verse 12).

Chapter 13. Paul hoped to visit the Corinthians for a third time. His letter prepared the way, giving them much to consider. It would not be necessary for sharp words when he did visit (Verse 10).

Before moving on, consider the overall impact of Paul's letters. Would we be able to write such letters to disciples under our care, with such balance of love, humility, trust in the Holy Spirit, uncompromising exhortation and understanding of the purposes of God?

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