

A full-page background image featuring a small, wet lamb standing in a dark, rainy forest. The lamb is in the foreground, looking directly at the camera. In the background, a blurry figure of a person with long hair and a beard is visible, suggesting a divine presence. The scene is filled with rain, creating a sense of being in the midst of a storm.

ENCOURAGED:

FINDING COMFORT IN CHRIST

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Encouraged: Finding Comfort in Christ

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Lesson 1–Encouraged: Finding Comfort in Christ

Encouraged To Endure

Jeff A. Jenkins

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are partners in our sufferings, so also you are in our comfort. For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of our affliction which occurred in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead, who rescued us from so great a danger of death, and will rescue us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, if you also join in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons in our behalf for the favor granted to us through the prayers of many.

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

When we discuss the attributes of God we often think only about the non-moral attributes. Every student of Scripture recognizes the omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, and immutability of God. Yet sometimes we overlook the moral characteristics of Divinity. These are attributes of God that every human can possess and should develop more every day. When John wanted to explain God to his readers, he simply said, “God is love” (1 John 4:7-16). Our brother Peter reminds us that God is patient with us: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9) [All Scripture references are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.] It is easy to see that these attributes of our Creator are also characteristics that should be a part of the heart of all of God people. Another moral attribute of God is holiness.

The hosts of heaven proclaimed around the clock that God is “Holy, Holy, Holy” (Rev. 4:8).

The Heart of the Message

Perhaps some of our fellow Christians in Corinth were struggling with their faith. They could have begun to grow weary in well doing. One of Satan’s greatest weapons against the people of God is discouragement. Most of us have known people who otherwise would have endured to the end, but they have become discouraged because of a health concern, the loss of someone dear to them, persecution, family issues, financial problems, failures of the church, or a million other reasons. Paul encourages Christians then and now to remain strong and faithful until the end. In so doing He reminds us that our great God is a God of remarkable comfort. The word Paul uses for *comfort* is the word Jesus used to remind His disciples in the first century that even though He was going away, He would send them the Holy Spirit, a comforter (John 14:16). It is also translated “helper, consolation, and exhortation.” All of the consolation, comfort, solace, and refreshment we receive ultimately comes from God. Any real, lasting comfort given in our world can be traced back to the God of all comfort. Near the end of Paul’s letter to the Romans, he says, “Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus” (Rom. 15:4). In 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, Paul uses the word translated *comfort* eleven times! In this text our brother reminds us that one of the primary reasons God comforts us is so that we will be able to empathize with others who go through something similar to what we have been through in our life. He comforts us so that we will be able to comfort others with the kind of comfort we have received.

Messages for Today

- **God comforts us through His Son.**
- **God comforts us through His Spirit.**
- **God comforts us through His Word.**
- **God comforts us through His people.**

God comforts us through His Son. “Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30). Our Savior bids us to come

to Him. He pleads with us to learn from Him. He promises us that with His help our lives will be more comfortable, and the burdens of this life will be lighter. Peter reminds us that we have the blessing and opportunity to turn our cares over to Him: “Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares about you” (1 Pet. 5:7).

God comforts us through His Spirit. Life can become so difficult and overbearing that we have difficulty even in our prayer life. In Romans 8, Paul says there were times in his own life that he did not know how to pray. It is during the most challenging times that God’s Spirit is our Helper. In the weakest moments of our life, when we are “groaning” within ourselves, “the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom 8:26).

God comforts us through His Word. In Psalm 119, David speaks of God’s Word as being our comforter: “Remember the word to Your servant, in which You have made me hope. This is my comfort in my misery, that Your word has revived me . . . I have remembered Your judgments from of old, Lord, and comfort myself” (Ps. 119:49-50, 52).

God comforts us through His people. In our text, Paul teaches us that one of the primary reasons we receive comfort is so that we might comfort others “with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” Our friend, Dean Miller, says in all of his grief seminars, “Don’t waste your pain!” God wants us to use the pain we endure to help others. Paul encourages us to “[b]ear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

A Message of Hope for You

In our weakest moments, we are tempted to believe that we are all alone. We wonder if there is anyone to turn to who can provide help. In Revelation 1, when John is delivering the message of Christ to persecuted Christians, he reminds them that they are not alone. That reminder remains a promise of great strength to Christians of all generations. “I, John, your brother and fellow participant in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 1:9). In the Kingdom, we are brothers and sisters who are “fellow participants.” John mentions three specific areas of life where we are all in this together. We are brethren and fellow participants in tribulation, in the Kingdom, and in endurance. This is the Gospel, i.e., the Good News. We do not have to walk in pain alone, we do

not have to work in the Kingdom alone, and we do not have to endure, remain faithful, or persevere alone. Praise God we are all in this together! If we endure and overcome, Jesus offers a great and comforting promise to us: “The one who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21). A crown awaits us if we remain faithful even when faced with death. “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). This eternal crown and reward are only possible through Jesus. “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57).

Discussion Questions

1. Talk about different experiences that keep Christians from enduring.
2. Discuss ways that God’s people can help someone who is struggling to endure.
3. What Scriptures come to mind that have meant the most to you during challenging moments in your life?
4. What would you say to someone who is thinking about throwing in the towel or giving up when it comes to their faith?
5. How do we show gratitude to God for the victory we have received in Christ?

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Lesson 2–Encouraged: Finding Comfort in Christ

ENCOURAGED TO FORGIVE

Westley Hazel

...so that on the other hand, you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a person might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. For to this end I also wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.

2 Corinthians 2:7-9

Joseph was a man whose brothers had done him wrong. His brothers wanted to kill him and settled on selling him as a slave. His brothers had even done Joseph's father wrong. They allowed him to grieve the loss of a son, knowing that it was all a lie. The guilt and damage done by their sin is without question. When they showed up looking for food, it is not surprising that Joseph struggled with the temptation to make them sweat when he called them spies, imprisoned Simeon, returned their money, demanded Benjamin be brought back, and hid his cup in their sacks. Finally, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, and the text tells us, "And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it" (Gen. 45:2). [All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Version unless otherwise noted.] The weeping that could be heard from the next room was the sound of a man forgiving.

This tension between wanting people to be punished for the sinful things they have done and extending forgiveness that will restore individuals and relationships is what is being played out within the Corinthian Church in 2 Corinthians 2 and is played out today in every congregation of God's people.

The Heart of the Message

The church in Corinth was struggling with a brother who had fallen into sin. There is some debate concerning the nature of this man's sin. Some have suggested that the text is addressing the man from 1 Corinthians 5 who had his father's wife—"immorality for such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles" (1 Cor 5:7). It is also possible that Paul is writing about a man who had caused division through his rebellion and became the object of Paul's sorrowful letter (2 Cor. 2:4). It would seem impossible to know if Paul is addressing someone with a severe

moral failing or a divisive man who had harmed the church. In either case, these are serious sins that had to be dealt with by the Corinthian church.

Thankfully, the punishment inflicted on this man has had its desired result causing him to humble himself and repent of his sin. Paul is now concerned that the church shift gears and spend as much time and effort in restoring this brother to fellowship as they did in dispensing the appropriate punishment. Paul's first concern is that if the church does not forgive and comfort this man that he will be "swallowed up with too much sorrow." If this were to happen, it would defeat the primary purpose for disciplining this man (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5).

Paul is also encouraging the Corinthian church to forgive because their willingness to forgive will serve as a test or indicator of whether they will be obedient in all things. If they were not willing to forgive this man, then it is unlikely that they would be willing to do other things that God commands His children to do. Of course, the ultimate end of this lack of obedience would be playing right into the hands of Satan who wants to use our lack of willingness to forgive others as the justification to condemn our souls. The irony of those who refuse to forgive because they cannot stomach the sins others have committed is that they become just as guilty and condemned as those with whose sins they are so concerned.

Messages for Today

- **The Gospel is good news.**
- **We must be ready to forgive and restore penitent sinners.**
- **Our willingness to forgive others is a test of our obedience.**

The Gospel is good news. In our desire to proclaim the reality and consequence of sin to a world that does not understand sin, we must take care that we don't simply turn the gospel into a message of condemnation. Jesus tells us that he did not come into the world to condemn the world but to save the world (John 3:16-18). The Gospel is good news. Many Christians can quote Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," but they fail to understand that that phrase is being used by Paul as part of a larger statement on the justification of man before a holy God. Romans 3:21-26 is not a message of condemnation but rather a bold statement of the justification we have through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. It is true

that there are too many churches/Christians who want to talk about the forgiveness of God without first talking about sin, which results in a meaningless conversation. It is also true that there are too many churches/Christians who want to talk about condemning sin and never get around to the forgiveness found for all in Christ. To do that strikes right at the heart of the church as a blood-bought institution.

We must be ready to forgive and restore penitent sinners. It is one thing to say that we believe in forgiveness; it is a greater challenge to actually carry out the reaffirmation of love for a fallen brother or sister. Here are four suggestions for restoring a brother: 1.) Be willing to take the first step (Isa. 30:18; Phil. 2:6-8). 2.) Offer a plan of restoration (Acts 8:22-23; 22:16). 3.) Defend them before those who refuse to forgive (Acts 9:26). 4.) Speak to them and include them in the work and fellowship of the church (Acts 15:36-39; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Our willingness to forgive others is a test of our obedience. The true test of looking like the church that belongs to Jesus Christ is not just loving Jesus. It's loving Judas. Every Christian believes on some level that we ought to forgive sin. At a minimum, people are supportive of their own forgiveness. Christians must go beyond that general commitment to be willing to forgive the sin when it is personal and painful. If we are not willing to forgive the sins of others, it is unlikely that we will be willing to follow the other commands of Jesus because we are not really concerned with being like Him in all ways. As Christians think about the Cross, they cannot help but be reminded that we never look more like Jesus than when we forgive those who do not deserve forgiveness. In doing so, the church becomes a haven of light in a world of darkness for all those lost in sin.

A Message of Hope for You

This text is not only about our willingness to forgive others who have sinned. Underlying that encouragement is the reality that men will always be forgiven if they are willing to humble themselves before the Lord. More importantly, we can always be forgiven. We may have participated in a great moral failure or even caused division within the body of Christ, but we can still be forgiven. In Luke 15, Jesus is addressing those who were struggling to accept the sinners and tax collectors who were coming to listen to Him. In response, Jesus tells three parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. In trying to sum up

the message that the prodigal child of God should hear from those parables, we could say, “Whatever you have done, just come home.” That same message that was true in the Corinthian church should be heard consistently in the church today. We are a forgiven and forgiving people (Eph. 2), and that is good news!

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the connection between a church dealing with sin and providing forgiveness.
2. Why might Christians need encouragement to forgive?
3. How can we intentionally provide forgiveness and comfort to a brother or sister?
4. What are some signs you might be struggling with forgiveness?
5. How does Satan take advantage of a lack of forgiveness?

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Lesson 3–Encouraged: Finding Comfort in Christ

ENCOURAGED TO RECONCILE

Christopher Jackson

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

The book of 2 Corinthians is considered one of Paul's most personable books, filled with references to Paul's own life. Paul gives a robust spiritual defense of his past apostolic ministry against detractors in the Corinthian church. Paul's defense of his ministry in this part of the letter is a celebration of what Christ has done in Paul, for Paul, and through Paul, which, at its heart, deals with the topic of reconciliation. We can extract principles from Paul's writing to help Christians live in a manner pleasing to God. Doctrine should produce a duty, and reconciliation is the catalyst that causes us to behave appropriately.

The Heart of the Message

One evidence of reconciliation is our reciprocation of Christ's love for us (2 Cor. 5:13-15). Here, Paul lets us know that if he seems crazy, it is for God, but if they are in their right mind, it benefits the church at Corinth. Paul states that it is the love of Christ that compels us, constrains us, and arrests us. The love Christ demonstrated toward us should control our actions. As the apostle John observes, "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). [All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] Historical proof of the love of Christ is his death on the cross for us. In verse 14, by using the word "all," Paul highlights that in the death of Christ, all underwent the death deservedly because of sin, therefore highlighting the universal scope of redemption that's offered to everyone. Still, the benefits of his death are not applied to everyone since not all obey the gospel. But those of us who have obeyed the gospel have a duty to no longer live for ourselves but for Christ. This principle of self-denial was a prominent

requirement of being a disciple of Christ: “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me’” (Matt. 16:24). Jesus relates these words right after Peter rebukes Jesus for saying he must be killed in Jerusalem. In one scene, Peter is testifying to the truth, but in another scene, he is attempting to stand in the way of truth. This is a reminder that a person can have and know the truth but, due to selfishness, not submit to the truth.

Another evidence of reconciliation is found in how we view or evaluate others (2 Cor. 5:16-17). A person’s ethnicity, income, or educational background doesn’t matter. Those things don’t determine a person’s value. Paul once made that mistake when he evaluated Christ from a human standpoint. Others made the same mistake by calling attention to either Jesus’ hometown or his failure to attend any of the religious schools of the day (cf. John 1:46; 11:18). Due to the Jews evaluating Christ from an earthly standpoint, they missed the greatest blessing ever, which is having a relationship with Jesus Christ. The problem of an erroneous evaluation also plagued the church at Corinth. Some of Paul’s opponents devalued him due to his credentials, especially his lack of speaking ability. “‘For his letters,’ they say, ‘are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible’” (2 Cor. 10:10; cf. 11:5, 6; 11:18).

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul notes that when anyone has obeyed the gospel, they are a new person, and a new situation has developed. The person is now saved, has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, has their sins forgiven, and has their name written in the Book of Life. These are just some benefits of becoming a new person and having this new situation. The old life, i.e., the pre-Christian life, has disappeared.

Still another evidence for reconciliation is our involvement in reconciling others to God (2 Cor. 5:18-21). God is the source of the new creation (vs. 18a). Indeed, one of the main reasons a child of God can demonstrate such a behavior change is because of reconciliation with God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (vs. 18b). People who were enemies at one time are now friends; at one time, there was hostility, but now there is peace. Those who were once wrong with God are now made right with God. God changes our relationship with him for the better because of the death of Christ. “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Rom.

5:10). No other person, place, or thing can reconcile a person back to God except Christ (John 10:9, 14:6).

Those of us who have been reconciled are added to the reconciliation team (2 Cor. 5:18c-21). We serve as his ambassadors to an evil world, and our behavior proves that we have been reconciled. This means we must go and spread the message to others who need reconciliation. Paul states God has committed to us the word of reconciliation. This word was not committed to the school system, government, or our favorite sports team, but to those of us who are Christians. If the world is going to hear the gospel, it will be through the local church as we serve as representatives of God with our message and behavior.

Paul spells out the details of the process of reconciliation. One of the two major steps of this process was God not counting/imputing mankind's sins against them. The verbal expression "to count against" involves keeping records of business accounts, and it can also mean "to keep a mental record of" in other contexts. The meaning here is that God does not keep an account of human shortcomings but rather forgives them. The other step in the process was that God made Christ sin for us so we could be right with God. Another way to look at the process is that God laid the blame for people's sins on Christ. The words "who knew no sin" constitute a Hebraic expression, which means to have no personal experience with sin. Through our union with Christ, God makes us right with a righteousness that comes from God (cf. Rom. 4:21-25).

Messages for Today

- **Being reconciled must control our behavior.**
- **Being reconciled must control our manner of evaluation.**
- **Being reconciled takes place at the cross when one obeys the gospel.**

Being reconciled must control our behavior. Since we have been reconciled, we deny ourselves, which includes our agendas, preferences, and desires, and seek first the kingdom of God, which means making our relationship with God and serving him our priority. The love of Christ stops me when I want to say something inappropriate; it stops me from being disruptive when I want to because my idea didn't get approval. We would possibly have fewer church splits if we, as members, let the love of Christ compel us. If Christ died for me, I can die to myself. We must

remember salvation is free but costly. Due to the cost, some people want it without sacrifice. The rich young ruler wanted eternal life, but he wanted it without sacrificing his idol: money (Mark 10:22). After taking inventory of your life, can you say that you live for Christ and not for yourself?

Being reconciled must control our manner of evaluation. Think about Jesus' twelve disciples. There were fishermen and a tax collector among them. I am reminded of a tongue-in-cheek memo from a minister search committee, noting candidates that the committee rejected because of serious inadequacies: Noah (no converts in 120 years), Moses (public-speaking problems; loses temper on occasion), Abraham (ran off to Egypt during difficult times; lied to get out of trouble), David (adulterous affair), Hosea (family life in shambles), Jeremiah (too emotional and alarmist; a whiner), Amos (unsophisticated country bumpkin), Peter (bad temper; denied Christ), Paul (lacks tact; harsh; appearance is detestable; preaches far too long), and even Jesus (challenges those in spiritual authority). The committee finally settled on Judas Iscariot, since "he seems to be very practical, cooperative, good with money, cares for the poor, and dresses well."

If Jesus had chosen the best and the brightest of his day, he would have chosen Pharisees and scribes! But God is more interested in a humble heart of dependence than pride in human abilities. Judging people by worldly standards is something of the past for someone who has been reconciled. David, Gideon, Rahab, Peter, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus are people who would have been devalued according to human standards based on their background, but God used them to accomplish his will, and he insists on using us as well. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-27, Paul states, "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty." We must remember that God has chosen to operate this way so that "no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Cor. 1:29). These Scriptures remind us that God can choose less than promising material as his instruments, and the gospel's glory is that God's mercy extends to those whom the affluent tend to dismiss. We must remember that the best things can come in packages that may not look appealing according to worldly standards. Let us keep this in mind when evaluating

others. "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7b). Let's use God's eyeglasses instead of our own.

Being reconciled takes place at the cross when one obeys the gospel. At the cross, an exchange, reversal, and change took place. Your sins went to Christ, i.e., he paid the punishment, and his perfection went to you when you obeyed the gospel. I have made so many mistakes and gone down the wrong path. When I should have gone right, I went left, said "yes" when I should have said "no," and kept talking when I should have remained silent. I now have fellowship with a holy, sinless God because I have obeyed the gospel. Sometimes I shed tears of joy when thinking about the goodness of God and his initiative to bless and save me on the basis of Christ's death. Our God is a God who can reverse fortunes. Ask Daniel in the lion's den, ask the three Hebrew boys in the fiery furnace, and ask Esther and Mordecai. The biblical record shows God changes and exchanges a person's situation and character. The greatest example of this is seen in the gospel and the benefits of the gospel. Christ became sin for us so that we be right with God.

In playing UNO, when it appears that you are about to lose, you can improve your chances of winning by playing a reverse card, which changes the game's direction. At the cross, God played the biggest reverse card ever when he allowed his sinless Son to take our place and experience death and punishment for our sins, and now humanity gets a chance to be adopted into the family of God as if we never did anything wrong. "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like Chris! I once was lost, but now I am found. I was blind, but now I see." Those of us who have experienced this reconciliation are now ambassadors of reconciliation. We must live the life of one who has been reconciled and tell this good news to an evil, crooked, and dark world. It's news that gives hope, gives peace, provides us with something to look forward, and lets the world know that God has made a way to reverse their life and the relationship they have with him.

A Message of Hope for You

Reconciliation came with a price: Jesus dying on the cross. If God paid the ultimate price to reconcile us, he will surely provide everything else we need. Paul states, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with

Him also freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). Since God has done so much for us and will take care of us in the present and future, we, as his people, are obligated to live for his purposes and glory. Christians cannot please Christ if they are unwilling to sacrifice their lives and live for him. We may wonder if living for God and putting Jesus first is worth it. The answer is an emphatic “yes.” “Then Peter began to say to Him, ‘See, we have left all and followed you.’ So Jesus answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children or lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:28-31). When we decide to forsake family and possessions to live for Christ, Jesus lets us know that we shall have a spiritual family, blessings, and, most of all, eternal life. Yes, it’s worth it to live a reconciled life!

Discussion Questions

1. What causes a person to have irreconcilable differences with God?
2. Why is it dangerous to evaluate a person based on worldly criteria, such as appearance and popularity?
3. How does living for yourself and not for Christ hinder your relationship with Christ?
4. What are some situations in the Bible where a person’s relationship with God changed for the better?
5. Read Matthew 21:28-32 and ponder how that parable relates to those who claim to be reconciled and obedient to God.

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Lesson 4–Encouraged: Finding Comfort in Christ

ENCOURAGED TO MATURE

Jason Jackson

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

2 Corinthians 7:1

What keeps you up at night? New parents awaken to a baby's cries, but as time goes by, they lie awake for other reasons. Many older parents toss and turn with serious concerns for their adult sons and daughters. They wonder, "Are they safe?" They agonize, "Are they saved?"

Paul's "kids" kept him up as well. When Paul listed his trials in 2 Corinthians 11, he added "sleepless nights" to his list of hardships (v. 27). Then he said, "Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches" (v. 28). [All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.] We may conclude from the Corinthian letters that Paul's spiritual children in Corinth accounted for many of his sleepless nights (cf. 2 Cor. 2:4, 13; 6:11-13). As their father in the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15), *Paul encouraged them to mature in Christ.*

The Heart of the Message

Paul labored over the serious problems in the church at Corinth: strife, immorality, worldliness, selfishness, pride, and false doctrine. In addition to a letter, Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to remind them of "my ways which are in Christ" (1 Cor. 4:17). Paul asked them: "What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?" (v. 21).

Before Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he visited Corinth again.¹ Apparently, this visit did not go well, and so he determined, if

¹ Paul planted the church in Corinth on his first visit (Acts 18:1-18). At the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, his upcoming visit would be his third (2 Cor. 13:1 [cf. Acts 20:1-5]). Sometime during his tenure in Ephesus (Acts 19) but after he wrote 1 Corinthians, Paul made a personal, second visit to the church in Corinth that was not recorded in the book of Acts (2 Cor. 1:23; 2:1; 13:2).

possible, not to have another troublesome engagement with the church (2 Cor. 1:23; 2:1). Some questions remained as Paul contemplated a third visit: Would the “servants of Satan” continue to mesmerize the saints (11:13-15), or would they heed Paul’s appeals about Christian values and doctrine (11:3; 13:10)?

Second Corinthians was written in advance of Paul’s third visit to encourage the Corinthians to mature by realigning themselves under Paul’s authority as God’s representative (5:20; 6:1-13; 13:1-3). This would necessarily involve severing ties and living holy. Thus, Paul encouraged, “[L]et us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (7:1). The apostle’s exhortation continues to speak to us today, urging every Christian to grow in spiritual maturity.

Messages for Today

- **We must obey the teaching about holiness.**
- **We must discern the difference between defilement and holiness in a contemporary context.**
- **We must embrace the reasons for holy living.**

We must obey the teaching about holiness. An unwavering commitment to holy living is a mark of spiritual growth (cf. Rom. 6:2). Mature Christians will obey the Lord (Luke 6:46), live as children of light (Eph. 5:8), and renounce the unfruitful works of darkness (v. 11).

Paul’s appeal in 2 Corinthians 7:1 begins with the conjunction “therefore,” which “signals continuity and development.”² The encouragement in 7:1 grew out of 6:14-18, which expanded on the imperative: “Do not be bound together with unbelievers.” This command stresses with force and clarity that “entangling alliances”³ must be identified and addressed.

Paul raised the issues of partnership, fellowship, harmony, commonality, and agreement between good and evil through a series of rhetorical questions (6:14-16). The final question brings readers to this conclusion: the temple of God and idols *do not agree* (v. 16). Yet, we are God’s temple (v. 16). *Therefore*, we must cleanse ourselves from all defilement, perfecting holiness in the

² Fredrick J. Long, *II Corinthians: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor, 2015), 125.

³ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 402.

fear of God (7:1). The Corinthians were urged to take this exhortation to heart—and so should we.

Any impurity is unsuitable for God's holy people (Eph. 5:3). Likewise, Peter stressed that Christians should be holy "in all manner of living" (1 Pet. 1:15 [ASV]). As we plea for a return to the "old paths" (cf. Jer. 6:16) in matters regarding salvation, worship, church organization, and mission, let us urge one another to "perfect holiness." Mature Christians make an unwavering commitment to holiness.

We must discern the difference between defilement and holiness in a contemporary context. Knowing how to apply moral and spiritual principles to everyday life is a mark of maturity (Heb. 5:14). Therefore, Christians with a developed sense of holiness will make informed and careful distinctions between what is and what is not proper for saints today.

To some in Corinth, the body was just a body. So, whether the body craves food or sex, it's just a body (cf. 1 Cor. 6:13). To some in Corinth, meat was meat. If one wanted to lounge around at the pagan temple and enjoy some great food, it was just food (cf. 8:10; 10:28). These superficial views were uninformed and immature, opening the door for reckless decisions.

While some have a commitment to holiness "on paper," their lack of moral and spiritual discernment in real life raises questions about their spiritual growth. Immaturity shows itself in selfishness, irresponsibility, impulsiveness, and emotional, mental, and spiritual fragility. Immaturity fails to factor into its choices an array of spiritual principles, examples, and motivations. Immaturity only asks: "Where does the Bible say I can't?" Maturity contemplates: "Does it facilitate holiness?"

Maturity includes the wisdom to "prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2 [ASV]). So, mature Christians will filter real-world decisions through the command to be holy. They consider decisions like the following: Where should I work? How should I talk? What are *holy* standards for modesty, recreation, and dealing with "entangling alliances?" In a world of drunkenness, nakedness, dishonesty, and hatred, Christians are called to be set apart (cf. 1 Pet. 4:3-4). Perhaps Paul's exhortation is as relevant for today's church as it was then: "'Come out from their midst and be separate,' says the Lord" (2 Cor. 6:17). Mature Christians live out holiness daily with zeal and discernment.

We must embrace the reasons for holy living. Paul emphasized in 2 Corinthians 7:1 “these promises” up front. To highlight the function of this leading subordinate clause, we may render it like this: “*Because* we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves.” By this construction, Paul identified “these promises” as supporting his appeal to “cleanse ourselves.”

Paul outlined some divine promises at the end of 2 Corinthians 6: “I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (v. 16). He continued, “And I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me” (vv. 17b-18). Since God dwells in his holy temple, the church, should not his saints be set apart?

Paul concluded his exhortation with another reason. He urged Christians to mature in holiness *in the fear of God*. While love repels the dread of punishment (1 John 4:18), the Christian is reminded not to lose sight of this reality: “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

Paul’s two reasons for holy living in 2 Corinthians 7:1 should encourage spiritual growth in all of us. Because of (1) what God has promised and (2) who God is, “let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness.” Immaturity reacts to life in superficial ways, but mature Christians are moved to live holy by their deep and abiding relationship with their Father.

A Message of Hope for You

Christians may feel anything but holy, and the longer we live, the more self-conscious we may become (cf. 1 John 3:20). Being holy like God seems impossible, but the Father does not require that which we cannot *pursue*. Mature Christians remain humble, relying on God for strength (1 Pet. 5:6, 10). With that truth in mind, Paul encouraged the saints: “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). Does not the Father feel the same about us?

God knows we will never reach a state of moral perfection in this life. He also knows, however, that we can make an unwavering commitment to holiness, sever entangling alliances, and keep our relationship with him in view (cf. Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 2:4-7). Are we “keeping him awake”? Let us strive daily for

greater spiritual maturity, knowing God will help us (1 Pet. 2:1-3; Phil. 1:6).

Discussion Questions

1. Identify some attitudes that could prevent an unwavering commitment to holiness.
2. How might social media contribute to the defilement of the flesh and spirit?
3. Discuss how reading through 2 Corinthians could help one grow in holiness.
4. How can Paul's teaching on maturity be reconciled with his "attacks" on his opponents?
5. How could one go about meditating on "the fear of God" in a constructive way?

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Lesson 5–Encouraged: Finding Comfort in Christ

ENCOURAGED TO GIVE

David L. Lipe

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

2 Corinthians 8:9

A significant aspect of Christian service is that of giving. The pattern for our giving established by the New Testament is to lay aside something on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2). In this way, the Lord's church can carry out the work with which she has been entrusted. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul begins the second main division of the book in which he discusses the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Since the collection had not proceeded according to plans a year earlier, Paul felt it was necessary to stir up renewed interest in the collection.

The Heart of the Message

In order to encourage the collection to go forward, Paul used the example of the Macedonians (2 Cor. 8:1-7). The Macedonians were enabled to give liberally because they had been recipients of God's grace, and it is their example Paul hopes to use to inspire the Corinthians to "abound in this grace also" (8:7). [All Scripture references are from the New Kings James Version unless otherwise noted.] Giving is spoken of as a "grace" because it is the result of God's grace toward every Christian. The example of the Macedonians provided for the Corinthians several *guidelines* for giving.

First, they gave according to their ability and even beyond their ability (8:3). Giving is according to what one has (8:12) and as one has prospered (1 Cor. 16:2). The Macedonians were able to do this despite "a great trial of affliction" and "deep poverty" (8:2).

Second, their giving was characterized by willingness. They were "freely willing" (8:2). One cannot be commanded to give against one's will (8:8); giving must be from a "willing mind" (8:12). Giving is not to be "grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver" (9:7).

Third, they gave out of “the abundance of their joy” (8:2). Undoubtedly, their joy in giving sprang from their knowledge of God’s grace being bestowed on them (8:1). The Lord Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Giving out of joy is the kind of giving that God loves (cf. 9:7).

Fourth, they gave to have fellowship, i.e., to have a partnership in ministering to the saints (8:4). They implored with great urgency to take part in helping the poor saints at Jerusalem.

Fifth, they “gave themselves to the Lord” (8:5). They had completely given themselves to the Lord; consequently, they gave themselves to his servants. Paul will later say in this epistle that he does not “seek yours, but you” (12:14). They understood what Jesus meant when he said to deny oneself and take up one’s cross and follow him (Matt. 16:24-26).

Messages for Today

- **Giving must be motivated by love (8:8-9).**
- **Giving must be purposeful (9:7).**
- **Giving ensures that “God is able to make all grace abound” (9:8).**
- **Giving brings about thanksgiving and glory to God (9:11-13).**
- **Giving is a means of establishing closer fellowship (9:14).**

Giving must be motivated by love (8:8-9). In addition to some guidelines for giving, Paul also gave the Corinthians some *motives* for them to abound in the grace of giving. First, giving must be motivated by love (8:8-9). The willingness to part with what one deems valuable is evidence of genuine love. Bear in mind that giving is not limited to one’s financial resources. One may and should give of one’s time and talent as well as of one’s money. Having noted love as a motivation to liberal giving, Paul speaks of the highest example of genuine love; namely, the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. Jesus gave up something when he became a man. He shared in the glory with the Father before undergoing humiliation for humanity (cf. John 17:5; Phil. 2:5-8). Paul reminds the Corinthians that it was “for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (8:9).

Giving must be purposeful (9:7). Giving must be according to how one has made up his mind. Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians is not based on high-pressure tactics (cf. 8:8). Each

person should set aside what they wish to give. In this way the giving is less likely to be “not grudgingly or of necessity.” One’s mindset should not reflect an unwillingness to part with what one has nor should it be influenced by what others might think if one does not give. One should set aside what one is prepared to give. This is what Paul told the Corinthians in his first letter to them; namely, to “lay something aside” on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2). He encouraged them also to “prepare” their “generous gift beforehand” (2 Cor. 9:5). Planned giving will lead to cheerful giving, and it is the cheerful giver whom God loves.

Giving ensures that “God is able to make all grace abound” (9:8). Already, Paul has said in verse 6 that the one “who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” This sentiment is found elsewhere in Scripture (Prov. 11:24; 13:7; 19:17; Mal. 3:8-10; Luke 6:38). This passage is often cited by those who teach the “health and wealth gospel” to encourage people to give more (usually to some television evangelist) in order that they may have more for themselves. Nothing could be further from the truth of God’s Word. Paul says in verse 8 that God is able to make all grace abound in order that (1) one may always have all sufficiency in all things and (2) one may have abundance for every good work. Giving liberally, therefore, is not for selfish purposes but to ensure that one has what is needed and that one can help others.

God is able to provide all things that are necessary for the one who gives liberally. The liberal giver is the one who does what he can with what he has, and in so doing, God will enable him to abound even more. Paul gives proof that this abundance is not for selfish purposes when he quotes Psalm 112:9. The one whose righteousness endures forever is the one who disperses abroad and gives to the poor (9:8).

We should remember that all gifts are from God (cf. Jas. 1:17), including seed for sowing (9:10). If we use properly the gifts God has given us, then we may expect an increase in our ability to serve and to be “enriched in everything for all liberality” (9:10, 11) in order that we can do more for others.

Giving brings about thanksgiving and glory to God (9:11-13). Not only will the collection for the poor saints of Jerusalem meet their physical needs, but it will also cause these same people to offer thanksgiving to God’s glory. Giving thanks to God is the natural response to God’s gift of grace. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:15 that grace “may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of

God.” The Macedonians benefited from God’s grace (8:1) and were motivated to help the needy. Because the Jerusalem saints’ needs were met, they gave thanksgiving to God, which in turn led them to glorify God because of his work in their lives (cf. Matt. 5:16). God will be glorified in two ways: (1) the Corinthians’ obedience to the gospel of Christ and (2) their liberal giving for the poor saints and for everyone else (9:13).

Giving is a means of establishing closer fellowship (9:14). Giving to the poor saints of Jerusalem is an expression “of the exceeding grace of God.” In a day when there was sharp division between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the contribution would have the effect of further uniting the two together. The collection would cause the Jerusalem saints to pray for and long for the Corinthians. It seems reasonable to conclude that giving—whether it be time, talent, or even money—can have the same effect among non-Christians. The actions of Christians toward non-Christians can be powerful. The grace that we manifest toward them can lead to them loving us and longing to know more about the Lord Jesus (cf. Matt. 5:13-16).

A Message of Hope for You

Throughout Paul’s discussion on giving, he has repeatedly spoken of God’s grace, his gift to humanity. The Macedonians were enabled to give because of God’s grace. The same would be true of the Corinthians as they abound in the grace of giving (8:7). Our ability to give is nothing less than a gift from God, a gift that should be used and used liberally (cf. Rom. 12:6-8). The more we give ourselves in service to God, the more God is going to shed his grace on us. We will never be gracious to others until we recognize how God has been gracious to us. The epitome of his grace is in the giving of his indescribable gift, the Lord Jesus himself (2 Cor. 9:15). When we truly appreciate what God has given to us, it will be easy for us to give to others.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Paul appeal to the Macedonians to encourage the Corinthians to move forward with their contribution?
2. What are some guidelines for giving based on the Macedonians? How can Christians today benefit from these guidelines?
3. What are some motives for giving based on the Macedonians? Are these the same motives for Christians today?
4. Throughout Paul's discussion on giving, he mentions the grace of God. How does this relate to the subject of giving itself?

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Lesson 6–Encouraged: Finding Comfort in Christ

ENCOURAGED TO WAGE WAR

Jim Laws

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. [. . .] I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare—since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you.

2 Corinthians 5:20-21; 13:2-3

In this personal letter, Paul describes what life was like as an apostle of Jesus Christ. This epistle shows he was human, and like all other men, he experienced joy and pain as well as victories and setbacks. Now, he directs his attention to the false teachers of his day. In the first section of 2 Corinthians, he speaks to members of the church, removing any doubt they may have regarding him personally and the doctrine he teaches. The false teachers have tried to undermine both Paul's good work and his good name. Their attack was personal, against his character and the gospel he preached. Because of these issues created by his opponents, Paul's tone changed in the third and final section (2 Cor. 10-13).

These severe charges against Paul required a direct defense, for the Corinthian church had been seriously affected (2 Cor. 2:5-6). What were these accusations? Well, there were statements like "some . . . think of us as if we walked according to the flesh" (10:2). [All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] But in the beginning of this letter, Paul stated, "For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you" (1:12). A quick scan of long passages, such as 1:3-2:17, show Paul's distress: "God...who comforts us in all our trials" (1:4); "the sufferings of Christ abound in us" (1:5); "you are partakers of the sufferings" (1:7; cf. 2:5-6); "our trouble which came to us in Asia..." (1:8-9). Indeed, these Scriptures express the strain and stress suffered by

Paul from false teachers. In fact, the trouble caused within the church almost did him in. He faced death (1:8-10), adding that “our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears” (7:5).

The Heart of the Message

2 Corinthians is a sequel to 1 Corinthians. It has been said 1 Corinthians speaks to the church, while 2 Corinthians speaks to the man, Paul. A Jewish faction had intensified in Corinth, which mightily opposed Paul. In the final portion of 2 Corinthians, Paul’s approach is apologetic in nature, i.e., a well-reasoned defense (Phil. 1:17). Therefore, he defends himself and the integrity of his message. One should understand not all the church at Corinth was antagonistic to Paul (7:16); however, some 30% of the book is devoted to a defense of himself and his work (i.e., four chapters). His inspired, true gospel and a false gospel were simultaneously being broadcasted around the world. Naturally, people were asking who was the true minister of the gospel and who was teaching error. This section of 2 Corinthians answers the question emphatically for everyone.

“For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:14). Paul presents his rebuttal to the false teachers at Corinth. He had been falsely accused of arrogance by the opposition; they claimed he measured himself by himself. Actually, his accusers were guilty of this practice. Paul asserted he had been given certain limits by God and had never overreached God’s standard. Paul was to be accepted by the church because he preached the gospel of Christ. This is the authority for his ministry, the only authority he had or needed. Unlike Paul, the false teachers at Corinth were stretching beyond their limits. Paul’s ministry to preach to the Gentiles, which included the Corinthian people, was given to him by God. The implication is that these accusers needed to repent and to become one with the other members of the church. Paul wanted their faith to grow for their sake and for the sake of others, that is, he wanted their faith to increase, so they might help send him and the gospel to other parts of the world.

“For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2). Paul had a love and concern for the church at Corinth; they were dear to him. This godly affection

urged him to expose the error of false teachers and his critics. To do so, he had to defend himself. He did not relish engaging in these matters, for he would rather speak about Christ. But he was forced to defend himself for their sake. Notice his soft approach toward them, “Oh, that you would bear with me in a little folly—and indeed you do bear with me” (2 Cor. 11:1). He had a godly jealousy for them, because he had led so many of them to Christ. He had begotten them through the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15); they were his work in the Lord (1 Cor. 9:1). Paul’s aim was to present the church pure, holy, and without blemish, or error. His love for them was without question; his motive was pure, even though critics wanted to seduce the church away from Christ. Could such a disaster happen? Yes! Just as Eve was drawn away by the clever temptation of the serpent, so the Christians at Corinth could be led away from Christ. Paul worked to preserve their faithfulness to Christ.

“Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds” (2 Cor. 12:12). Paul reminded them of his behavior while he was with them. His conduct proved he was a faithful apostle, a servant of the Lord equal to any other. One specific charge against him stated that he was an inferior apostle or that he was, perhaps, not an apostle, or minister, of Christ at all. Paul’s answer was unequivocal; he was equal to any apostle, or minister, and his ministry among them was proof. The signs of an apostle had been demonstrated among the church. In fact, these signs had been manifested under the most severe circumstances, requiring great patience.

“Therefore, I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction” (2 Cor. 13:10). The final message was given to them; he had done all he could to help them. He had taught and exhorted the false teachers and critics and those in sin at Corinth to repent. His final words were words of warning, prayer, challenge, and blessing. 2 Corinthians 12:15 states, “And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.”

Messages for Today

- **To be pleasing to God, one must respect God's divine authority.**
- **It is the responsibility of each Christian to be aware of the thinking of the times, the challenge these views present to the church, and how to answer them biblically.**
- **It is the responsibility of Christians to understand the need for continual self-examination of their spiritual lives.**

To be pleasing to God, one must respect God's divine authority. Paul emphasized the only authority he possessed was the authority given to him by Christ. The only authority any of us who preach and teach the gospel have is the authority from the New Testament. No other legitimate authority exists for a servant of Christ. Both Paul and Apollos are examples for us "not to go beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6). If this principle were followed, many divisions and difficulties in the church would be resolved. The cause of division in our religious world is the same as it was in Jesus' day: the acceptance of man-made viewpoints that have become traditions over time (Matt. 15:9). If Scripture teaches anything, it teaches that if a man goes beyond God's authority, he has made a presumptuous, sinful, spiritual move and has failed in the sight of God. No one has the authority to add or to take away one scintilla to biblical faith. To do so is sin.

It is the responsibility of each Christian to be aware of the thinking of the times, the challenge these views present to the church, and how to answer them biblically. An additional message comes as a warning—the way of error is clever. Therefore, the church should always be made aware of the false teachings of the day and the reason for their danger. Simply because a method or teaching is new, not having been seen previously, does not make it wrong. It could be someone has an insight into the Scriptures others have not seen. However, always be aware only the truth makes us free, not error (John 8:32). Elders, preachers, teachers, and every member should be attentive to what is being taught and promoted, so they will not be beguiled as was Eve.

It is the responsibility of Christians to understand the need for continual self-examination of their spiritual lives. Paul's way of dealing with false accusations and teaching is a model for us. We must have courage to defend the truth of God's word as well as see the need we have to apply it to ourselves. Our world, as in

Paul's day, is plagued with the efforts of those who either do not love the truth of the gospel or are uninformed about its saving message. Additionally, we are not immune from error and must constantly evaluate ourselves in the light of God's word. The challenge has always been to answer the counterfeit claims with the truth of God and at the same time examine ourselves to be sure we are pleasing God as well.

A Message of Hope for You

Paul concluded his discussion with an admonition for each Christian to make an objective, self-examination spiritually. This holds true for Christians individually and the church collectively. With intentional, spiritual evaluation, we will grow to greater levels of maturity. When Paul wrote that "faith comes by hearing" (Rom. 10:17), he did not have in mind a simple hearing of audible words, but a submissive attitude, one that is willing to heed and to yield to the Scripture's instructions. By a spiritual self-examination, we can determine whether we are following God's word, and if not, make the necessary corrections.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Paul write this letter?
2. Why did Paul write so much to vindicate his ministry?
3. In chapter 10, upon what basis were some people evaluating Paul?
4. In chapter 11, what are the main points of the chapter?
5. In chapter 12, in what way did Paul prove his apostleship to the Corinthians?
6. In chapter 13, in the closing of the book, what does Paul exhort them to do?

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Lesson 7—Tough Texts

GOD HAS ANOINTED US

Will Hanstein

Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.

2 Corinthians 1:21

Historically speaking, anointings were performed for a variety of reasons, ranging from the hygienic (Ruth 3:3), to the medicinal (Jas. 5:14), to the religious (Exod. 30:22ff). Kings and priests, even utensils, were anointed for various reasons. Ostensibly, they were “a ceremonial action performed on persons and things to separate them from profane use and obtain on their behalf the infusion of Divine grace.”¹ Anointings were very important and significant when they were performed.

The Heart of the Message

The Source of the Anointing—God. If there is to be an anointing, there must be an anointer. Paul identifies the source of the anointing rather plainly by saying, “Now He who...anointed us is *God*. . . .” [All scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.] In the Old Testament, various men are told by God to anoint others. Moses is told to anoint Aaron and his sons as priests (Exod. 28:41). Samuel is told to anoint David as king of Israel (1 Sam. 16:13). God Himself anointed Jesus at His baptism, not with oil, but with the Holy Spirit and power (Acts 10:38, Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27). Here, God Himself is again performing an anointing.

The Recipients of the Anointing—Christians. If there is an anointing, there also needs to be someone or something that is anointed. “Now he who...anointed us. . . .” Some believe that this anointing was only for Paul and other apostles, since he does not repeat “us with you” in regard to the anointing. However, there are two concrete reasons to include the Corinthian Christians in those who have been anointed by God. First, the rules of Greek

¹ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, ed. “Anointing,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (N.P.: N.p., 2005), 73.

grammar necessitate this in 2 Corinthians 1:21.² Secondly, John very clearly states in 1 John 2:20, 27 that Christians have been anointed. There is no other conclusion that can be drawn than that all Christians receive this anointing from God.

The Purpose of the Anointing—Commission. Every anointing has a purpose behind it. Paul does not tell us the purpose of the anointing, but we can glean it from other passages. Harris states, “In OT (Old Testament) times it was consecration to royal or priestly or... prophetic service; in NT (New Testament) times it was consecration to the divine service of doing God’s will. . . .”³ Jesus was anointed for the purpose of preaching to the people (Luke 4:18). In 2 Corinthians 1:21, both Paul and the Corinthian Christians have been anointed for a purpose. Paul was anointed for the purpose of being an apostle and preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15-16). The Corinthian Christians were anointed to perform the task of bringing others to Christ (Matt. 5:9; John 15:1-11; Rom. 12:1-2, etc.).

The Substance of the Anointing—Holy Spirit. Every anointing has a substance used to anoint the recipient. In the ancient world, oil mixed with perfume was often used. Paul does not specifically mention with what substance we are anointed, but the fact that he mentions the Holy Spirit as God’s seal in verse 22 gives us a big clue as to what, or in this case whom, God uses to anoint the Christian. “Given the emphasis on the Spirit in the present context it is best to see here a reference to Paul and his colleagues having been anointed by the Spirit.”⁴ Additionally, other passages of Scripture tell us with whom we are anointed. We are told Jesus was anointed *with* the Holy Spirit (Lk. 4:18; Acts 10:38). 1 John 2:20, 27 states that Christians have an anointing themselves. David Lipscomb says, “In the passage

² Murray J. Harris. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, A Commentary on the Greek*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Milton Keynes, 2005), 206.

³ Harris, 206.

⁴ Colin G. Kruse. *2 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Vol. 8 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 78.

before us, when Paul says, ‘and anointed us,’ he means that the anointing of the Spirit is common to all Christians.”⁵

The Occasion of the Anointing—Baptism. As with all anointings, there is a time when this anointing takes place. For instance, God tells Samuel to anoint Saul as king (1 Sam. 9:16). At a specific time, Saul then receives the anointing to be king over Israel from Samuel (1 Sam. 10:1). When does the Christian receive his anointing of the Holy Spirit from God? It has already been established that all Christians have this anointing. Since all Christians have it, then the only option as to the occasion of the anointing is the point at which a person becomes a Christian. R.C.H. Lenski states, “The act occurred in our baptism as it did immediately after Christ’s baptism.”⁶

Messages for Today

- **This anointing shows us we are special to God.**
- **This anointing shows us God has given us a job to do.**
- **This anointing shows us the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins.**

This anointing shows us we are special to God. The vast majority of anointings in Scripture were performed by mere men and used merely oil. Even when God commanded an anointing to be done, a man was still the agent accomplishing the task, and oil was still the substance applied. However, the anointing of the Christian is performed by God Himself. 1 Pet 2:9-10 says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” The substance used is the Holy Spirit Himself. 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 and Ephesians 1:13-14 state that we are so special to God that He gives us His own Spirit as a down payment on our salvation. Paul tells us that because the Holy Spirit dwells in our physical bodies, we “belong to Him” (Rom. 5:8). How

⁵ David Lipscomb, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles: Second Corinthians and Galatians*, Gospel Advocate New Testament Commentary, ed. J. W. Shepherd (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1989), 35.

⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 854.

special is the Christian to God that He would personally anoint us with His Holy Spirit!

This anointing shows us God has given us a job to do. As mentioned earlier, anointings were performed to set aside a person for a special task. Saul, David, and Solomon were anointed to perform the task of being king over God's people (1 Sam. 9:16; 16:1; 1 Kings 1:34). Moses anointed Aaron to perform the tasks of the high priest (Exod. 29:7). Similarly, but in a much greater way, Christians have been anointed to help others get to heaven. Romans 10:14 states that without us, no one will hear the gospel. Peter lets us know that we are a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9). A priest mediates between God and man. We have been given the essential commission of bringing the gospel to the world, making peace between sinful man and God (Matt. 5:9). May we never neglect this crucial commission which God has given to Christians!

This anointing shows us the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins. The moment when we receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit by God is at baptism. Scripture is quite clear that baptism is the point at which a person is saved (1 Pet. 3:21), forgiven of his sins (Acts 2:38), and becomes a disciple (Matt. 28:19-20), i.e., a Christian (Acts 11:26). Baptism is also the occasion at which a person is established, anointed, sealed, and given the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:21-22). If the anointing does not occur at baptism, then when does it occur? May we always fulfill our commission to let all men know the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins so that they, too, can receive this anointing!

A Message of Hope for You

How blessed are Christians because they have received an anointing of the Holy Spirit by God! All Christians should realize their worth because they are special to God.

How vital is the duty that all Christians have been given to preach the Gospel to all men! All Christians should realize that they are the only hope this world has.

How crucial are all Christians, babes in Christ and mature in Christ, young and old, men and women, rich and poor, etc.! All Christians should realize they bear a responsibility to preach baptism for the forgiveness of sins, no matter their current situation in life.

Discussion Questions

1. What was an anointing, and what was its significance?
2. Why is it significant that the Christian is anointed?
3. Why is it significant who anointed the Christian?
4. Why is it significant with whom the Christian is anointed?
5. Why is it significant when the Christian is anointed?

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Lesson 8–Tough Texts

MADE HIM TO BE SIN

Alan H. Judd

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

2 Corinthians 5:20-21

In times of military conflict, men are sometimes captured in the course of battle and become known as prisoners of war (POW). During WWII, Camp Crossville in Cumberland County, Tennessee, housed over 1,500 German and Italian POWs between 1942 and 1945. This camp was the only one in the United States designated for officers in each army. Only one German soldier is known to have escaped, and he was later recaptured and returned to the camp until the end of the war.

Throughout history and continuing to the present, POWs or hostages have been exchanged by opposing armies and other groups hostile to one another. Terms of the swap have varied with each situation, but usually, both sides have to make concessions to secure the exchange. What happens if the side held hostage can offer nothing to the opposing group? Could they entertain any hope of release or rescue? This question is similar to what Paul deliberates in 2 Corinthians 5:11-21.

The Heart of the Message

“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” [All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] “This justly famous verse is one of the most critical in this letter and indeed, within the writings of the apostle Paul.”¹ How can humanity held hostage by sin have any hope of release? The immediate context describing a day of judgment, which engenders a fear of the Lord that motivates Paul’s evangelism (2 Cor. 5:10-11), prompts the apostle to “develop the thought in terms of an exchange: Christ was made

¹ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 312.

sin, that we might become *God's righteousness*.”² “Here, stated succinctly and with power, is the heart of the Gospel.”³

Verses 14 and 15 contain the repeated affirmation indicating Jesus “died for all.” Verses 17 and following indicate how humans benefit from this vicarious action and prompt the apostle to declare imperatively in verse 20, “We implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.” Without using names or titles to identify the involved parties, verse 21 climaxes Paul’s thought and allows the reader to “penetrate to the center of the atonement and stand in awe before one of the most profound mysteries in the universe.”⁴

What does it mean that Christ was made sin for us? Three interpretations have been advanced since the earliest Patristic writers and continue to the present.⁵ The triad of possibilities stated simply is either (1) Christ was made a sinner, (2) Christ was made a sin-offering, or (3) Christ was made to bear the consequences of our sins.⁶ Some suggest other nuances and additional options, but space will limit this lesson to considering only these three.

The first suggestion is impossible, given the extensive New Testament testimony concerning the sinlessness of the Savior (John 7:18; Acts 3:14; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 3:5). Jesus never sinned in action or attitude, and he had no acquaintance with sin, which led him to challenge his opponents, “Which of you convicts me of sin” (John 8:46).

The second suggestion that Christ was made a sin-offering is appealing to many expositors. Some offer convincing arguments that this interpretation was the ancient and dominant understanding for centuries and that it comports with how the LXX uses similar language in the Old Testament (c.f. Lev. 4:3) and best fits the Corinthian context.⁷ Additional appeal to the

² Charles K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (San Francisco: Harper, 1974), 180.

³ Barnett, 312.

⁴ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 451.

⁵ Charles Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary*. 2nd Ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 200.

⁶ Colin Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, an Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1987), 129.

⁷ Talbert, 201.

scapegoat ritual and Day of Atonement drama in Leviticus 16:5-10; 20-22, and what Yahweh does to the suffering servant in Isaiah 53:10 are also presented as evidence favoring this understanding.⁸ Lastly, Paul's comparable teaching in Romans 8:3 and Galatians 3:13 makes this explanation attractive.

The last option that Christ bore the consequences of human sin on the cross is akin to Isaiah 53:12, where the servant of the Lord is described as "numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many." In echoing the words of Isaiah and describing the work of Jesus, Peter affirmed, "Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed" (1 Pet. 2:24). This interpretation understands Paul to describe Christ's death as substitutionary and God's response as judicial, which is supported by the overall thrust and message of Scripture.⁹

While the first option goes too far and asserts what the rest of Scripture refutes, do either of the remaining interpretative options go far enough in describing what Paul is attempting to teach? Duane Warden's warning needs careful consideration: "The manner of Christ's identification with the sin for which he died required Paul to choose his words cautiously."¹⁰ In my opinion, Murray Harris provides a balanced analysis: "We conclude that in v. 21a Paul is not saying that at the crucifixion the sinless Christ became in some sense a sinner, yet he is affirming more than that Christ became a sin offering or even a sin bearer. In a sense beyond human comprehension, God treated Christ as 'sin,' aligning him so totally with sin and its dire circumstances that from God's viewpoint he became indistinguishable from sin itself."¹¹ The Hebrew writer concurs by summarizing, "so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation" (Heb. 9:28).

⁸ Harris, 452.

⁹ Norman Geisler and Thomas How, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Ada, MI: Baker, 1992), 472.

¹⁰ Duane Warden, *2 Corinthians: Truth for Today Commentary* (Searcy: Resource Pub., 2020), 181.

¹¹ Harris, 454.

Messages for Today

- **We know Jesus is sinless.**
- **We, who know Jesus, should sin less.**
- **We must make the Savior known to those in bondage to sin.**

We know Jesus is sinless. We serve a Savior who “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). His sinless perfection allowed Jesus to be the vicarious atonement to remedy our estrangement from our Holy God (Rom. 3:21-26; Heb. 9:22-10:14; 1 John 2:2).

We who know Jesus should sin less. We know from personal experience that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). While we will fail to imitate the Savior’s sinlessness perfectly, we should not only strive to “follow His steps” (1 Pet. 2:21), but motivated by what he has done for us, we should also live lives wherein we “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).

We must make the Savior known to those in bondage to sin. The apostle Paul knew all people would one day stand before their Creator in judgment (2 Cor. 5:10, Acts 17:31, Rom. 14:12). Paul understood that the death of Christ was the only hope for sinners to be reconciled to God. Those with this knowledge and who have received salvation through Christ are now tasked with “persuading” and “pleading” with sinners to “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:11; 5:20).

A Message of Hope for You

Because of sin, we are held captive by the devil (2 Tim. 2:26) and deserve the penalty of death—physical and spiritual (Rom. 6:23). Thankfully, Jesus, as a perfect sacrifice, died in our place to rescue us and allows us to share his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). “These are the wondrous realities that are here stated for us in perfect language; we only stammer when we try to repeat them in words of our own.”¹²

¹² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 1055.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do we know Jesus did not die as a sinner?
2. What did Jesus experience that might suggest identification with sin?
3. Do you think the cry of Jesus in Matthew 27:46 relates to 2 Corinthians 5:21? Why or why not?
4. What significance does “for us” have in verse 21?
5. What steps can Christians take daily to sin less?

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Lesson 9–Tough Texts

DO NOT BE UNEQUALLY YOKED

David Roach

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

2 Corinthians 6:14

You have probably heard the expression, “We live in the world, but we are not of the world.” While that exact phrase is not in the Bible, the principle certainly is (cf. John 17:11, 16). As believers we are not “of the world,” but we are to have a positive impact on the world. Our Lord calls us to be “the salt of the earth...the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-16). [All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] As believers we have been commissioned to make disciples, i.e., to teach, baptize, and teach (Matt. 28:18-20). In order to do these things, and much more, we must engage unbelievers to some degree. To what degree may believers be involved with unbelievers? What are the limits or boundaries we must maintain? The answer to this question is found, in part, in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1.

From a study of Paul’s first letter, there seems to have been two extremes being practiced by some at Corinth. One was total isolation from the world, which Paul corrected by clarifying his previous statement (1 Cor. 5:9-10); the other was *sinful* participation in/with those of the world, e.g., idolatry, which Paul soundly condemned (1 Cor. 8:4-13; 10:14-22). A balance lies between the two. The words “[d]o not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers” help provide that balance along with other passages.

The Heart of the Message

Our text begins with a command: “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” The words “unequally yoked,” from (*heterozugeō*), mean to be unevenly yoked or to be mis-mated.¹

¹ Walter Bauer, et. al. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 399.

This is undoubtedly an allusion to the prohibition found in Deuteronomy 22:10 forbidding the yoking together of an ox (a clean animal) and a donkey (an unclean animal). It is worth noting that Paul does not write, “Do not be *yoked* with unbelievers,” but rather “unequally yoked.” A specific kind of *yoke* is forbidden. It is one that is uneven or unequal; it involves a mismatch.

An examination of Paul’s first letter shows that the words “do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers” are not a prohibition against any and all “yoking” with unbelievers. First, Paul permitted believers to “keep company” with unbelievers (1 Cor. 5:9-10). The words “to keep company” mean to mix up with or to have or keep company with.² Second, Paul recognized marriage between a believer and an unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:12-15) as did Peter (1 Pet. 3:1-5). Third, believers could accept a dinner invitation from an unbeliever (1 Cor. 10:27). Fourth, unbelievers were permitted in the church’s assembly (1 Cor. 14:23f). Beyond these considerations from 1 Corinthians, one should note that our Lord Himself received sinners and ate with them (Luke 15:1-2).

In verses 14b-16a, Paul gives reasons why we must not be “unequally yoked,” and in so doing, he sets forth principles by which boundaries can be established. He asks five rhetorical questions to make his point while at the same time revealing the stark contrasts between the believer and unbeliever. (1) “What fellowship has...righteousness with lawlessness?” The believer’s character and conduct are different. (2) “What communion has...light with darkness?” The believer is influential for good and does not fear scrutiny. (3) “What accord has...Christ with Belial?” Believers serve a different Master. (4) “What part has...believer with unbeliever?” The believer’s core beliefs and values are different. This is why they are believers. (5) “What agreement has...temple of God with idols?” Believers belong to the living God. God lives in and works through them. The answer to each of these questions is obvious. Note also the various nouns used to describe what should not occur in this “unequal yoke.” They are *fellowship* (better translated “partnership”), *communion*, *accord*, *part*, and *agreement*.

² W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Vol. IV A-D (N.P.: Fleming, 1966), 217.

In verses 17c-18, Paul concludes with three additional commands followed by three promises from God. The commands are (1) “Come out”; (2) “be separate,” meaning to mark off from others by boundaries, to limit, to separate;³ (3) “do not touch.” The promises are *fellowship*, “I will dwell in them and walk among them” (v. 16), *reception*, “I will receive them” (v. 17), and *relationship*, “I will be a Father...you shall be My sons and daughters” (v.18).

In 7:1, Paul wraps things up, signaling it with “Therefore.” He uses the promises of verses 17-18 to encourage and motivate the Corinthians to *holiness*. This holiness falls into two categories: (1) the *flesh*, i.e., the outward man/body, our actions (cf. Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 2:3; Jude 1:8; 2 Pet. 2:10) and (2) the *spirit*, i.e., our inward man/mind, our thoughts, motives, and attitudes. Holiness is necessary in both body and spirit (cf. James 4:8.) Therefore, we must not be “yoked” to anyone or anything that would cause this holiness to be compromised.

The bottom line, in my judgment, is as follows: to be *unequally yoked together with an unbeliever* means that an alliance has been formed or a partnership has been forged with an unbeliever that *demand*s that truth and righteousness be replaced with error and sin. When this is the case, that relationship/partnership ought to be severed.

Messages for Today

- **We must be conscious and cautious of the alliances we form and the partnerships we enter.**
- **We must allow freedom for each person to exercise personal judgment.**

We must be conscious and cautious of the alliances we form and the partnerships we enter. We all have various relationships socially, domestically, and professionally that we have entered. If the *creation* or *continuation* of the relationship depends on compromising truth and/or promoting or participating in sinful conduct, then that relationship ought to be severed. The believer should “come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord, and touch not what is unclean” (2 Cor. 6:17). If you are being asked or required to violate your Lord’s will, then sever the

³ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 90.

relationship. Righteousness is clashing with lawlessness, light with darkness, and Christ with Satan.

We must allow freedom for each person to exercise personal judgment. The majority of alliances or relationships that we enter will be uncomplicated, while others may not be quite as clear. Consider this example. A man who is a believer is a mechanic for a truck repair and maintenance company. The company secures a contract to maintain and repair a fleet of trucks, but the trucks are owned by a local brewery. Would remaining cause him to be “unequally yoked with unbelievers”? Can he remain or must he leave? Could he repair the van of a denominational church that came into the shop? Most companies like Walmart deal in some things that are sinful, e.g., alcohol. Is a believer’s legal and moral transaction of legitimate goods and services with Walmart prohibited because of this? Can a believer have stock in Walmart? These examples and questions can be multiplied. Do these not constitute instances when we should allow one another freedom to exercise personal judgment? Do any of us want to be the one to make the ultimate decision for others in these cases? A discussion of one’s conscience would be pertinent as well (cf. Rom. 14:23; 1 Cor. 10:25ff.).

The Bible, being its own best commentary, contains other passages where different words are used to teach the same truth or principle found in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. Solomon’s instruction to his son (Prov. 1:10-15) is an excellent example. Other pertinent passages include Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 15:33, Ephesians 5:11, James 1:27, and 1 Peter 4:1-4.

A Message of Hope for You

We must remember that although we are in this world, we are not of this world. We must remember Who we belong to (Christ), what we are (Christians), and where we are going (heaven). We must make a conscious effort every day to “live soberly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Tit. 2:12). We cannot accomplish this if we are “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” or anyone else for that matter.

Discussion Questions

1. does it mean to say that “we are in the world, but we are not of the world”?
2. What are some examples of believers being “unequally yoked with unbelievers”?
3. In our text, what does God promise to those who will be holy before Him?
4. What are some other biblical passages that express the same principle found in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1?
5. Discuss the example of the believer who is a mechanic. Can you think of similar scenarios?

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Lesson 10–Tough Texts

I WILL BOAST

Keith Harris

Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.

2 Corinthians 11:18

Admittedly, some of the apostle Paul’s writings are difficult. Even Peter, through inspiration of the Holy Spirit, acknowledged concerning the writings of Paul, “There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Pet. 3:16) [All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.]. Paul’s so-called “Fool’s Speech” in his second letter to the Corinthians (11:16—12:13) is one such passage. Paul boasts of his experiences and admits his foolishness in doing so. But as he does so, Paul points to the reality that his actions are needful to add credibility to his ministry and actions among the people of Corinth. Most people do not care to spend time with a braggadocious person. However, Paul urges the Christians in Corinth to accept him as a fool, in the same way they had accepted others. Would this prove effective for Paul?

The Heart of the Message

According to a story in the Grand Rapids Press, the owner of a small foreign car had begun to irritate his friends by bragging incessantly about his gas mileage. So, they decided on a way to get some humor out of his tireless boasting, as well as bring it to an end. Every day one of them would sneak into the parking lot where the man kept his car and pour a few gallons of gas into the tank. Soon the braggart was recording phenomenal gas mileage. He was boasting of getting as much as 90 miles per gallon, and the pranksters took secret delight in his exasperation as he tried to convince people of the truthfulness of his claims. It was even more fun to watch his reaction when they stopped refilling the tank. The poor fellow couldn’t figure out what had happened to his car.

Boasting is not a characteristic that draws a lot of people toward a person. More often than not, a boastful personality comes off as cold, self-absorbed, self-aggrandizing, and self-centered. This is not what would classify as a Christlike spirit.

However, we see the apostle Paul boastfully explaining his experiences to the Christians in Corinth. So, how are we to make sense of this boasting of Paul? Does it align with what we know to be the spirit of a Christ-follower? It is interesting that Paul makes a distinction in his communication. He says, "Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast" (2 Cor. 11:18). This boasting, according to Paul, is not as the Lord would speak. He notes, "What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool" (2 Cor. 11:17). This is an important distinction in the larger context of this portion of Paul's writing. One that we would do well to remember.

Beginning this larger section of his writing in chapter 10, Paul opens by stating, "I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!— I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 10:1-2). There were apparently some in Corinth who were speaking against Paul and those with him, saying that they were walking, or living, according to the flesh. It is the accusations of these individuals that Paul addresses in such a "foolish" manner in his boastful rant. The Corinthians were bearing with those who were boasting of themselves and speaking against Paul. Paul points out, "For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face" (2 Cor. 11:19-20). Because of their willingness to accept such people, Paul feels compelled to respond accordingly, though he understands this is not the way Christ would respond. This is certainly not Paul's usual method of operating. However, he cannot let such challenges to his apostleship and service in the kingdom go unanswered. It seems that Paul regrets having to stoop to this level of communication, but he continues, nonetheless, making his point with boldness.

Throughout this section of Paul's writing, he continually refers to the necessity to boast in the Lord. He acknowledges his own weaknesses and the frailty of his wisdom. He makes it clear that he is not pretending to be something he is not, and he points to the call of God in his life and ministry. Paul demonstrates a life lived for the glory of God, even though we see him responding to his opponents' accusations as though he were a "fool." If we were to take a statement here and a statement there out of this larger

passage, we might accuse Paul ourselves. But the overarching thought of the text seems to point to the humility of Paul as he seeks to follow the will of God and Christ. With that in mind, there are some important lessons that we can learn from Paul as we face challenging moments in life.

Messages for Today

- **We should boast in the Lord, not ourselves.**
- **We should recognize our weakness.**
- **We should rely upon God's strength.**

We should boast in the Lord, not ourselves. Paul addressed the false teachers who had spoken ill of him when he told the Corinthians, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (2 Cor. 10:17). We must not presume to take credit for any accomplishments or accolades we may receive in this life. As those false teachers in Corinth gloried in their freedom to attend idol feasts and flaunt the sophisticated rhetoric of the day, they gloried in nothing that God had done through them. If we are boasting, we should make sure that our boasting is of the work of God in our lives, allowing Him to receive the glory.

We should recognize our weakness. Paul states, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Cor. 11:30). Again, he writes, "... but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses ..." (2 Cor. 12:5). Though he was quite skilled in rhetoric and knowledge, Paul was sure to admit his weakness. He understood that compared with the knowledge and wisdom of God, his wisdom was folly. But his attitude demonstrates to us a proper response to the authority and power of God. We are weak in nature. But God is strong. As we face the challenges of life, it is important that we recognize our own weaknesses.

We should rely upon God's strength. God's strength is available to all who will receive it. As we come to understand our weakness and to recognize that our accomplishments are not our own doing, then we will have a proper attitude as we stand before God. We will not be seeking our own glory, but we will acknowledge the power of God and rely upon His strength. The moment we begin to rely upon ourselves is the moment that we fail to glorify God. God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). We should acknowledge our weakness and allow God's strength and power to be made complete.

A Message of Hope for You

As we face a challenging world, we understand that there will be moments where we feel compelled to boast. But we must remember that as we interact with others, our goal as followers of Jesus is to bring glory and honor to God and Christ. We can do this by boasting in the Lord and what He has done through us and in us. Recognizing our weaknesses puts us in a proper posture for relying not on ourselves, but upon God and His strength. What a blessing it is to know that we serve a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving. He will meet all our needs, supply the comfort we need in life, and give us strength to face the challenges of this world. We simply must put our faith and hope in Him, submitting our will to His will for our lives.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it that we are so easily tempted to boast in ourselves?
2. What are some practical ways we can ward off those temptations?
3. How can we make sure we are giving glory to God?

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Lesson 11–Tough Texts

THE THIRD HEAVEN

Josh Blackmer

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.

2 Corinthians 12:2

What wonderful things God has shown his servants, from the prophets of old to those grand scenes revealed to the apostle John (Rev. 1:10). This reference to the third heaven by the apostle Paul gives rise to several questions. What is the third heaven? Who is this man? If it is Paul, is he sharing with the Corinthians that he has witnessed heavenly things? If he has, why does he only briefly mention them in this letter? What does the reader learn from this information? This passage, when examined in the greater context, proves to be a passage that teaches more about Paul and his character.

The Heart of the Message

When we address the idea of a third heaven, we must understand that we are looking into the ancient people's concept of the sky, the solar system, and the dwelling place of deity. Not all of them were correct, but some were astonishingly accurate. Thousands of years ago the Babylonians were the first known group to build towers to watch the night sky. "They were the first-known people to predict eclipses. They could track and predict the relative movements of the sun, the moon, Mercury, and Venus."¹ Even though they knew so much, they still considered the earth the center of the universe. The Hebrew concept of the sky or heavens had three categories. The first two are observable. The first is the sky in which the birds fly, and the second is seen beyond the sky and contains the sun, moon, and stars. The third is the unobservable heaven reserved for God. This idea of a plurality of heavens shows up 184 times in Scripture. The most widely known passage is Genesis 1:1, which

¹ Susan Bell, "How Did Ancient Civilizations Make Sense of the Cosmos, and What Did They Get Right?" Phys.Org, Phys.org, 7 Mar. 2022, phys.org/news/2022-03-ancient-civilizations-cosmos.html.

reads, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." [All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.] Paul said he knew a guy who went into the third heaven, the place of God.

Did this person go into heaven, and was it Paul? He said twice that he didn't know if it was in the body or not (2 Cor. 12:2-3). Given that Paul wrote in his previous letter that "we will all be changed" before entering heaven, it is likely that this person wasn't there in bodily form (1 Cor. 15:51-53). He also references "visions and revelations" in this context (2 Cor. 12:1), which do not require a physical presence. In the visions Ezekiel had of the new temple, he writes, "In the visions of God He brought me into the land of Israel," indicating that he wasn't physically there (Ezek. 40:2). I do believe that it was such an immersive and overwhelming experience that it felt like he was there. Many people have had dreams that felt real. How much more vivid and tactile would the visions and revelations from God be?

Given the immediate and greater context of the book, Paul appears to be speaking about himself. Removing chapter divisions, Paul had been speaking about the things that he had suffered as an apostle (2 Cor. 11:22-33). Though he did not particularly like the idea of boasting, he deemed it necessary because of the circumstances (2 Cor. 11:18; 12:1a). He then makes a transitional statement: "but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord," which indicates he is still talking about himself (2 Cor. 12:1b). He changes from first person to third person, speaking about himself as "a man in Christ." It is not uncommon for inspired writers to use the third person when speaking about themselves; both the apostle John and Moses used it (John 12:23; 21:20-24; Num. 12:3). Paul may have been using it because of his dislike of boasting. When we look at what Paul was dealing with in the Corinthian church, we might understand why Paul revealed to them this information about visions and revelations from the Lord.

A repeating theme in both of the letters to the Corinthian congregation was Paul's defense of his apostleship (2 Cor. 12:12). During that time people were claiming to be apostles, so the church had to be vigilant (2 Cor. 11:13; Rev. 2:2). In Corinth it seems that it was more than just a congregation being over-cautious. There was division in the church because of factions (1 Cor. 1:10-17) and arrogance (1 Cor. 4:6, 18-21). There was some improvement in the congregation, which was part of the reason for the second letter, but he continued to defend his

apostleship (2:14-7:4).² He may have saved the visions and revelations argument for apostleship for last as many had falsely claimed to have these (2 Thess. 2:9-10; 1 John 4:1). This information that he shared about himself was part of a larger defense of his apostleship and election by the Lord.

Messages for Today

- **We need to do our best to glorify Christ and not ourselves.**
- **We need to do our best to maintain humility in our lives.**

We need to do our best to glorify Christ and not ourselves. We've all known people who talk about everything they have. We've all been in the company of the *one-upper* conversationalist who always has a better story or has done something better than you. Imagine if Paul talked this way. Imagine if his conversations centered on his suffering for Christ, all the miracles he had done, the sermons in the synagogues, and the list of important people he had met. The emphasis of Paul's speech would be on himself. That kind of attitude would hinder his ability to effectively share the gospel. Paul did his best not to be boastful; he worked hard to keep his boasting "within the limits of the sphere which God apportioned" (2 Cor. 10:13). His message was that all the things that he had labored for and that were gain to him, he "count[ed] as rubbish, that he might gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8). May our conversations be seasoned in such a way to bring glory to Christ and not ourselves (Col. 4:6).

We need to do our best to maintain humility in our lives. "But I refrain from this [boasting], so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me" (2 Cor. 12:6b). Paul did not want to be elevated or put on a pedestal in any way. He wanted to be taken on the merit of what others saw and heard. He was dealing with arrogance in the congregation (1 Cor. 4:6, 18-19; 5:2; 13:4; 2 Cor. 12:20). Paul not only taught against it, but he lived a humble life among the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:7). Jesus' teaching includes being humble: "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:4; 23:12).

² Jackson, Wayne. "Paul's Spectacular Journey." *Christian Courier*, christiancourier.com/articles/pauls-spectacular-journey. Accessed 13 Dec. 2023.

A Message of Hope for You

Paul shares with the Corinthian church his experience of visions of the realm of the third heaven where God dwells. He said it in this way so he could stay as far away from boasting as possible. He spoke about unprofitable boasting and the need to maintain humility. As we view this passage in its greater context, we get a deeper understanding of Paul's character and devotion that he gave to the church, despite the opposition (2 Cor. 11:28). Here is a list of grievances he feared he would find in the church in Corinth: "strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances" (2 Cor. 12:20). But then we read passages like the following: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). He is not saying these things just because the Holy Spirit told him to; he was living it. He also taught, "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:9-10). He wrote such things even when the church was not good or good to him. How many of us would have just left instead of trying to make things better? How many people get upset over trivial things that often turn out to be nothing more than a misunderstanding? This sheds more light on the broader context of Paul's emphasis on love in the church (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

Discussion Questions

1. Why would Paul be writing in the third person in this passage?
2. Why is boasting unprofitable?
3. Is there ever a time when boasting is not wrong?
4. How can humility help when speaking to others about the gospel?
5. What role does love play in maintaining a healthy church?

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Lesson 12–Tough Texts

THE THORN IN THE FLESH

Bill Boyd

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me.... Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

With my chainsaw I was clearing a hedgerow of overgrown Callery Pears (*Pyrus calleryana*). They had reverted from the ornamental Bradfords and Clevelands to a form of their wild cultivar. Their trunks and branches were covered with stiff woody thorns of up to three inches in length. One of those trees fell toward me. Its thorn pierced my jacket and entered into my shoulder. I extracted the thorn, but a barb at the tip broke off in the muscle below the skin. I had a thorn in the flesh.

The Heart of the Message

There is much speculation concerning the nature of Paul's thorn. I have had a real thorn: could it be that simple? A larger, deeper thorn in a more tender place would be quite painful, and depending on the body's reaction, its pain could prove persistent.

The word translated "thorn" in 2 Corinthians 12:7 is found only here in the New Testament. It is a stabbing. Twice in the Septuagint this word is associated with thorns (Num. 33:55; Ezek. 28:24). Thorns grew in the way of Adam (Gen. 3:18), and a crown of thorns was placed on our Lord's head (Matt. 27:29). "A thorn in the flesh" is a fit metaphor for a physical infirmity.

Paul had suffered "stripes above measure" (2 Cor. 11:23). [All Scripture references are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.] Five times he received forty stripes save one. On three occasions, he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned (2 Cor. 11:24-25). He said, "...I bear in my body the marks of Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). This could have been the cause of his "thorn."

The "thorn" may have been a problem with Paul's eyes. To the Galatians, Paul wrote, "Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you... I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and

have given them to me" (Gal. 4:13-15). After having passed through Galatia with this infirmity, Paul came to Troas. This is where we first read of Luke the physician. I can imagine someone seeing Paul with his infirmity and saying, "You need to see a doctor!"

Others have suggested that as "thorn" is metaphorical, so also is "flesh." Could this have been a spiritual temptation? Paul seemed to write of such when he wrote, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (1 Cor. 9:27). It has been facetiously said that it was Paul's wife and that her name was Grace because the Lord said, "Grace is sufficient for thee." On a more serious note, it is suggested that the thorn was a false teacher giving Paul problems, and that is why Paul called him "a messenger of Satan."

This much we know: the "thorn" was given to Paul after he received an abundance of revelations. Twice Paul said it was given "[l]est I should be exalted above measure" (2 Cor. 12:7). The "thorn" humbled him. Three times he prayed that it might be removed, but the Lord answered, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Upon realizing its spiritual benefit, Paul said, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

The passage may be considered a tough text because we cannot determine the precise nature of the "thorn," but I suggest that the tougher part of the text is in understanding how we can "take pleasure in infirmities." James wrote, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations" (Jas. 1:2).

Messages for today

- **With blessings come trials.**
- **We can bring our difficulties to God and accept his answer.**
- **With trials come blessings.**

With blessings come trials. It is easy to envy others for their advantages. We often know little of others' trials. If we realized the burdens many carry with their blessings, we would likely be more content with our own lot. Jesus to his disciples, "If any man

will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt., 16:24). Paul wrote, "Every man shall bear his own burden" (Gal. 6:5).

We can bring our difficulties to God and accept his answer. Thorns in the flesh can bring us to our knees in prayer. Paul prayed three times concerning his thorn as Christ prayed three times in the garden. The Lord taught us to pray, "Thy will be done" (Matt, 6:10); in his agony he showed us how to pray that. Jesus drank the cup, and Paul kept the thorn. Both received spiritual blessings better than what they had asked. Both received grace to triumph over their trials in a way that brought glory to God.

With trials come blessings. James wrote, "...the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing" (Jas. 1:3-4). Peter wrote, "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time" (1 Pet. 5:6). The epistle to the Hebrews says, "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons... For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:6-11).

A Message of Hope for You

The exact nature of Paul's "thorn" cannot be determined, and that makes it easier for us to relate our own difficulties with those of Paul. It also makes it easier for us to draw strength from how he was able to bear it. It is often our difficulties that make us strong.

Consider the power of the preachers you have known that have preached through their difficulties, and the sympathy with which you opened your heart to what they had to say. In a previous generation, G. P. Bowser had his arm ripped off by a train. He would hold up his remaining hand up and quote Scripture as though he was reading it from his palm to great effect. I remember how Foy E. Wallace Jr. garnered our sympathy as he pushed his invalid wife before him in her wheelchair as he walked the aisle to where he was to preach. We read with

interest the books of hope and comfort that Bob Spurlin wrote when bedridden with multiple sclerosis. After struggling and being helped to the pulpit, Tom Holland filled our hearts as he spoke of grace, thanksgiving, and joy. I do not think we ever listened more intently to Robert R. Taylor, Jr. than when he preached from his wheelchair. Mark Newman leads singing locally, and he is blind. With his fingers he reads his brail song book with joy, and we never fail to sing joyfully with him. Steve Higginbotham demonstrated the power of the Spirit's word in our hearts when he spoke with calm, clear confidence after receiving what seemed at the time a hopeless diagnosis of cancer. Don Blackwell continues to preach and teach with a broken back and lower body paralysis. I have watched my own father preach into his nineties, leaning on his cane. His voice may grow weak, but his words remain strong.

Thorns are common in life. They humble us even as they strengthen us. As we gather thorns, we grow wise. Let us learn from Paul to pray, to rejoice in infirmities, and to glorify God (see also 1 Pet. 4:16).

Discussion Questions

1. Conduct a word search and consider how "thorn" is used in the Scriptures.
2. Why did Paul not miraculously remove his thorn?
3. Why would Paul call his thorn "a messenger of Satan?" (Consider Job 1 and 2).
4. All thorns are not physical. What mental, emotional, spiritual, or social thorns do some bear?
5. How often should we pray about a difficulty, and how can we rejoice in God's answer?

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Lesson 13–A Supernatural Stroll Through 2 Corinthians

SEEING GOD IN 2 CORINTHIANS

Steve Higginbotham

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

The letter of 2 Corinthians is often overshadowed by Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. If one were asked to rehearse some of the major topics in 1 Corinthians, he would probably do well. But if he were asked to rehearse some of the major topics contained in 2 Corinthians, he might struggle. However, there is nothing about the letter of 2 Corinthians that is inferior, less relevant, and less important to our time. This letter is a valuable record of the challenges and triumphs of this first-century church, and it gives us valuable insight into the character of the God we serve.

The Heart of the Message

Oftentimes, when we study the Bible, God is treated as a presupposition. In other words, we treat him as a foundational assumption that does not need to be considered or proved. Then we proceed to whatever topic we want to discuss. While this can sometimes save time, it can also be dangerous. The danger is that we can get to a point when we know God’s word, but we don’t know God.

Every year, our nation sets aside certain days to celebrate significant events. It is not only possible, but very likely, that many people celebrate on these days, but they give little or no thought to why they are celebrating. For many, the celebration has been divorced from its purpose.

Likewise, there may be some people who know God’s commandments well, but they know very little about God himself and the reason he wants us to obey his commandments. As important as it is to know God’s word and what he expects from us, it is equally important to know God himself. Without knowing the person of God, why would we deny ourselves, take up a cross, and follow him (Matt. 16:24-26)? [All Scripture references are

from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] A truism sometimes repeated is “rules without relationship results in rebellion.” This is never truer than in religion. Expecting people to obey commands, many of which require great sacrifice, will not be successful unless they come to know and love the One who gave the commands.

We must know God if we are to obey him, and when people neglect or forget the nature and character of God, they will soon lack the motivation to obey his commands. We need to get to know God if we are to love him, and we must love him to obey him.

This is why God’s special revelation of himself through his word is so valuable. While there are enough things revealed about God through creation that leave us without excuse (Rom. 1:20), the letter of 2 Corinthians reveals several compelling character traits that induce us to love him. Let’s take a look at God as he is revealed in 2 Corinthians.

Messages for Today

- **God is a God of comfort.**
- **God is a God of truth.**
- **God is a God of reconciliation.**
- **God is a God of grace.**

God is a God of comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-4). An over-arching theme in 2 Corinthians is “comfort.” The Greek term “*parakaleo*” and its various forms are used seventeen times in this letter. The word means “comfort,” “consolation,” and “encouragement.” Many Bible students know that the Holy Spirit was given to be a “paraclete” or comforter (John 14:16). But giving comfort was not just a work of the Holy Spirit, but of the Father (2 Cor. 1:3) and the Son as well (2 Cor. 1:5). Through the years, I have heard many people say things like, “I do not know how I would have gotten through this trial if it were not for God.” Consider the extreme hardship and peril that Paul endured as an apostle (2 Cor. 11:23-28). If the comfort of God was able to sustain Paul, it is more than able to sustain us. God, as he is revealed in 2 Corinthians, is not only able to comfort us, but his character traits that are revealed compel us to love and obey him.

God is a God of truth (2 Cor. 1:18-19). God is faithful. When he speaks, he does not vacillate depending upon his audience (Matt. 22:16). He always spoke the truth (Heb. 6:18; Titus 1:2; Num. 23:19). Consequently, he is worthy of our trust. Imagine what it

would be like if God were not truthful. How could we ever have peace of mind and know that we have been pleasing to him? How would we discern between truth and error (Heb. 5:14) or the doctrine of God and the doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1)? Knowing that God is truthful gives us confidence in his promises and commitments. His truthfulness provides us with a foundation for faith, or trust, and provides us with a sense of guidance and assurance revealed in his word.

God is a God of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-21). Before there was a sinner, there was a Savior (Rev. 13:8). Before there was guilt, there was grace (2 Tim. 1:9). Before there was hopelessness, there was heaven (Tit. 1:2). These passages demonstrate that God desires that we be reconciled to him. He is not a God who is eager to condemn and destroy (Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:15; 2 Pet. 3:9). This characteristic of God reminds us that God can pick up the shards of our broken lives and reconcile us to his people as well as to himself. Paul's strongest argument as a preacher of reconciliation, to move people to be reconciled to God, is the fact that God loves us so much that he gave his Son for us (2 Cor. 5:20-21). That is still the highest, most noble reason to be reconciled to God.

God is a God of grace (2 Cor. 12:9). In all of the recorded sermons Jesus ever preached, in all of the recorded parables Jesus ever presented, and in all of the personal interactions Jesus had with people, he never once mentioned the word "grace." But do not let that fool you; Jesus was full of grace! 2 Corinthians 12:9 is the only record of Jesus ever using the word "grace." It is comforting to know that God's grace is sufficient. In the best of circumstances and in the worst of circumstances, his grace is sufficient. Note that God's grace is not *barely* sufficient; his grace is an abounding grace. "For of His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John 1:16)."¹

A Message of Hope for You

It is hard to appreciate what we cannot see, and we cannot see God. But vivid descriptions help us to develop a picture in our mind, and that is what the letter of 2 Corinthians has done for us. In this letter, God is revealed as an inviting God, a God who loves us and wants to give us what is best for us. He is willing to comfort us, to tell us the truth, to reconcile us to himself, and to

¹ *Legacy Standard Bible* (N.P.: Steadfast Bibles, 2021).

give us grace that is more than sufficient to navigate this life successfully.

God has not promised to exempt us from the pain of this fallen world. We still struggle with heartache, suffering, and even death, but God is with us, not just as a Creator, but as a loving and caring Father (1 John 3:1).

When we grow in our knowledge of the attributes of God, we will learn to love him, and when we love him, we will live a life of faithful obedience to him. "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Discussion Questions

1. How does "knowing" God help us to obey him?
2. If God is a "God of all comfort," why does he allow his children to suffer?
3. What are some of the ways God comforts us when we need comforting?
4. Since God is a God of truth, how should that affect our reading of Scripture and our obedience to his word?
5. If God knew we were going to need to be reconciled to him before he even began creation, why did he proceed with creation?
6. Can a person preach about sin, immorality, and hell and be preaching God's grace?

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Lesson 14—A Supernatural Stroll Through 2 Corinthians

SEEING CHRIST IN 2 CORINTHIANS

Bryan D. McAlister

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

2 Corinthians 5:20-21

Suffering marks the heart and life of the child of God. For those living in the present age of ease, comfort, safe spaces, and trigger warnings, the idea of suffering has become nearly untenable to the modern heart and mind. Our world considers the encounter of something which could even remotely involve suffering a thing to be avoided and altered at all costs. When the called and chosen apostle Paul writes to his cherished brethren in Corinth, his life of hardship was characterized by his constant pursuit of the Lord Jesus. However, the greater weight tipping the scale of sorrow was his constant concern for the church and her desperate need to pursue Jesus Christ, which will inevitably result in suffering (2 Cor. 4:7-15). When we see Christ, we see strength in weakness, supply in poverty, and above all, grace in the midst of sin.

The Heart of the Message

As Jesus prepared His apostles for the change of life without Him, He implored them, "Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1). [All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] Later He would assure them that since they had believed in God whom they had not seen, they should hold fast to their faith in their Messiah, whom they had seen. What is more, He declared to them in no uncertain terms, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me" (John 14:6). The sentiment of one of our Lord's most comforting statements is the foundation of Paul's assurance to his Corinthian brethren. The comfort we seek from God is provided through Christ (2 Cor. 2:5). The influence we seek for God is provided through Christ (2 Cor. 2:14). The message we declare for God is the message of life and light through Christ (2 Cor. 4:5-6). The judgement seat before which we all will stand is that of Christ's (2 Cor. 5:10). He is our aim, our

confidence, our righteousness, our holiness, and our hope. We, through Jesus Christ, are being transformed into His image of glory (2 Cor. 3:18).

The goal of a transformed life in Christ is brought out through the message of Paul (2 Cor. 5:17). There is a new focus of suffering (2 Cor. 4:16-18); of sorrowing (2 Cor. 1:3-4); of forgiving (2 Cor. 2:10); of walking (2 Cor. 5:7); of changing (2 Cor. 7:10); of giving (2 Cor. 9:13); of thinking (2 Cor. 10:3-5); of focusing (2 Cor. 11:28); of enduring (2 Cor. 12:9). Our goal is to walk outside our own life, looking inward to measure not only our lives against the will and life of Christ, but to do so in order for others to see our lives as a testimony of the Lord Jesus and come to know the grace of new life found in Him (2 Cor. 13:5-6).

No life—lost or saved, believer or unbeliever, Christian or pagan—will ever avoid the reality of trouble. When Paul opens his word to his brethren, the first eleven verses describe the nature of our world as one which contains “trouble” (2 Cor. 1:4). Paul will use “tribulation, trouble, sufferings, afflicted, and burdened” to describe what our world devotes time, energy, and resources to avoid ever encountering. Ironically, we tend to find more of the aforementioned in our efforts of avoiding “trouble” than we seem to find remedies for our trouble. Layered within the emphasis on the reality of the trouble we will experience in the limits of flesh and life is the reassurance of another word found twice as much as the words used to describe life’s trouble. No less than ten times in the same eleven verses Paul points to our “comfort” and “consolation” found in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:1-11).

Messages for Today

- **The method of Christ was to provide for those who were his own.**
- **The mission of Christ is reconciliation.**
- **The mind of Christ should characterize all of us.**

The method of Christ was to provide for those who were his own. When Jesus was preparing His followers for His departure, the news of this departure was justifiably distressing to them. His followers been with Him on a daily basis for the last three years. Whatever they needed, he provided. The thought of not having that supply or connection was an unthinkable reality to them (see John 14). What they had failed to realize was that though God had been supplying for them through the earthly life of the

Son, He would continue to provide for them through His resurrected, glorified Son. Every need would be supplied according to the Father's riches and glory through Jesus Christ (Phil. 4:19).

Christ continues to be a supplier to this day (2 Cor. 8:9). It's really remarkable. How can wealth come from poverty? How can the guilty be made innocent? How can slaves be made free? Only through Christ's method of supplying all the needs of life.

The mission of Christ is reconciliation. Reconciliation seems to be a word the world uses today, especially when seeing the distance and division which greatly abounds among people today. Jesus' mission has always been one of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). Betrayal, bigotry, blasphemy, bias, belligerence, or whatever fault or divide may exist between people today, it is only the ministry of reconciliation that will bring the healing we desire.

It is necessary to note, too, that my greatest need is not to be reconciled to my neighbor against whom I can and quite potentially will stand opposed. My greatest need (my neighbor's greatest need) is to be reconciled to God. Through the mission of Christ, this reconciliation, this peace, is found. When it is, my life and my neighbor's life are both made better.

The mind of Christ should characterize all of us. Some of our deepest divides and greatest barriers between people and one another exist not because of immutable characteristics any of us may possess, but because of broken ways of thinking which persist. Because of Christ, every thought is able to be brought into captivity and surrendered to the power of His mind and not our own (2 Cor. 10:5). The language used in 2 Corinthians 10:1-5 is war language. Paul calls for us to recognize that our war is not against "flesh" but against "arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God" (v. 5).

Make no mistake about it, I cannot come into Jesus Christ with the mind of the world and be content to remain shackled to my old way of thinking. The conforming of my mind to the mind of Christ comes into my life as my thoughts are brought into captivity and surrendered to the One who sets me free and makes me new.

A Message of Hope for You

So long as the world continues to look for the Jesus they want and not the Jesus they need, trouble, sufferings, afflictions,

burdens, and tribulations will not only haunt and harm our lives, but they will also hold us hostage from ever finding the peace that is so passionately desired but remains painfully absent in the lives of so many. It is only in the sanctity of a Savior, who provides us with our comfort and consolation as well as our redemption and regeneration, that we will ever truly know the glory of being the new creation where all things have been reconciled to God through the Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-20).

When Jesus came into the city of Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover week, the last week of our Lord's life, the crowds clamored to see the Messiah, and they all thought they wanted a Messiah who would remove every suffering and every sorrow. What they found was a cross of suffering and shame, and they walked away from the Lord. Of those who went looking for the Jesus they wanted, Fred Craddock rightly observed, "I first went because I thought, wherever Christ is, there is no misery. But now I realize, wherever there is misery, there Christ is."¹

Never shall we hear sweeter words this side of eternity: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness...Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Discussion Questions

1. What are some reasons people want to avoid suffering?
2. How did Paul find comfort from his fellow ministers?
3. How can we find comfort from our brethren?
4. What are three ways we can challenge our own ways of thinking?
5. What can I do today to live through Christ that I otherwise would not choose on my own?

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¹ Fred Craddock's sermon "Jesus Saves" preached at Woodmont Christian Church, July 10, 2011.

Lesson 15–A Supernatural Stroll Through 2 Corinthians

SEEING THE SPIRIT IN 2 CORINTHIANS

Andy Kizer

For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

2 Corinthians 5:4-5

My wife and I bought our first house in 1972. It cost \$18,000.00. When I told the realtor and the seller that we would buy it, I gave them a check for \$1,800.00 and signed a contract. The payment was called “earnest money.” “Earnest money” is “money given by a buyer to a seller to bind a contract.”¹ We applied for a loan from the Federal Housing Administration, and the loan took some time getting approval. The seller became impatient and wanted to back out of the deal, but she had our earnest money and had to wait until the process was completed.

In the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians, he said that God had given the Holy Spirit to them as a “guarantee.” [All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.] The King James Version translates the Greek word behind the ESV’s “guarantee” as “earnest.”

The Heart of the Message

When one hears the gospel and puts Christ on in baptism for the remission of sins, God gives the Holy Spirit to him/her (cf. Acts 2:38, 5:32; 1 John 3:24; 4:13; Gal. 4:6). The Holy Spirit takes up residence in God’s child for meaningful purposes. Twice in 2 Corinthians, Paul said that God had given the Corinthians the Holy Spirit as a guarantee (1:22; 5:5). In the first reference, the guarantee is directly related to a seal.

In the first century, seals were well-known and widely used. One purpose of a seal in the Scriptures is to declare authenticity. “The metaphor of sealing is a common one for giving

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/earnest-money>.

attestation....”² When one sets his personalized imprimatur to a paper or certificate, he acknowledges it to be his. In that same way, God acknowledged Jesus to be His Son (John 6:27).

Another purpose of a seal is to conceal something, or keep it hidden, until the time for disclosure. The message of the scroll in the right hand of God could not be known because it was “sealed with seven seals” (Rev. 5:1). John watched as the Lamb opened the seals to reveal the message.

Sometimes a seal demonstrated authority. When the lifeless body of Jesus was placed in Joseph’s tomb, a great stone was rolled into place to secure the tomb and the body within it. Then the chief priests and Pharisees “made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard” (Matt. 27:66). “A hard signet was pressed into softer wax or clay with the implicit message that it was by Roman authority that Jesus was buried. Tampering with that seal would defy the authority of Rome....”³

In 2 Corinthians, we see the Holy Spirit as a badge that proclaims ownership. “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim. 2:19), and He marks them with a seal, and that “seal” is the Holy Spirit. In the Revelation, an angel “with the seal of the living God” shouted, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads” (Rev. 7:1-3). If Christians are owned by God, and so marked as such, then they are not their own. And so, Paul wrote to the Corinthians in the earlier letter, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price...” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

² Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. V (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1932), 57.

³ George Tippis, “Sealed with the Holy Spirit” in *What Do You Know about the Holy Spirit?* (Fort Worth: Winkler, 1980), 27.

Messages for Today

- **Sealing with the Holy Spirit is directly related to a guarantee.**
- **The earnest of the Holy Spirit (which is the Holy Spirit Himself) binds God and the Christian to an agreement.**
- **Being God's property and marked as such, one is guaranteed an inheritance.**
- **The presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit identifies an individual as a child of God.**
- **The faithful child of God has the Holy Spirit as a companion.**

Sealing with the Holy Spirit is directly related to a guarantee.

The sealing of the Christian with the Holy Spirit is directly related to his/her being given the earnest of the Spirit. This was stated by the inspired apostle no less than three times. In 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, he said, "And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ...and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee." In 2 Corinthians 5:5, again Paul said, "He who has prepared us for this very thing (i.e., heavenly dwelling in a spiritual body, cf. vv. 1-4, AK) is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee." In Ephesians 1:13-14, he said, "In him you also...were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance...." The Holy Spirit was promised by God to everyone who would repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). And the promise is fulfilled when the Spirit takes up residence in the obedient soul's heart (cf. Gal. 4:6).

The earnest of the Holy Spirit (which is the Holy Spirit Himself) binds God and the Christian to an agreement. The granting of the earnest binds God and the Christian to a covenant relationship. The "us" in "he who has prepared us" (2 Cor. 5:5) includes all who long to be clothed with heavenly dwelling. The presence of the Holy Spirit has to do with the Christian's fidelity and the boundless eternal joys to be received.

Being God's property and marked as such, one is guaranteed an inheritance. Many years ago, I proposed to my wife and gave her a ring. That ring was a promise of what I intended to do, i.e., to marry her at some future date and be a blessing to her as her husband. The word in the New Testament that translates into "earnest" is the same word in modern Greek that translates into "engagement ring." Paul used the Septuagint transliteration of the Hebrew word found in Genesis 38:18 to indicate that the

Holy Spirit is God's guarantee of an inheritance. He has prepared the saint for eternal union with Him in heaven.

The presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit identifies an individual as a child of God. In Acts 5:32, we learned that the Holy Spirit was given by God to those who obey him (cf. Acts 2:38). In Ephesians 1, Paul explained the progression of obedience: one learns the gospel, obeys it, and then (and only then) the Holy Spirit is given to dwell within the obedient child of God (vv. 13-14). Since the Holy Spirit is given to dwell only with those who obey God, His presence in my life is proof that I am one who has obeyed God. So, Paul said to the Romans, "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16).

The faithful child of God has the Holy Spirit as a companion. Paul closed the second letter to the Corinthians as follows: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (13:14). In doing so, he included the Holy Spirit in the Godhead as a companion. In the group, the grace is of Jesus, the love is of God, and the fellowship is with the Holy Spirit. "Fellowship" is "communion." That which we share in common with the Holy Spirit is life in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:13-14). The Holy Spirit is in the Christian, living with him and representing the Father and the Son. God's child is "a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22; cf. 1 Cor. 6:19-20).

A Message of Hope for You

The presence of the Spirit in the Christian is assurance of God's full payment of eternal blessings. The payment in full will be the final redemption of the body, the swallowing up of death by life. There is a foretaste of that life in the fellowship we have with God through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. The realization of this truth should motivate us to faithful preparation for that time when the Lord returns. At that time, the fellowship will be fully realized.

Discussion Questions

1. When does God give the gift of the Holy Spirit to someone?
2. For what purpose or purposes would God give the Holy Spirit to a person?
3. For what purpose did the Corinthians have the Holy Spirit in them?
4. What is the meaning of a guarantee?
5. In what way do we have fellowship with God?
6. How does the guarantee of the Holy Spirit give us hope?

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Lesson 16–A Supernatural Stroll Through 2 Corinthians

SEEING SATAN IN 2 CORINTHIANS

Rick Harrison

The origin, mission, and destiny of Satan are of great interest among believers. Who is this malevolent being, and why is he so intent on the destruction of the human family? Although this lesson is not designed to deal with all of these issues, let us say a few things about these matters. Satan is an actual and real created being, yet many liberal theologians see Satan as a mere personification of evil. However, in the Bible, he is commonly referred to as “the devil” (thirty-three times in the NT) or “Satan” (thirty-six times in the NT). Scripture makes it clear that Satan is not on par with deity as indicated by his subjection to God (Job 1:12; 2:6; Zech. 3:2; Luke 22:31; Rev. 20:10). Deity is all-powerful, but Satan is not; therefore, Satan is not deity (John 10:28; 1 John 4:4).

The title of this lesson is a bit obscure, for one might see Satan in different ways. Satan might be seen in life’s circumstances and in events that unfold throughout human history as the influencing force behind the evil in this world. One might see Satan in oppression and the temptations of life. In Scripture, Satan is seen in each of these ways, but more importantly, Satan is revealed to man as to his character throughout the pages of the Bible. As we take a supernatural stroll through 2 Corinthians, we discover that Satan is mentioned by name three times in this great book. With each mention, a picture is painted, and his character is revealed, but to what end? What is the apostle Paul attempting to tell us about this great foe of humanity? As we stroll through 2 Corinthians, let us discover what we see when we see Satan in 2 Corinthians.

The Heart of the Message

Several references to Satan in 2 Corinthians, either by name or indirectly, reveal something about this menacing foe. The first mention of Satan is in 2 Corinthians 2:11. The apostle Paul writes, “So that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.” [All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.] The apostle Paul reminds us that Satan is constantly seeking an advantage over us to control us totally. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians regarding a sexually immoral brother, he instructs

them to deliver the sinner to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor. 5:5). The purpose of this delivering to Satan was not for the destruction of the brother entirely but for the saving of his soul. In this letter, Paul instructs them to turn and love the brother again, seeing that he has repented and returned to the Lord (2 Cor. 2:7-8). It is in this context that Paul warns the brethren that failure to act appropriately may result in them being outwitted by Satan. The point is that Satan is trying his best to outmaneuver us, and he can use overt sin to do this, but he can also use self-righteousness to accomplish his design. What is the design of Satan? Our total destruction.

Indeed, Satan has many ways of accomplishing his design, and he does so by blinding people to the truth of God's word. Paul writes, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel..." (2 Cor. 4:3-4). Satan is the god of this world because man has chosen Satan to be his god rather than the Lord God.¹ Satan is the god of this world not because all worship him but because he is the embodiment of all wickedness and ungodliness in this world.² It is he who originated the perdition by which all men perish. One of the worst activities of Satan is mentioned here, namely, blinding the thoughts of unbelievers. The Bible warns us about the devil, yet he is treated as a joke. The very one who deceives mankind is not even seen when God fully exposes him.

God has instructed the faithful to keep their distance from an unequal association with the world. Satan can quickly tip the balance and overcome even the faithful if the faithful do not heed the warnings of God. As the apostle Paul writes, "What accord has Christ with Belial?" (2 Cor. 16:15). Belial is another name for Satan, and it is derived from one of Satan's characteristics that he is "worthless" or "treacherous." Paul illustrates just how treacherous Satan can be when he writes, "And no wonder, for even Satan, disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). Satan is so maniacal and so treacherous that he will disguise himself and become what is the antithesis of his character to gain

¹ David Lipscomb, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles, Second Corinthians and Galatians*, ed., J W Shepherd, Vol. III (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1976), p. 59.

² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), p. 960.

an advantage over God's people. The wicked will always have an advantage, for they have no boundaries by which they are constrained, yet their end will be that of ruin.

Finally, Paul mentions a thorn in the flesh he received, which he calls "a messenger of Satan" (2 Cor. 12:7). Interestingly, this message was designed to keep Paul from becoming conceited. This result, which the message was intended to do, is wholly out of character for Satan. It is not in Satan's nature to send a messenger with a righteous purpose. How are we to view this messenger and its purpose? When man fell from the garden, he was smitten with a curse, and that curse was death, but it was not only man that was cursed. The whole of creation was cursed as well. When Satan seduced man to sin, a corruption of the planet followed, and the entire creation was subject to bondage (Rom. 8:20-21). One of the signs of the cursed earth was that of thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:18, Heb. 6:8). With this thorn in the flesh, Paul has a message from Satan, yet while Satan meant it for evil, God meant it for good to keep him from becoming conceited (cf. Gen 50:19-20).

Message For Today

- **We must be vigilant.**
- **We must make proper preparations.**
- **We must keep our eyes on the prize.**

We must be vigilant. The apostle Peter reminded Christians that they should "[b]e sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan is not done with humanity. As he asked for the patriarch Job (Job 1:6), so he asked also for the apostles (Luke 22:31), and he is seeking the faithful even today.

We must make proper preparations. With Satan on the prowl, Christians need to make adequate preparations. One way of preparing is for Christians to prioritize their Christian life. This involves creating a spiritual hedge around our faith that removes and keeps out the wicked associations hindering our journey to heaven (2 Cor. 6:14ff). As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "Let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1).

We must keep our eyes on the prize. Though many things in this life appear to have rich value, they all fail in comparison to heaven. The fleeting things of life are mere smoke screens that

Satan uses to distract us from God's eternal plan. Whether it be prosperity or pain, they are not worthy of being compared with the glory that is to be revealed (Rom. 8:18). As the apostle Paul put it, "For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:17). Therefore, we keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

Message of Hope for You

Indeed, Satan is a formidable adversary, and he is greater than us in strength, knowledge, and determination. Were it not for the founder and perfecter of our faith, we would surely fail. Fortunately, we also have this promise that sustains and moves us: "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). We can rest assured that nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:31ff). Even though Satan is an extremely powerful foe, he can do nothing to snatch us away from the hands of God. However, we must maintain our fidelity to God and ever lean on his strength to bring us into eternity.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is Satan interested in the destruction of humanity?
2. Why does God allow him to work in this capacity?
3. How does Satan operate in the world today?
4. What is the role of human suffering in developing obedience to God?
5. How should the Christian view the suffering of life?

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Lesson 17–Corinthian Contrasts

THE LETTER VS. THE SPIRIT

Matt Langfield

Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

2 Corinthians 3:4-6

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasts “the letter,” which is the Law of Moses, and “the Spirit,” which is the gospel of “the new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6). [All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.] At the end of the previous chapter, Paul began to defend himself and his ministry. Critics had made various accusations against him, and it seems that Judaizing Christians had even assaulted his teachings. In 2:17, the inspired apostle categorizes other teachers as “peddling the word of God,” while he taught only “from sincerity.” While others were teaching for profit or personal gain, Paul’s motives were only pure.

As chapter three begins, he continues his defense by explaining that the faith of the Corinthians, a congregation established by Paul, should stand as evidence and proof that his motives and message were both sincere and eternal. He writes: “Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation for you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men” (2 Cor. 3:1-2). While other teachers may have impressed this young congregation by providing a letter boasting of their previous accomplishments, Paul explains that all the commendation he needed was the changed hearts of the Corinthians.

He then continues contrasting the physical letter and the spiritual “letter of Christ,” which is “written on hearts...with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor. 3:2-3). His reference to the Ten Commandments, “tablets of stone,” inches us closer to our subject and begins his specific defense of the gospel itself. We read that his confidence comes “through Christ” and that he has been made “adequate” or able, not on his own, but by God. As he now defends himself and his ministry, he writes: “Our adequacy

is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

Paul has taken us from a defense of his motives and message to a contrast between "the letter" and "the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:6). "The letter" references the Law of Moses with its physical beginning and requirements. At the same time, "the Spirit" refers to the soul-saving gospel, which the Corinthians had already obeyed.

The Heart of the Message

Paul teaches that the letter brings death, while the Spirit brings life. He writes, "for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life," and he goes on to describe the Law of Moses as "the ministry of death" (2 Cor. 3:6-7). While the old law was given to the Israelites by God, He never intended it to provide a final path to spiritual salvation (Exod. 20:1-17). The law aimed to define sin while exposing the need for God's grace (Rom. 5:20-21). Because no one could keep the law perfectly, and no animal sacrifice was sufficient to forgive sins, the unfortunate conclusion would always be spiritual death (Heb. 10:4). Under the Law of Moses, men and women would be able to recognize their sins and understand their need for God, but never know forgiveness.

The Spirit, on the other hand, "brings life" (2 Cor. 3:6). We have already seen that "the Spirit" is synonymous with "the new covenant." This covenant was prophesied by Jeremiah, spoken of by Christ, and is the soul-saving and eternity-changing gospel message (Jer. 31:31; Luke 22:20). Jesus said, "[T]he words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63). Peter then declared, "You have words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Unlike the old law, the gospel is the path that leads to life (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Paul teaches that the letter was physical, while the Spirit is spiritual. Paul describes the letter as "engraved on stones," which again reminds us of the Ten Commandments, first spoken by God to Moses and then "written by the finger of God" on "tablets of stone" (Exod. 31:18). The old law was physical in nature and based on a system of works. A physical tabernacle or temple and sacrifices laid on altars were divinely instructed centerpieces of "the letter."

The Spirit, alternatively, is not physical in nature, but spiritual. Where works provided the foundation of the old law, the new covenant is based on faith. Paul wrote: "[A] man is not

justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 2:16). While faith was a necessary part of the Law of Moses, it was based on works, and while works are an essential part of the new covenant, it is a system that is based on faith (Rom. 10:17; Jas. 2:26).

Paul teaches that the letter was temporary, while the Spirit is eternal. We read that both came “with glory,” meaning that both came from God and came with His glory. The glory of the old law faded, while the gospel’s is eternal. Paul refers to the events first recorded in Exodus 34 when “the skin of [Moses’] face shone” after he spoke with God, causing the people to be “afraid to come near him” (Exod. 34:29-30). Ultimately, Moses placed a veil over his face “so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away” (2 Cor. 3:13). That veil was both in response to the glory of God and symbolic of the fading glory of the old covenant.

The life-giving Spirit is eternal. Near the end of chapter three, we read: “[W]henever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Cor. 3:16). Through the gospel, there is not a fading glory, but only a surpassing glory (2 Cor. 3:10-11). While words engraved on stone might last for thousands of years, the Spirit’s change on the heart of a faithful Christian will have an eternal impact.

Messages for Today

- **We should have confidence through Christ.**
- **We should speak with boldness.**
- **We should remember that we have been set free.**

We should have confidence through Christ. Christians today should have the same confidence that Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 3:4 because, like Paul, we are a part of the “new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6). When we obeyed the gospel, by God’s grace, we were given “life” (2 Cor. 3:6). Knowing and understanding our eternal future, God’s plan, and His love for each one of us should give us great spiritual confidence.

We should speak with boldness. While some certainly criticized Paul, his speech was never deterred. In understanding the power of the gospel and its precious spiritual value in comparison to the old law, he wrote, “Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech” (2 Cor. 3:12). While none of us today are inspired apostles, we have the same hope on which Paul relied. If we truly believe in God’s promises to each of

us, then we should speak about those promises and that hope with boldness.

We should remember that we have been set free. While the Israelites of the Old Testament were required to keep all sorts of physical commands, today, as part of a better spiritual covenant, we have liberty. We have been set free from our sins and the burdens of the physical and temporary Law of Moses (Rom. 8:2, 2 Cor. 3:17).

A Message of Hope for You

While we may never be tempted to fall into the physical requirements and restrictions of the Old Testament, we may find ourselves failing to recognize the incredible value of the gospel. Because of God's unending love for each of us, His Son died on the cross to save us from our sins (John 3:16). His death made possible every good thing we read about in 2 Corinthians 3. Today, as Christians, we do not merely consider the fading glory of God as shone in the face of Moses and covered by a veil, but we are being transformed to increasingly reflect the glory of Christ in ourselves (2 Cor. 3:18).

Discussion Questions

1. What are three key differences between "the letter" and "the Spirit"?
2. Why was Paul able to speak and teach with such boldness?
3. In what ways is the new covenant better than the old?
4. Why did Moses cover his face with a veil?

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Lesson 18–Corinthian Contrasts

OUTER MAN VS. INNER MAN

David A. Paher

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

2 Corinthians 4:16

Paul's ability to face hardships bravely is commendable. He viewed difficult times through a heavenly lens (2 Cor. 4:8-9), seeing challenges as opportunities for reaching the lost, ministering to the saved, glorifying God, and anticipating his heavenly reward. Paul provided distinct reasons for the Corinthians to avoid losing heart (2 Cor. 4:1, 16), and his words still inspire and uplift Christians today.

The Heart of the Message

Paul's declaration of not losing heart stems from two factors (4:16). He acknowledges the body's inevitable decay,¹ as forewarned by God in Genesis 2:17, "lest you begin to die."² [All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.]

The second part involves Jesus' prophecy concerning his disciples facing persecution (John 15:18-25). Paul endured harsh treatment, particularly from his Jewish peers (Acts 5:17-42). A former zealous Pharisee (Phil. 3:4-6), his conversion dealt a blow to the failing Judaic system. Despite significant suffering (2 Cor. 6:4-10; 11:23-27), Paul and his fellow workers persevered without giving up or succumbing to discouragement³ (2 Cor. 4:8-9).

With these considerations, Paul looked beyond (*skopeō*) the visible world to the eternal realm (4:18). Through faith, he perceived the imperceptible, using an idiom transliterated as "from hyperbole to hyperbole" (*kath' hyperbolēn eis hyperbolēn*).

¹ In 4:16, *diaphtheirō* means "thoroughly corrupt."

² Most translations of the Hebrew phrase, *muth muth*, emphasize the certainty of death: "you shall surely die." However, Young's Literal Translation uses the phrase "dying thou does die."

³ In 4:16, *ekkakeō* pertains to the adverse emotions regarding the body's deterioration from time and life's circumstances.

Translations often use “beyond all comparison,” emphasizing that divine glory surpasses human understanding (4:17).

To depict this invisible image, Paul employs two metaphors to describe a new body immune to decay and hardship. First, he uses a metaphor of a tent or tabernacle (5:1), linking this new body to the ancient Jewish sanctuary. As the tabernacle transitioned to Solomon’s temple, our fleshly body will also transition to an enduring form. Injuries and the prospect of death lent a unique perspective to Paul’s acknowledgment⁴ that something superior awaited him in glory.

Then, Paul shifts to the image of a new garment (5:2-4). The degeneration and misfortune he endured stirred intense feelings. He groaned⁵ about the current body, yearned⁶ for the “from heaven garment” (5:2), and was burdened for the the body’s shortcomings (5:4) and the weight of glory (4:17).⁷ Consequently, he explored “the things that are unseen” (4:18), envisioning new clothing replacing the frail body worn out by time.

However, Paul warned that a person could be found naked, a euphemism for lacking the new heavenly clothing (5:3). Reflecting Jesus’ parable of the wedding feast (Matt. 22:11-12), this underscores God’s desire to clothe Christians comprehensively, mirroring His action for Adam and Eve with coats of skin (Gen. 3:21). The Laodicean church was underdressed, too, and was advised to acquire “white garments” (Rev. 3:18).

⁴ Unlike other words associated with vision or sight, *eidō* signifies the comprehension of a principle or reality. In this instance, Paul understood that a new body was laid up for him.

⁵ The groaning, *stenazō*, expresses a mix of grief, anger, and desire, akin to the intense emotions experienced during childbirth. This emotion regarding our mortality (5:4) differs from the anticipation of a new body (5:2).

⁶ Paul’s use of *epipotheō* indicates an intensified form of yearning.

⁷ Though similar in nature, the eternal weight, *baros*, from 4:17 differs entirely from the burden, *bareō*, in 5:4. The former is incomprehensible and mystifying, while the latter is insufferable and distressing.

Paul concluded by indicating that while Christians plan for a new body, it is God who prepares⁸ the saint and ensures promises through the Spirit as a guarantee⁹ (5:5; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14). The evidence is seen in spiritual fruits (Gal. 5:22-23), for a Christian's actions are connected to Christ, the vine (John 15:1ff).

Messages for Today

- **We empathize with Paul's struggle between the outer and inner man.**
- **We experience life's entropy and vulnerability.**
- **We desire to groan about this world's problems.**
- **We eagerly await the new eternal garment by wearing the garments of righteousness today.**

We empathize with Paul's struggle between the outer and inner man. It's a contrast between the decaying outward body and the inner yearning for the new garment (4:16). Aging, evident in the physical changes, serves as a reminder of the sin-death curse (Gen. 3:19). Despite discouragement induced by the natural aging process, the inner soul has the capacity for renewal.¹⁰ Hardships spark the desire for a resilient body immune to decay. Christians find strength through His Spirit in their inner being (Eph. 3:16).

Like Paul, a Christian will grapple with the outer and inner man in at least four ways (4:17). First, the present life brings affliction. Second, negative experiences here are balanced by the prospect for exceeding glory in the next life. Third, the perception of time varies. An octogenarian might contemplate a teenager's life, like Methuselah and his 500-year-old grandson, Noah. In the grand scope, all are God's children, and every life is but a fleeting moment. Fourth, the word "prepared" subtly encapsulates the struggles, trials, and concerns, which produce endurance, character, and hope (Rom. 5:3-4).

We experience life's entropy and vulnerability. Eternity poses an issue as it cannot be seen or inspected now (4:18), but the

⁸ *Katergazomai* is an intensified term literally signifying working down to the endpoint.

⁹ In 5:5, Paul uses *arrabón* to signify a guarantee, token, or pledge, like an escrow payment.

¹⁰ In 4:16, Paul employs *anakainoō* to signify a renewal to a higher qualitative state.

souls longs to return to God (Eccles. 12:7), perceiving Him through purity (Matt. 5:8), peace, and sanctification (Heb. 12:14). Entropy, evident in regression, impacts living and non-living entities, like melting ice, burning wood, or decaying matter. This natural principle is found in many scientific disciplines and is known as the Second Law of Thermodynamics. In due time, the earth itself will transform into ash (2 Pet. 3:7-12).

With the image of a tent in mind (5:1), the vulnerability of the material is evident. Anticipating a structure from God, not crafted by human hands, Christians look forward to an eternal abode, superior in quality and duration.

We desire to groan about this world's problems. At times, our present struggles in the flesh (5:2) echo the sentiments seen in Job, who found resonance in a donkey's bray over insufficient food (Job 6:5). This poses risks to a sufferer, leading to Comparative Suffering (measuring pain), Competitive Suffering (overshadowing struggles), or Combative Suffering (questioning experiences) when sharing personal issues.

In the current life, bodies age as God wills. In the next life, with new bodies, the concept of growing old is irrelevant. God's people store up treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:20), eagerly awaiting the judgment.

Two burdens impact a Christian's faith journey (5:4). Bodily ailments hinder performance, and sin acts as a weight impeding progress (Heb. 12:1). This struggle, akin to swimming against a current, fosters endurance, accompanied by groans over the strain. In spite of everything, Christians cry out with joy (cf. Phil. 4:4).

We eagerly await the new eternal garment by wearing the garments of righteousness today. The Christian journey involves shedding sinful ways and acquiring godliness (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-10). We know the sinful body will give way to eternal life (Isa. 25:8; 1 Cor. 15:54).

A Message of Hope for You

Growing old is not for the faint of heart. Hearing, memory, posture, bones, and muscles are in gradual decline, but Christians press on joyously singing, “What a glorious day that will be!”¹¹

Christians must exchange the old attire of worldly living for garments of righteousness. Imagine the joys in accomplishing the fight, finishing the course, and keeping the faith (2 Tim. 4:7). Sadly, worldly Christians may find themselves underdressed for the heavenly banquet.

Discussion Questions

1. Reflecting on Paul’s hardships, what trials can we groan about in our own lives today?
2. What are some ways we can find encouragement through these struggles?
3. Describe your perspective of the contrast between “the eternal weight of glory” and “this light momentary affliction.”
4. How should we prepare for the new heavenly body?
5. What effect does this world have on our preparations?

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¹¹ Hill, Jim. “What A Day That Will Be.” Ben Speer Music, 1983. *Hymnary.org*, https://hymnary.org/text/there_is_coming_a_day_when_no_heartaches

Lesson 19–Corinthian Contrasts

OLD CREATION VS. NEW CREATION

Demetrius Desnoes

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

2 Corinthians 5:16-17

A man purchased a house that was dilapidated due to abuse by its past owner. He took on the task of renovating it, so that it would rightfully reflect his character. The man took what was unclean and unkept and gave everything he had to transform it into something far superior to the original house, even in its former glory. One day the new owner received a visit from the old owner who did not accept the remodeled version of the house. That former owner decided to tear down everything new, undoing all the labor of the man who saved the condemned property.

As Christians, we were that condemned property, decaying, deteriorating, and lacking hope. But now we are “members of the household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15), who were “purchased with His blood” (Acts 20:28) and “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 7:23), so that we could become a new creation in Christ. [All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] In his letter to Corinth, Paul was clear that we must behave ourselves in a manner consistent with the design of Christ, our contractor. Furthermore, as tenants of the present-day temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), we are expected to eliminate the old and accentuate the new. Paul emphasized as much to the saints at Ephesus, saying “that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds” (Eph. 4:22-23).

Paul proved to be someone with whom many believers can identify, having struggled himself between right and wrong or old and new. He painted the vivid picture of being forced to carry a literal dead body on his back (Rom. 7:24). Throughout his epistles, Paul attempts to alleviate some of that same burden by changing the way one views that old life. For example, he chided

the Corinthian Christians for returning to the things they were redeemed from and not progressing past them, stating “for you are still carnal” (1 Cor. 3:3).

The Heart of the Message

Perception of old versus new determines position (Phil. 4:8; Col. 3:1-3). Paul once called himself less than the least of all saints and the chief of sinners (Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:15). He certainly had his former life as a devout Jew in mind. He remembered how passionately he persecuted the same people he would soon call his partners in the gospel, which made him feel unworthy of his calling. His conviction to oppose Christ was controlled by a worldly perspective at the time, and he only saw Christ as a mere mortal man who was justly crucified. Unfortunately, such a skewed point of view, influenced by Satan, kept Paul blinded.

Having obeyed the gospel and transformed his agenda, Paul indicates “we regard no one according to the flesh” (2 Cor. 5:16). So, Paul says that as a new creation, how one views oneself, another person, and Christ is no longer fashioned by the flesh (2 Cor. 4:18). The old creation confined a person to experience failure, fault, and futility. The new creation allows a person to enjoy fellowship, forgiveness, and freedom (Rom. 8:1-4).

Next, Paul references the personal testimony of first-century Christians who witnessed Christ in the flesh, but he powerfully says they cannot recognize Him in that way any longer (2 Cor. 5:16). He pulls his audience out of the past and into the present by acknowledging that the substance of their relationship with Him spiritually takes precedence over their preference of knowing Him physically. If Paul can get the reader to let go of their idea of Christ, then he can get them to accept their new identity in Christ.

Perception of old versus new determines purpose (1 Pet. 2:9). When God first created man, there was also nothing standing in His way to accomplish His purpose (John 1:1-18). However, when God desired to re-create man, it was the schemes of Satan, and even man himself, that stood in the way, attempting to prevent the gospel plan. The finished work of creating something new was even better than the great work of creating the world. Paul would write to his Ephesian brethren to reveal what had been concealed, namely, that the new creation is inclusive of all mankind (Rom. 1:14-16; Eph. 3:1-7).

Paul preached a message that corresponded with what the new creation provided. The apostle sought to show that the ways of old no longer mattered to the movement Christ established (Rom. 6:3-4; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:14). Among the things that separated the old and new in Scripture, the Gentiles were not in covenant relationship with God under the old law. But the new creation afforded the alien sinner access to God through the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:11-13). While the new covenant created was indeed good news, there were those who still strived to abide by the old one by distorting what Paul received and delivered to them (1 Cor. 15:1-4; Gal. 1:6-16).

Paul rebuked those Judaizing teachers at several points in his ministry because their preferences put the purpose of the church in peril. Unless those men changed the way they operated, they would rebuild the “middle wall of separation” (Eph. 2:14), which Christ worked so hard to tear down. Paul and his fellow-laborers were inspired by the Holy Spirit to press that permanent perspective into the believer and to prioritize the purpose of the gospel, which is to reconcile all creation under a new creation.

Messages for Today

- **We must accept an integral perspective.**
- **We must allow an integration of people.**
- **We must avoid an interruption of purpose.**

We must accept an integral perspective. “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). The concept of considering death as a gift should not be foreign to us. Furthermore, the new creation requires that we come to terms with the reality that our life is not our own (Gal. 2:20) and view ourselves as “fitly framed together for the edifying of the body” (Eph. 4:16).

We must allow an integration of people. We sing a song that claims “the blessed gospel is for all,” but do those words ring true by our actions? It was prophesied that the church would be about unity, not uniformity (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21). So, we must examine ourselves and make sure we are not practicing a perverted Gospel, but one that is inclusive of all races and classes.

We must avoid an interruption of purpose. Arguably the most difficult task for us today is mastering the ability to reflect Christ, so others do not reject Christ. We can undoubtedly embody Christlikeness if we, like John the Baptist, believe that “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Christians are given

several examples from the cloud of witnesses about the distractions and detractions to expect along the way (cf. Heb. 11-12:2). Christ gave us an important reminder that the way to convert lost souls is to point them to Him (John 12:32). As new creatures, we may also become discouraged by others in our efforts of well-doing, which is why we must give attention to our calling and not the characters.

A Message of Hope for You

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon gives us an idea of what life looks like when you rely on a perspective dominated by worldliness. Over and over, he uses the word “vanity” to describe any pursuit other than fearing God and keeping His commandments (Eccles. 1:2, 14, 17; 2:11 ,17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9; 12:9). His words may sound sobering and depressing when he tells us that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9). But the good news for us is that Christ says, “[B]ehold One who is greater than Solomon is here” (Luke 11:31), and He came to make everything new.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways can we Christians become dominated by the life we once lived?
2. What caused Paul to battle with guilt?
3. How does the new creation differ from the old creation?

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Lesson 20–Corinthian Contrasts

GODLY GRIEF VS. WORLDLY SORRY

Jeremy E. Weekley

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

2 Corinthians 7:9-10

Sorry, not sorry. We've all heard the words "I'm sorry" spoken from behind many microphones as a well-known figure apologizes to the public for their behavior. Many of us are skeptical of the sincerity of the confession. As Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he tells them he is not sorry about his former letter causing them grief. He states, "As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting" (2 Cor. 7:9). [All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.] He is not sorry because the grief produced something within them that benefited their souls. He calls it godly grief. What is the difference between godly and worldly grief, and why does it matter?

The Heart of the Message

As Paul writes this second letter to the Corinthian church, he addresses concerns the Corinthians have expressed about his apostleship in his absence. He wrote a letter that condemned the Corinthians sharply for their response to a sinner in their midst. The so-called severe letter has been debated for many years among scholars. Some believe it to be 1 Corinthians, while others believe it is a letter we no longer possess.¹ It appears that the letter was initially ill-received. Perhaps part of the reason was that they were expecting Paul to visit instead of writing a letter.² Paul had written to admonish them for believing the accusations

¹ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 246.

² Barnett, 246.

that had been made by some that he had wronged them somehow.³

Paul's letter found its mark. Paul had regretted writing the letter because he knew it would cause them sorrow, but he rejoiced because the letter brought them to repentance.⁴ The Corinthians responded by repenting of their sins. Paul expressed his joy at the news that they had done what was right.⁵ Scott Hafeman observes that Paul was comforted by their response because the letter had achieved its goal of fostering repentance in the church at Corinth.⁶ Paul uses their response to teach a valuable lesson on repentance.

In this passage, Paul contrasts the world's response to guilt and sin and the godly person's response. Worldly grief is little more than shallow remorse.⁷ It expresses sorrow simply because the consequences have caused an inconvenience for the sinner. The sorrow they feel is only about their consequences. Paul states that worldly grief produces only death (2 Cor. 7:10). True repentance includes acting according to God's will, not just seeking a restoration of status or influence.

True repentance results in a changed life because it is not about a one-time action.⁸ Christians seeking repentance should not view it as a vending machine where one can simply engage in a sin and then flippantly ask God for forgiveness without changing the behavior in the future.

Paul writes, "...godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret..." (2 Cor. 7:10). Duane Warden observes that the world often offers "...grief without forgiveness." Christians have the weight of sin lifted from them through Christ, while worldly grief continues to divide and destroy.⁹ Godly grief fosters continual change in an individual. Godly grief is developed through an intimate relationship with Christ through

³ Duane Warden, *2 Corinthians*, Truth for Today Commentary (Searcy, AR: Resource, 2019), 219.

⁴ Barnett, 251.

⁵ Barnett, 247.

⁶ Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text to Contemporary Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 313.

⁷ Barnett, 253.

⁸ Warden, 229.

⁹ Warden, 229.

His Word. As one comes to know Christ, they love him and seek to do the things that will please him because they understand his love for them (John 14:15). Godly grief has a love for God as its motivation for change. Godly grief produces a desire to be better and do better because one wants to glorify God, not oneself.

Messages for Today

- **Love speaks the truth.**
- **Restoration is the goal.**
- **Sincere repentance requires change.**

Love speaks the truth. We live in a world that celebrates what is untrue. Paul wrote a letter of admonition to the church at Corinth because of his love for them. Parents don't discipline children because they enjoy it. Neither the parent nor the child likes discipline, but the parent knows it is necessary to train the child. They help their children learn what is right and wrong even when that truth hurts (Heb. 12:11). Paul regretted that he had to discipline the Corinthians. Still, the happy state of the Corinthians was directly connected to the sorrowful confrontation Paul had engaged in with them.¹⁰ If one has a genuine heart for ministry, one must be willing to love people enough to share the truth about sin. Paul's example demonstrated a genuine heart for ministry.¹¹

Restoration is the goal. Paul wanted the Corinthian church restored, not rejected. His objective was not to cause them pain but to move them to repentance and fellowship with Christ. We win no souls by simply proving ourselves right and others wrong. We must be just as sincere in our quest to restore an erring soul as the person's repentance is genuine. His love for the Corinthians was his motivation for admonishing them.¹² Our motivation must be grounded in love if we truly want to help restore souls.

Sincere repentance requires change. Sometimes saying "I'm sorry" isn't enough. That phrase can become trite to someone whose actions have truly harmed another. True repentance calls for a change of direction. In his commentary, Hafeman observes, "Repentance includes both remorse that comes from recognizing

¹⁰ George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 377.

¹¹ Hafemann, 306.

¹² Hafemann, 311.

that one has wronged God and its consequent resolve to reverse one's behavior as seen in the first steps in that new direction. Therefore, though its consequences are long-term, repentance is indicated by an initial change in both attitude and action."¹³

A Message of Hope for You

We all sin (Rom. 3:23). Therefore, we must repent. Thankfully, God offers us forgiveness when we repent (1 John 1:9). We do not have to carry the guilt of sin if we confess that sin and seek to live faithfully for him.

The misunderstanding of true repentance often leads to shallow faith and continual disobedience. Godly grief is motivated by a love for God and seeking to live a life that is pleasing to him. True repentance requires a change in our behavior. We cannot continue to engage in sin repeatedly and think that we have repented.

Because of his love for us, God offers us salvation. Repentance is part of our response to that love from God.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between godly grief and worldly grief?
2. What are the challenges to true repentance?
3. What are some biblical examples of true repentance?
4. How can we lovingly restore those who need to repent?
5. What challenges do we encounter when we try to help restore an erring brother?

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¹³ Hafemann, 311-12.

Lesson 21—God’s Grace

SUFFICIENT GRACE

Joe Keefer

And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Imagine your son has contracted cancer. You pray that with treatment the cancer will leave. Your son endures sickening chemotherapy, painful spinal taps, and radical surgeries for months. In the end, the cancer remains.

Or imagine that some other difficulty overtakes your life. If the difficulty would go away, life would be better. Without it, perhaps, you could serve the Lord better, so you pray for it to go away. But it does not go away. You must live with it.

The apostle Paul spoke of a thorn in the flesh about which he pleaded with the Lord three times for it to depart. It didn't depart. Instead, the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 2:9). [All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.]

The Heart of the Message

When trying to comprehend God's grace, one attribute that needs to be understood is that God's grace is help (Heb. 4:16), the help only he can provide. We don't earn it. He freely gives it.

The Lord did not answer Paul with a simple "no." He gave Paul a message of hope. Jesus assured Paul that he, the Lord, can provide all the help needed to live with the thorn.

The Lord also encouraged him with the following truth: "My strength is made perfect in weakness." In other words, the Lord's strength reaches its goal in our weaknesses.

With the Lord's answer, Paul gained a grace-filled perspective on his thorn (weakness). Paul now sees the thorn not as a disability, but as an opportunity—an opportunity to have "the power of Christ rest on him" (2 Cor. 12:9). He also understood, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

From the Lord's answer, Paul drew two positive conclusions. First, he could boast in his infirmities. He could still experience joy and contentment even with infirmities. With them he can experience the power of Christ. Second, he can "be well pleased with"¹ the infirmities. He endured them for Christ's sake. The suffering had a purpose.

Messages for Today

- **His grace is sufficient for our salvation.**
- **His grace is sufficient for our repentance.**
- **His grace is sufficient for our weakness.**

His grace is sufficient for our salvation. Without God's grace we cannot be saved from our sins (Eph 2:8-9). It was grace when God sent his Son (John 3:16). Jesus became a man, and his humanity could not remove the nails driven into his hands on the cross. The nails stayed, and salvation for man followed.

We must trust *the plan of salvation* revealed in God's Word. Our ideas about how to be saved are powerless, being void of God's grace.

We must believe and not doubt the salvation provided by God, even if at times salvation seems too amazing to be true. Our salvation from sins is real because God, not man, has the power to provide it. Regardless of whatever trials we experience or whatever hardships we endure, we can remain confident of our salvation in Jesus (1 John 5:13).

His grace is sufficient for our repentance. When we repent, we change our mind,² turn from sin, and turn to God. Repentance transforms our lives because we do "works fitting of repentance" (Acts 26:20). When repenting of sin, we take on work. Part of that work is dealing with the consequences of past sin. When we receive forgiveness from God, we are set free from the spiritual consequences (Rom. 6:23), but earthly consequences remain, and some even last lifetime.

Though we cannot avoid them, we can rise above the distress and limitation caused by the consequences of sin. Our loving God will help us deal with the external consequences that persist. And those internal ones, such as feelings of shame, humiliation,

¹ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1966), 189.

² Vine, 280.

sadness, and hurt, God can heal when we trust our hearts to his grace (1 Pet. 2:24; 2 Pet. 3:18).

We don't need to let the consequence of a past mistake disrupt our service to the Lord. Instead, we can fully depend on Jesus and become stronger in heart.

His grace is sufficient for our weaknesses. Sin is weakness, but the weakness we are speaking of here is not personal sin. We have other weaknesses in life. Weakness can include anything we are powerless over; things out of our control, mistreatment from others, and so on.

We have limitations. We do not have the power to remove every difficulty in life. Human solutions do not fix every problem in life. Some things are just too complicated.

Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses. He cares. He understands how they may make us suffer: "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15).

For Christ's sake, we may suffer "infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions, distresses" (2 Cor. 12:10). But with Christ, we have full access to all the grace we need to endure and to continue trusting and serving.

A Message of Hope for You

When we think of the tough things Paul endured, we may ask, "Why didn't he quit?" No doubt within the answer is Paul's understanding and appreciation of the grace of God. He relied on God's grace to provide all that he needed to keep on doing the work of the Lord. He depended on God to help him thrive in the presence of any weakness. The same can be true for us.

It requires being humble—humble enough to reach out to God in any distress and humble enough to trust God in any distress. Trusting God strengthens our inner man. "That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man" (Eph. 3:16).

Serving the Lord is not easy (Matt. 7:14), but it's blessed (Eph. 1:3). God will provide what we need (Phil. 4:19) to remain strong when the thorns do not depart.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some trials we experience for the sake of Christ?
2. How do we feel when we plead with God for a thorn to depart and it does not?
3. What comfort does the knowledge of God's grace provide?
4. What is inner strength?
5. In what ways is inner strength needed to serve the Lord faithfully?

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Lesson 22—God’s Grace

ABOUNDING GRACE

Ralph Richardson

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 1:12-14

Have you ever heard this statement; “You can’t out give God; His shovel is bigger than yours.” When someone is making this statement, he or she is usually referring to giving in a monetary way. In 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul is reminding the Christians in Corinth of the importance of giving and the responsibility they have in providing financial support for the brethren who are in need. Paul’s thoughts center around the Christian’s call to take care of the needs of others. The Christians in Corinth had previously promised to help the underprivileged Christians in Jerusalem with a financial gift and had yet to forward that gift. Paul is also reminding them that it is God who will supply and multiply their every need.

The Heart of the Message

Perhaps the underlying message from Paul is not so much the Christian’s duty of giving monetarily but the blessings that can be found in another gift—grace. The statement, “You can’t out give God” would certainly apply to grace.

“And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8). [All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.]

We know that God loves a cheerful giver; however, He has also promised to bless those who are generous. This is why God, through Paul, promised the Christians in Corinth they would be blessed abundantly. Paul is not implying that giving generously will increase our wealth. Paul is focusing on God’s ability, not His guarantee. God is able, and He is also free to choose whom, how,

when, and to what degree He will bless.¹ Paul instructs them that as they give, God will graciously replenish their resources, enabling them to be more benevolent. Paul uses an agricultural illustration of sowing and reaping to make his point clear. “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor. 9:6).

The Christians in Corinth could have felt threatened that their livelihood was in jeopardy if they were extravagant in their giving. Perhaps those who found it difficult to give generously had placed their faith and trust in themselves and not in God. Paul’s message was clear: God’s abundant grace would equip them and supply their every need. He will do the same for us.

Message for Today

- **Abounding grace is grace that enables.**
- **Abounding grace is grace that works.**
- **Abounding grace is grace that is alive.**

Abounding grace is grace that enables. Light enables us to see so we will not stumble in the dark. Light also enables things to grow so we can put food on the table. Just as the sun is our source of light, grace is our source for everything in a spiritual sense. Paul said, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into ministry” (1 Tim. 1:12). Paul was a minister; he never thought of himself as being appointed to a position of honor. He always thought of himself as being appointed to serve.² He used the Greek word *endynamoō* (“enabled”), which according to Vine’s Dictionary means to make strong.³ Paul was quick to credit Jesus for his opportunity and ability.

Before Paul was thrust into service for the Lord, he thought what he was doing was acceptable (Acts 26:9). Paul was not relying on God’s strength; he was relying on himself. It was not until he recognized the abounding grace of God that the opportunity to serve was given. Despite the struggles he faced, God needed him to fulfill this ministry. Eventually, Paul was

¹ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *Holmon New Testament Commentary*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville: B& H Pub., 2000), 405.

² Jim Sheerer, *New Testament Commentary* (Chickasha: Yeomen, 2001), 918.

³ W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Concise Dictionary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 363.

successful because he fully relied upon the grace of God to *enable* him to overcome. Paul asked on three occasions (2 Cor. 12:8) to have “a thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7) removed. When the Lord denied his requests, Paul was satisfied that God would *enable* him to overcome, and He did. “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Abounding grace is grace that works. Service is at the very heart of Christianity. Paul knew it was only by God’s abundant grace that he was able to serve others in the capacity in which he served. We, too, must recognize God’s abundant grace at work in our lives. When we do, we become selfless and much more willing to serve. “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4). The more we serve others, the more we become like Jesus and the more God’s abundant grace is revealed in our lives.

Service brings purpose and direction to our lives. Jesus, of course, was the ultimate example of service, and He commands that we serve others regardless of whether they deserve it. Jesus taught His disciples about service as they argued over who was the greatest. They had it all wrong. Jesus said, “[W]hoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Some are reluctant to serve because service can be challenging. We have all experienced the person that is difficult, stubborn, and offensive, which makes serving them even more of a challenge. As we strive to obey Jesus by reaching out to even those hard-to-reach people, God’s grace will enable us to also fulfill our responsibility.

Abounding grace is grace that is alive. A person whose behavior is considered abnormal can be described as one who is doing something out of character. Someone who is always nice then suddenly lashes out at someone would be an example of a person acting out of character. The behavior of a Christian is a direct reflection of God’s abundant grace in us. We live in a time when a person’s character can be placed under a microscope and examined by all. Well-known figures in the public eye are scrutinized right alongside the common person. When we treat others as we want to be treated, this is the first step toward fostering a character filled with grace.

Paul was scrutinized, especially after his conversion to Christ. “When Saul (Paul) had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were afraid of him and did not believe that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). Saul (Paul) was traveling toward Damascus on his way to persecute those “who were of the Way... *so that* he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2). From that day forward, things changed for Saul (Paul), he went from persecuting Christians to converting non-Christians. Now that Paul’s character was deeply imbedded in Christ, he explained that it was the abundant grace of God that spurred him to change who he was and what he pursued. “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor. 15:9-10).

Paul never forgot where he came from, and he never forgot it was by the grace of God that he was who he was now. He understood fully what he was, and he also understood what he had become because of God abundant grace. “Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:13-14). Dan Winkler asked the following question in his book about grace: Could he (Paul) continue to live as if there were no rules keeping him from doing what he had been doing or what he wanted to do?⁴ God’s abundant grace would not allow Paul to remain the same (Rom. 6:1-2).

A Message of Hope for You

Paul encourages us to take notice of the blessings that exist in and through God’s grace. If you and I are living in the abundance of His grace, we are not living for self. After all, children of God are not who they were *before* Christ; instead, they are who they are now *in* Christ (Eph. 2:1-7). God pours out His grace in abundance not only on the one who is serving but also on those who are being served. By applying these concepts

⁴ Dan Winkler, *Grace, Simply Incredible, Incredibly Simple*, (Huntingdon: D & D Pub., 2018), 77.

we have discussed, it will unlock the door to God's abundant grace.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss ways that God's grace has made a difference in how you serve others?
2. Why do you suppose that many people rely on their own strength instead of on the strength of God?
3. Discuss some ways that we might see generosity in other people's lives and how one might encourage others to be more generous.
4. List some biblical examples of how Jesus served others and why it is important for us to follow this example of service today.

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Lesson 23—God’s Grace

WASTED GRACE

Tim Harty

As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.

2 Corinthians 6:1

Waste is rampant in our world today. As a modern-day example, stories are published both in print and video form depicting people from all over the world—not just third-world countries—picking through large garbage dumps to make a living. These individuals collect anything of value that they can sell to survive. When considering this situation, one should reflect on the fact that everything in the dump was discarded by someone who no longer found value in it. Sadly, we find this to be the case not only in the physical world but also in the spiritual lives of people. I cannot imagine a more somber situation than a person who has wasted the grace offered by God. Regrettably, this grace can be squandered in many ways, not just by those who apostatize.

The Heart of the Message

We find this warning about wasted grace in the middle of Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, a church that was dealing with false teaching and a lack of humility. The issues that the church faced are at the heart of all forms of wasted grace. The false teaching and lack of humility there had laid a foundation for waste, a waste that we still encounter today.

We have seen over the last six decades a reduction in the number of faithful followers of Christ. We have also seen in many churches a significant reduction in attendance numbers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes are not only related to death, but many people have been lured away by false teaching and worldly living.

When we examine the rate of population growth in the United States alongside of the growth of membership in churches of Christ, we find a sad fact. With the population of the United States in 1960 at roughly 179 million people and in 2020 at roughly 330 million people, we observe a growth rate of approximately 84 percent over the time period. During the same period, we find that the churches of Christ experienced a decline

in attendance. So, the logical question is: why did the churches of Christ not grow but instead decline over the same period of time? It is a simple question, but the answer is not as straightforward. Why is there so much waste, and how can we turn the tide?

Messages for Today

- **Some say grace cannot be wasted once received.**
- **Some fall away because of hardships in life.**
- **Sometimes we waste the grace of God by not being like Jesus.**

Some say grace cannot be wasted once received. We must recognize that some say that once a person has been saved that he cannot lose his salvation. This is a common false teaching that is taught not only in Calvinistic churches but also in many mainstream denominations that do not teach all the principles of Calvinism. This teaching is referred to as “once saved, always saved.” Upon examination of God’s word, including the main text of this article, which states, “As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain” (2 Cor. 6:1), we find that this prevalent teaching is at odds with Scripture. [All Scripture references are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.] Additionally, in Galatians 5:4, Paul writes, “You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” Simple logic teaches us that a person cannot fall from something they have not achieved, nor can a person take something in vain that they do not have.

Some fall away because of hardships in life. We are all warned about false teachers. Paul spends much time addressing this subject in several of his epistles. In 1 Timothy 4:1, we read, “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.” In addition, we are warned of those that fall away (i.e., waste grace) due to hardships in life, e.g., persecution. In the so-called Parable of the Sower, Jesus states: “Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away” (Mark 4:16-17).

Sometimes we waste the grace of God by not being like Jesus. Sadly, those of us who are Christians sometimes make decisions about who is worthy of having the gospel shared with them. In

John 4:1-42, we see that Jesus is an equal-opportunity Savior, and he also shows us the proper way to evangelize people. He demonstrates to whom we are to talk (the least), how we are to talk to them (kindly and truthfully), and when we are to do it (now). Unfortunately, in verse 27, we discover that Jesus' disciples had their own blind spots: "Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you talking with her?'" This woman is not someone they would have shared the gospel with due to social constructs. When we limit with whom we share the gospel, we naturally limit the number of people who could become faithful Christians.

A Message of Hope for You

Are we as concerned for those around us as Paul was for the church at Corinth and all those he encountered? We all have "missed opportunities" for evangelism for different reasons. We all are aware of the dwindling numbers of faithful Christians, and we are all bombarded with the false teaching that is prevalent in "Christendom" today. However, we should be able to find strength and motivation in Paul's words to Timothy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7-8). Paul does not talk of retirement here. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the word retirement. In fact, we only find the word mentioned once in the Old Testament, and there it is referring to those who retire from working in the temple and how they should continue to assist their working brothers without taking on the lead role (Numbers 8:24-26).

Just like those who must step back from the lead roles in the temple due to age, we have an incredible opportunity in front of us. Those who retired from the temple might not have been in the limelight, but they played a vital role in instructing and guiding the next generation in the task of serving the Lord. Moreover, like those retirees of old, we also have a responsibility to pass along correct instruction and habits (not just God's word but also the carrying out of God's word). This is an opportunity available to all of us and is important for the growth of the church and our loved ones. Let us never retire or coast in doing God's work when we reach a certain stage of life. What a wasteful

state of being and a waste of God's grace, a grace that is available to all.

Because of what God has done for us, we need to finish our races strong, and this includes sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with everyone. May God help us to carry out the task of spreading the good news and reducing waste.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss different ways in which God's grace could be wasted.
2. Discuss people we have known that have fallen away from the church.
3. What ways can we help bring those who have fallen away back to the church?
4. What areas in your community need to be reached, and in what ways can they be reached?

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Lesson 24–Special Topics

UNITY OF 2 CORINTHIANS

Kevin Cleary

And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all....For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while....This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them.

2 Corinthians 2:3; 7:8; 13:1, 2

Should 2 Corinthians be just one book? Does it consist of multiple Pauline letters stitched together? Could it contain the sorrowful letter or previous letter? One does not have to look far to find all these theories and more offered to explain the content of 2 Corinthians. Does a careful reading of the book warrant these theories?

The Heart of the Message

If we turn in our Bibles to 2 Corinthians, we find a book consisting of thirteen chapters composed by Paul to the church in the city of Corinth. The letter contains various discussions all of which relate to Paul's relationship with these Christians and the strain placed on that relationship because of a few factors: (1) opponents of Paul who were seeking to undermine his influence; (2) a difficult visit and subsequent letter; (3) an impending visit to collect funds.

Some have looked at the book and considered it to be somewhat disjointed. They have accounted for this by proposing that 2 Corinthians is not one letter based on one occasion, but a number of letters based on a number of occasions.

A common proposal is to posit that chapters 1-9 constitute one letter that fit the occasion of Paul's fourth correspondence with Corinth. In this scenario, chapters 10-13 constitute the painful letter referred to in 2:3 and 7:8. This suggestion was first

made by J. S. Semler in 1776 and has continued to have some popularity up to present day.¹

Some scholars suggest that removing 2:14-7:5 makes for a more natural reading and conclude that the content from 2:15-7:4 must be from a different letter which has been inserted.

Others think that 6:14-7:1 does not sound much like Paul and must have been taken from another source, possibly Qumran writings, which were then inserted into the book.

The similarity between chapters 8 and 9 have led some to suggest that they are different letters with chapter 9 being written to follow up and bolster the message of chapter 8.

Another suggestion has been made that chapters 10-13 do not constitute the painful letter but rather represent a fifth correspondence between Paul and Corinth, authored upon receiving a bad report from Titus when he returned from delivering the fourth letter, which would be 2 Corinthians 1-9.²

If we accept these theories, we are left with not one but several fragments of letters, which have been stitched together and now comprise what we call 2 Corinthians. These letters/fragments would be as follows:

- 1:1-2:14 with 7:5-9:15
- 2:15-6:13 with 7:2-4
- 6:137:1 Qumran Fragment
- 1:1—8:24
- 9:1-13
- 1013 sorrowful letter sent between 1 and 2 Corinthians.
- 1013 (not the sorrowful letter but a follow up to 2 Cor 1-9)

The first issue most commentators point out is the seemingly drastic change in tone between 2 Corinthians 1-9 and 2 Corinthians 10-13. Kruse explains the sentiment of many who hold this view: “[I]t is psychologically impossible for Paul to have written chapters 1-9 and 10-13 at the same time.”³

¹ Paul Barnett, *Paul, Chronology and the Unity of 2 Corinthians*. Aug 2011. <<http://paulbarnett.info/2011/09/paul-chronology-and-the-unity-of-2-corinthians/>>.

² Fredrick J. Long, *Ancient Rhetoric and Paul's Apology: The Compositional Unity of 2 Corinthian* (Cambridge: University P, 2004), 1.

³ Kruse, Colin. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 2 Corinthians* (Leicester England: InterVarsity, 1987), 28.

While any reader of 2 Corinthians will admit that a change of tone is evident in chapter 10, there are several reasons to maintain the unity of the letter. First, the change of tone is not out of place given the aims of Paul in the letter.⁴ Second, the letter may be following a common rhetorical pattern well attested in ancient writing known as “the apologetic.” In this form of writing, it was standard practice to conclude with a peroration which involved summarizing previous points in a strong emotional appeal.⁵ Third, there is considerable overlap of key concepts between chapters 1-9 and 10-13, including words found nowhere else in the Pauline corpus. Fourth, the summary statement found in 12:19 seems to refer to the whole of the letter not just to the previous two chapters.

The second issue that scholars frequently raise relates to passages that speak of past or future events. In 13:2, Paul writes, “On my return I will not spare them,” but in 1:23, Paul states, “It was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.” [All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.] Based on this and other passages (10:6; 2:9; 13:10; 2:3; 7:2; 12:17), some say that chapters 10-13 must have been written before chapters 1-9. Incidentally, the references to sending versus having sent Titus are easily explained by the plans outlined by Paul to send Titus back to Corinth and do not necessitate two separate letters.

The third issue often highlighted is the phrase “lands beyond you” in 10:6, which is said to make more sense if written from Ephesus rather than Macedonia. If this could be substantiated, then such would indicate that chapters 10-13 were written before chapters 1-9. If Paul were in Macedonia when he wrote chapters 1-9, it is argued he would have said “Lands beyond us.” This observation is often combined with the previous points discussed to claim a preponderance of evidence. We have already addressed the weakness of those points. We will add that it was not at all uncommon in the ancient mind to consider Macedonia quite different from Greece; they were different Roman provinces.

⁴ Christopher Land, *The Integrity of 2 Corinthians from a Linguistic Perspective* (Hamilton Ont.: N.p., 2013), 348.

⁵ Paul Burnett, *The New International Commentary On the New Testament The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

In support of the theory that 2:14-7:4 is inserted, it is said that going from 2:13 directly to 7:5 makes for a smoother reading. It's worth noting, however, that similar points to those raised regarding 10-13 can be made of 2:14-7:4. These chapters make sense where they are in light of what Paul is trying to do in the letter. It is reasonable that Paul re-introduces his travel in 7:5 because he is aware that he has digressed and wants to remind his readers of the travel narrative.

Considering 6:13-7:1, the passage forms a strong appeal for separation from idolatry. It makes perfect sense that Paul, quoting the Old Testament, would sound similar to other contemporary Jewish sects using the same source. Again, it is not warranted to suggest editorial modification in this case.

Lastly, chapters 8 and 9 are sometimes said to be too similar. As such, it is alleged that they cannot be a part of the same letter, especially not in such close proximity. Paul's use of the phrase "Now concerning" is said to indicate that he is introducing a new topic, showing that chapter 9 was at one time separate from chapter 8. Yet it has been shown that the phrase works well as a resumption of the discussion in 8:16-24.⁶

To the previous point, the content of the chapters 8 and 9, while similar, make good sense when read together as a strong appeal to action. Furthermore, 9:3 relies on the previous introduction of the brothers that we have in 8:16-23. The alleged insertion of chapter 8 or 9 is not necessitated by the text but refuted instead.

Message For Today

- **Beware of interpretive approaches that are long on speculation.**
- **Commentaries are helpful tools for Bible study, but we should never allow them to become shortcuts that do our thinking for us.**
- **In your personal study, be aware of influential thinkers or speakers who may point you in a wrong direction.**

Beware of interpretive approaches that are long on speculation. If we set aside requiring positive evidence to support ideas, we enter a realm of pure subjectivism. In this study we have considered not only the most prolific proposed separation

⁶ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, Leon Morris. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 277.

between chapter 1-9 and 10-13, but others also. We can safely conclude that these suggestions cause at least as many problems as they solve. Not only are they unwarranted by the internal evidence, but they also lack any support whatsoever from external evidence, which is arguably a weightier matter. There are no manuscripts which end at chapter 9, and there are no fragments that contain only chapters 10-13, 3-6, 8, or 9. There are also no manuscripts that are missing 6:13-7:1. Finally, there are no citations or allusions to these fragmented letters in any writings of the Church Fathers.

Commentaries are helpful tools for Bible study, but we should never allow them to become shortcuts that do our thinking for us. We must take care in advancing historical reconstructions that are not clearly evidenced by the text of Scripture. Efforts to understand 2 Corinthians as a series of literary fragments, stitched together by an unknown editor, offer no better interpretive approach than the one suggested by the book itself. They lack compelling historical evidence and are completely undone by the absence of supporting textual evidence. Therefore, we can be confident that the letter of 2 Corinthians we have in our Bibles can and should be read as one correspondence between Paul and this struggling congregation.

In your personal study, be aware of influential thinkers or speakers who may point you in a wrong direction. After J. S. Semler first theorized about divisions in 2 Corinthians, many capable scholars followed his lead. No doubt this move engendered praise from peers; however, this is not the purpose of Bible study. Good students do their own research and follow where the evidence leads.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Paul write 2 Corinthians?
2. Is the content of the letter consistent with this purpose?
3. What unifying ideas or phrases can you identify in the book?
4. Why would scholars propose multiple edited letters?
5. What would you tell a friend who asked you if 2 Corinthians should be considered two or more letter fragments?

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Lesson 25–Special Topics

THE AROMA OF CHRIST

Jacob A. Evans

“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.”

2 Corinthians 2:14

Gasoline. Pine needles. A new car. Cinnamon. A freshly cut lawn. All of these are polarizing smells. A person either loves or loathes the fragrance of these things. It is difficult to pinpoint in each instance what accounts for the divergence of opinion regarding these aromas. Most people think that one’s present reaction to a given smell is based on past experiences with the scent. That makes sense. [Pun intended.] We do know that odor serves as a stronger trigger for recalling memories than any other sensory cue. But sometimes one’s estimation of a scent can be based on present circumstances or associations.

In 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, which serves as the beginning of a long digression in the flow of Paul’s letter that ends at 7:4, Paul likens the diffusion of the knowledge of God in Christ to a polarizing fragrance. To some, nothing smells better; to others, nothing smells worse. What makes this paragraph especially interesting is twofold: (1) The imagery Paul uses that gives rise to the aroma metaphor; (2) The role that Paul assigns to himself and fellow Christians in disseminating the “aroma of Christ” (2 Cor. 2:15). [All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.]

The Heart of the Message

By virtue of being in Christ, Paul and his colleagues are always led by God in triumphal procession. After recounting his difficulties while traveling through Asia (1:8-11), his reasons for not traveling to Corinth (1:12-2:11), and his reason for not staying in Troas but traveling on to Macedonia (2:12-13), Paul suddenly breaks out in thanksgiving to God: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession . . .” (2:14a). As modern readers, we visualize that God is either parading Paul as a victor throughout his missionary journeys or is going to help Paul be victorious in whatever circumstances he finds himself. But those Corinthian men and women, who were

thoroughly enmeshed in Roman culture, would have probably pictured something quite specific when they heard Paul's letter read in the first century.

What comes to us in English as a phrase, "leads . . . in triumphal procession," is actually one word in Greek: *thriambeuō*. This word only occurs twice in the New Testament (here and in Col. 2:15), but it is used a number of times in extra-biblical writings, and not a few of these references appear in the context of describing a Roman triumphal procession.¹ While some scholars reject any connection in 2 Corinthians 2:14 between Paul's *thriambeuō* and a Roman triumphal procession, most scholars see a connection, though there is some debate about whether Paul envisions himself as a winning soldier or a willing captive.

A Roman triumph was an elaborate parade granted by the Roman senate to a victorious Roman general. Archaeologists have uncovered depictions of these processions on arches, reliefs, coins, statues, cameos, and paintings in the ruins of the Roman Empire. A typical procession in Rome would roll out as follows: state officials; the senate; trumpeters; carts carrying the spoils of war; paintings and models of the things seized (i.e., citadels, ships, towers, etc.); the sacrificial white bull; the principal captives (i.e., kings, princes, magistrates, generals, etc.); the "lictors," i.e., the executioners; the general himself in a chariot pulled by four horses; and, finally, the general's army. This parade would wind through the streets of Rome with crowds on either side of the road. Some of these processions lasted for more than one day!²

More than likely, the above imagery would have come to the Corinthians' minds with Paul's use of *thriambeuō*, but as we noted earlier, scholars debate about where Paul sees himself in this triumphal procession. On the one hand, it could be that Paul sees himself among the victorious combatants marching behind the conquering Christ, shouting cries of triumph, and knowing that *the* battle has been won. On the other hand, it could be that Paul sees himself among the vanquished captives who march before the triumphant Christ as evidence of Christ's disarming

¹ H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, "*θρίαμβεύω*," *A Greek English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 806.

² R. C. Stone, "Triumph," *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 825.

power. Elsewhere Paul does refer to himself as a “prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:1; cf. 4:1; Rom. 1:1; 16:7; 2 Cor. 4:5; Philem. 1), and he often highlights his incredible transition from persecutor to persecuted (Phil. 3:4-11; 1 Tim. 1:12-16; cf. Rom. 5:10). Several scholars also claim that this interpretation should be adopted on lexical grounds, arguing that *thriambeuō* necessarily implies the idea of displaying or leading around conquered foes (see NLT).³ Both possibilities evoke a powerful image, but I opt for the former interpretation on contextual grounds. At the very least, it flows better out of Paul’s expression of thanksgiving, and as Colin Kruse points out, it allows 2 Corinthians 2:14-17 “to function as a counterbalance to the preceding sections where Paul dwells upon the difficulties and sufferings involved in the apostolic mission.”⁴

By virtue of being in Christ’s triumphal procession, Paul and his colleagues spread the aroma of Christ everywhere. Paul’s metaphor of smell, beginning in 2:14b, appears to be directly related to the imagery of the triumphal procession, though some scholars do see a connection to OT sacrifices, especially in verse 15, wherein Paul says that he is “the aroma of Christ to God” (emphasis added). Nevertheless, Murray J. Harris notes that “included in the victory procession—at least on occasion—were those who burned incense along the triumphal route, others who carried and displayed spices brought from the conquered regions, and yet others who scattered garlands of flowers and sprinkled perfume along the streets. As a result, pleasant fragrances filled the air and were widely diffused along the processional route.”⁵

Paul capitalizes on the aromatic nature of the triumphal procession to highlight his role in diffusing the knowledge of God as manifested in Christ everywhere he goes. In verse 14b, the aroma, or knowledge, of Christ is spread *through* him and his colleagues, while in verse 15, he and his colleagues *are* the aroma

³ Moyer V. Hubbard, “2 Corinthians,” in *Romans to Philemon*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary, Vol. 3, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 207.

⁴ Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 86.

⁵ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 246.

of Christ. This subtle difference suggests that both their proclamation and their practice are indispensable to spreading the gospel everywhere they go to everyone they meet. The phrase “to God” in verse 15 indicates that Paul only cares that all he does is well-pleasing to God, regardless of what anyone else might think about him.

Paul divides humanity between “those who are being saved” and “those who are perishing” (v. 15). Paul and his missionary team represent Christ to both the people who are saved and to the people who are lost. To the former, the “aroma of Christ” is a pleasant perfume; to the latter, it is a foul fragrance (v. 16a). Think back to the imagery of the triumphal procession. Wouldn’t it be true that if you were a conquering soldier in the army of the victorious general that the smell of the incense and flowers would evoke feelings of victory, joy, and celebration? But wouldn’t it also be true that if you were a conquered captive being led through the streets of your enemy by your enemy that the smells of this celebration would evoke feelings of defeat, death, and hopelessness? As mentioned at the outset of this lesson, sometimes the same scent can lead to totally different feelings in two people.

In verse 17, Paul leaves behind the metaphor of smell and speaks plainly about his motives in preaching God’s word. Claiming to be a person of sincerity, Paul denies being a charlatan or huckster. While many market God’s word for the money, Paul proclaims God’s word because he is on a mission. Not only has God sent him on this mission, but Paul is fully aware that God is watching him and holding him accountable.

Messages for Today

- **The aroma of Christ must be diffused by us.**
- **The aroma of Christ creates a crisis of decision.**

The aroma of Christ must be diffused by us. Like Paul, those of us who are Christians have a responsibility to spread the gospel of Christ everywhere to everyone (Matt. 28:18-20). We could say that Christians are God’s atomizers. If you’re having trouble picturing an atomizer, just think of a cologne or perfume bottle. When you press the cap on top of the glass bottle, liquid travels up through a tube and rushes through a nozzle that divides the liquid into thousands and thousands of tiny particles, a.k.a., atoms. Of course, you could have the most phenomenal perfume inside of a bottle, but if that perfume never gets diffused, what

good is it? Likewise, as atomizers for God, we are only good if what is inside of us gets out; otherwise, something spectacular just stays bottled up. Our purpose is not to keep the fragrance of Christ bottled up, but to broadcast it. We must atomize the aroma of Christ with both our lips and our lives (Col. 4:2-6; 2 Tim. 4:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:15; 3:14-16).

The aroma of Christ creates a crisis of decision. Like the smell of Play-Doh, the aroma of Christ is polarizing. There is no neutrality. We either love it or hate it. David Garland writes, “The message of the gospel creates a crisis of decision that does not allow anyone to remain neutral or to take a wait-and-see attitude. [. . .] How persons respond to the gospel determines whether their final fate is eternal life or eternal death.”⁶ Paul does not elaborate on why some find the aroma of Christ appealing, while others detest it. It’s certainly not because God predestined some to be saved and others to be lost. People are being saved or destroyed because they choose to receive or reject the message (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18). Unfortunately, rather than coming to associate the aroma of Christ with love, forgiveness, joy, and hope, most people have come to associate the aroma of Christ with guilt, judgment, limitation, and shame. Perhaps a good starting point in our conversations with the lost is to inquire about the associations they make with the “aroma of Christ,” using 2 Corinthians 2:14-17 as a launching pad. This will provide us with an opportunity to confront their negative associations in a gentle and loving manner.

A Message of Hope for You

At the end of 2 Corinthians 2:16, Paul asks, “Who is sufficient for these things?” Without question, the responsibility that has been placed upon our shoulders as God’s atomizers can seem like a daunting one. This recognition is what led Paul to ask this question. It isn’t easy being a diffuser for God, and Paul’s ministry, not to mention Jesus’ ministry, demonstrates just how difficult it can be. Interestingly, Paul would eventually answer his own question in 2 Corinthians 3:5: “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.” In other words, with God, we are sufficient; without God, we aren’t sufficient. By sustaining a close

⁶ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 149.

relationship with God and trusting in his promises to be with us (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5-6), we can be the atomizers that God needs us to be in this world.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of any other polarizing smells besides the ones that were mentioned at the outset of this lesson? Why do you think people have such different reactions to the same smell?
2. Do you think Paul saw himself as victorious combatant or a vanquished captive in Christ's triumphal procession?
3. Discuss specific ways in which we can be effective atomizers for God.
4. Why do you think people associate such polarizing things with the aroma of Christ?

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Lesson 26–Special Topics

GUIDELINES FOR GIVING

Chance Blackmer

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work:

2 Corinthians 9:7-8

James Elliot once wrote, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot see.” Giving seems counterintuitive in a society where individual worth is predicated on attainment: real estate, money, fame, notoriety, status, influence, and office. God’s people are constantly inundated with the messaging of a world that is overly materialistic and superficial. This messaging begets the scrooges and hoarders of society who have amassed great wealth or have an overabundance of “stuff” and yet are never happy. Others realize they will never have much of anything and have resigned themselves to a life of poverty, misery, and sorrow because of a perceived deficiency. In either case, it is neither the owning of goods nor the lack thereof that builds godly and morally sufficient servants of God; it is one’s perception and use of material goods that makes the difference.

Jesus makes it clear that “no man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). [All Scripture references are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.] Since man cannot serve two masters faithfully, he will be overcome by one. Unfortunately, the world often wins. “For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world...” (2 Tim. 4:10). One of the greatest challenges that men of the ages have faced is a reliance on and trust in riches. This gives way to an inability to give them up and stifles the would-be generosity of the Christian.

The Heart of the Message

In 2 Corinthians 9, Paul addresses the upcoming contribution to be collected for the brethren in Jerusalem. In this passage he reminds them of what constitutes proper giving. The Christians at Corinth are to have the right attitude of benevolence toward

the saints in Jerusalem since they are all one body. It is only right for them to share the goods they have with one another so that God is glorified, the saints are encouraged, and the gospel continues to spread. In this passage the apostle addresses the heart of giving. God has given us the greatest gift, his Son, and in acknowledging that gift, the Christian is to be openhanded and benevolent.

In verse 6, Paul sets up the contrast between the giver and the hoarder. The parsimonious will receive in the way they give, and for the open-handed, the same is true. But then, as if to head off any feeling of obligatory offering and to change the attitude of the givers, he tells the believers to give “as he purposeth in his heart” and “not grudgingly, for the Lord loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). The one who decides to give determines what amount, so there is no compulsion. Each one knows their situation and knows what they can give, and as long as the gift is given with the right disposition, it is acceptable. In chapter 8, which furnishes the background to Paul’s discussion in chapter 9, Paul explains how the Macedonian church gave out of their poverty: “How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality” (2 Cor. 8:2). The desire to participate in the collection was a great blessing to the church in Macedonia and a testament to true fidelity. Paul then shares with the Corinthians the benevolent attitude of the church in Macedonia to encourage those at Corinth to overcome any selfish tendencies which might be present and to give with eager willingness.

In verse 7, Paul explains that “God loveth a cheerful giver.” This text appears to be from the Greek text of Proverbs 22:8, where it reads, “God blesses a cheerful man and giver.” Whenever giving is obligatory, it cannot be received in the proper way. Whether the gift is to others or to God, it makes no difference. No one wants to take something from someone who is unwilling to voluntarily give it.

In verses 8-14, the apostle argues for the all-sufficiency of God and encourages the Corinthians to realize that all the blessings of this life come from him. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jas. 1:17). If all we have is from God, it makes perfect sense to distribute it to others in their need. God’s people should not be concerned about their own needs, for they will be cared for. “I have been young, and now I am old, yet have I not seen the

righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread" (Ps. 37:25). There has never been a time when his people have found themselves in want; therefore, to give in abundance is encouraged. In Malachi 3:8-10, the prophet reminds the people of the all-sufficiency of God and that to give in abundance is consistent with his desire for his people.

Messages for Today

- **Each one must give individually.**
- **Each one must give proportionately.**
- **Each one must give liberally.**
- **Each one must give decisively.**
- **Each one must give joyfully.**
- **Each one must give sacrificially.**

Each one must give individually. Notice that in 1 Corinthians 16:2, Paul tells the brethren that "[e]ach one of you" should lay by in store. Each family has the injunction to give to the Lord, and as it is a requirement by God for his people to be benevolent, here we find that it is not relegated only to those with great means. No Christian can serve God by proxy. We must do our own praying, singing, attending, communing, teaching, soul-winning, and giving.

Each one must give proportionately. Note that there is a correlation between the gift we give to God and what God has given to us. Paul tells them in 1 Corinthians 16:2 to give "as God hath prospered him." The gift given is proportional to our means.

Each one must give liberally. The benevolence of the Christian should be consistent with the benevolence of God. God gave us his "indescribable gift," (2 Cor. 9:15). His people should be willingly abundant in their gifts, too (cf. 2 Cor. 9:6; Rom. 12:6-8). Christians should give abundantly, liberally, or over-flowingly.

Each one must give decisively. In 2 Corinthians 9:7a, Paul writes, "As he purposeth in his heart...." We should purpose (pledge, commit) to give to God a certain amount and then give at least that amount (2 Cor. 9:7). In the gift given there should be a readiness to perform it (cf. 2 Cor. 8:11-12).

Each one must give joyfully. Paul then addresses the attitude of giving in 2 Corinthians 9:7b: "[S]o let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver." There are three kinds of giving: grudge giving, duty giving, and thanksgiving. Grudge giving says, "I hate to"; duty giving says, "I ought to"; thanksgiving says, "I want to." The first comes from constraint,

the second from a sense of obligation, and the third from a full heart. Nothing much is conveyed in grudge giving since “the gift without the giver is there.” Something more happens in duty giving, but there is no joy in it. But in thanksgiving, the doors of heaven are open, and it is fully received.

Each one must give sacrificially. The Bible records several glowing examples of sacrificial giving, including the widow (Mark 12:41-44), the Jerusalem church (Acts 4:32-37), and the Macedonians (2 Cor. 8:1-7).

A Message of Hope for You

One of the most important dispositions of the early church was benevolence. From her inception in Acts 2, the church displayed the most charitable demeanor for her members, and the care that she provided for her own is unparalleled in the ancient world. In our modern milieu of religious confusion and self-serving ideologies, Christ’s church should stand as a beacon of hope and love for all to see. Jesus says, “[B]y this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another” (John 13:35). There can be no greater way materially to convey the love of God to others than by supplying their needs and helping them in their distress.

The church at Corinth was encouraged by Paul to extend that love to the brethren in Jerusalem who were enduring a famine. God’s people today give so others can be supported by the church to continue their work as missionaries and evangelists, and many more are supported by the church in their everyday needs through the distribution of those funds to brethren who are in need. The ability for the church to help others with the tool of money is a blessing, and to withhold that good to whom it is most due, i.e., God, is an egregious error.

Discussion Questions

1. How does God expect us to give? Why?
2. What are some challenges modern Christians face in their giving?
3. How does materialism negatively affect our relationship with God?
4. What causes people to withhold their contributions?
5. How can God's people become better givers?

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Lesson 27–Special Topics

CARRYING A CROSS IN A WORLD OF COMFORT

Michael S. Green

“Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.”

2 Corinthians 11:29-31

Can you imagine if the Lord Jesus Christ had said these words about us?

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” Acts 9:15-16

[All Scripture references from the New American Standard Bible 95 unless otherwise noted]. To be used by God as a spokesperson for the gospel is a great honor, but to be told you would suffer greatly for it is a test of faith. There is no record of Ananias repeating these words to Paul, but we have extensive accounts of their fulfillment. What was Paul’s attitude towards suffering? How was he able to bear up under such deep pain? What implications are there for our own suffering?

The Heart of the Message

Paul was keenly aware of the criticism of his ministry. There is perhaps no greater apology for his ministry than that presented in 2 Corinthians. “Paul’s method of personal exposure and transparency (in 2 Corinthians) is unlike any of his other extant letters. His sense of urgency and awkwardness is revealed in a simple reading as the apostle’s self-defense or self-apologetic is laid bare before the reader.”¹ Indeed, one may conclude a defense of his ministry is the central purpose of writing in 2 Corinthians.

Part of Paul’s defense of his apostleship involved an appeal to his heritage and his sufferings. He heard all the criticism: “For

¹ Mark S. Gignilliat, *Paul and Isaiah’s Servants: Paul’s Theological Reading of Isaiah 40–66 in 2 Corinthians 5:14–6:10*, ed. Mark Goodacre, vol. 330 (N.P.: T&T Clark, 2007), 33.

they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible’” (2 Cor. 10:10). Paul’s defense of his apostleship in the letter comes to a crescendo in 2 Corinthians 11 with a forceful and direct response to his critics.

We are confronted in this chapter with an astonishing example of courage in the face of danger for the sake of the gospel. In attempting to defend his ministry against baseless attacks, Paul provides a model for Christians seeking to bear up under sufferings and trials in this life. Furthermore, this section of Scripture forces us to examine difficult questions about a Savior who would allow one of His chosen servants to suffer so tremendously.

Message for Today

- **What was Paul’s “bold” defense?**
- **When we are weak, He is strong.**
- **We serve a Savior who allows suffering.**

What was Paul’s “bold” defense? Beginning in chapter 10 and continuing to the current pericope under consideration, Paul makes a prolonged defense of his apostleship against his rivals at Corinth. Having already asserted in chapter 10:17-18 that “...one who boasts is to boast in the Lord” and “it is not the one who commends himself that is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends,” Paul nevertheless makes what he calls his “bold” defense. Since the Corinthians were willing to tolerate foolish boasting, Paul says he, too, will boast (cf. 11:17-20). We find the pronoun *kagō*, translated “I too” or “so am I,” four times in verses 21-22 (six times if we go back to verse 16). Thus, whatever strength these rivals could boast of in the flesh, so could Paul and more so. Could they boast of their Jewish heritage in the flesh? So could Paul. Could they boast of being servants of Christ? So could Paul. It is this final comparison—that of being a servant of Christ—which prompts Paul to enumerate his sufferings for the cause of Christ. The list is indeed bold.

When we are weak, He is strong. If Paul’s repeated use of *kagō* indicted equality with his rivals, his use of *hyper egō*, translated “I more so” (v. 23), indicates superiority in every way to these rivals as a servant of Christ. What is the basis of Paul’s “bold boast” that he is superior as a servant of Christ to those who were attacking his apostleship? Paul asserts it is his sufferings for the cause of Christ. Paul catalogues his weaknesses—what in any other

circumstance may appear as defeats—as a means of dispelling any notion his apostleship is not legit. “Quite possibly the sufferings incurred in his own ministry as set forth in the ‘speech’ as it unfolds were, in themselves, sufficient to discredit the ministry of these triumphalists without further comment.”² Strength in weakness seems like an oxymoron, but when Paul’s sufferings were compared to the price his rivals had paid as so-called servants of Christ, the evidence overwhelmingly gave validity to Paul’s ministry. Like Jesus who learned obedience through what he suffered (Hebrews 5:8), so also Paul could claim his sufferings granted validity to his ministry and demonstrated his position as a servant of Christ far beyond what his rivals could claim.

We serve a Savior who allows suffering. What Paul learned and what his life and apostleship demonstrated is that the path to genuine faith is most easily accessed through humility and grace. More importantly, when viewed properly, sufferings for the cause of Christ can be understood as a means for demonstrating the goodness of God and His commendation of our status as servants of Christ. What Paul affirms in this chapter is what Jesus Christ first taught and demonstrated in His earthly ministry (cf. Matt. 5:10-12). Jesus taught us that if the world treated Him in such a manner, we should expect the same as His followers. Perhaps there is no greater example of this truth than the apostle Paul, who viewed suffering for Christ as a gift granted to the believer (cf. Phil. 1:29).

A Message of Hope for You

The Lord told Ananias that he would show Paul “how much he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:16). While this may present difficult questions for believers today, we should not fret. The rest of the New Testament provides a clear response to what the Lord meant. First, Paul was used as an instrument of the Lord to demonstrate the faithfulness of God during human sufferings. The fact is that few Christians have suffered as Paul did for Christ. This fact provides believers with hope that we, too, can bear up under the trials of this life. Second, Paul’s attitude of strength in weakness is worthy of emulation. Human pride is a great threat to genuine faith. By boasting only in the areas of our

² Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 539.

life where God is magnified, such as in perseverance through trials, we diminish the temptation of allowing arrogant pride to take hold in our life. Third, Paul's defense of his apostleship in 2 Corinthians demonstrates a proper way of dealing with those committed to undermining our efforts for the gospel because of their own selfish motives. Paul's genuine character was abundantly evident for the honest observer. Each Christian today should strive to have such a character.

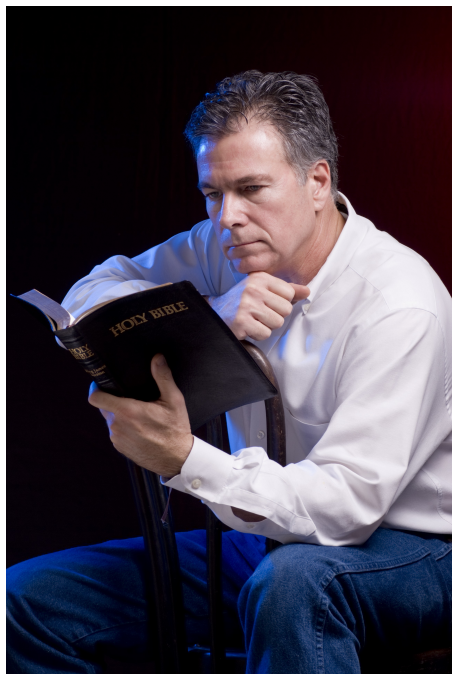
In conclusion, God delights in the suffering servant motif (cf. Isa. 53). Both Jesus and Paul demonstrate this motif in the New Testament. Our suffering brings the Lord no pleasure, but it provides an opportunity for the demonstration of the kind of faith that pleases God (1 Pet. 4:16). Paul's defense of his ministry in 2 Corinthians provides insight into how those of us who are Christians today can face persecution and opposition without compromise. May we all strive to understand this and emulate Paul's great example and attitude towards suffering.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the different views of suffering in the world today (e.g., the charge of meaningless suffering, "everything happens for a reason," etc.)
2. What do we learn about suffering from the apostle Paul in the New Testament?
3. How can we encourage others who are experiencing a season of suffering with what we have learned in this lesson?
4. How do we answer those who question how a good God could allow such terrible suffering?

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“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

2 Corinthians is not easy to follow. In fact, abrupt topical and tonal changes have led some scholars to question its essential unity. But the meandering flow of this letter could be explained on the grounds that it is Paul's most personal and emotional letter.

Confronted with persecution from unbelievers, interruption of his travel plans, and even opposition from a minority segment of the Corinthian congregation, Paul is forced to defend his decisions, actions, ministry, and apostleship. Along the way, he supplies some of the most encouraging and comforting teaching in the entire New Testament.

This book, suitable for junior high through adult classes, provides students with an overview of 2 Corinthians. It offers not only encouragement and perspective to finish what we have started in Christ, but also comfort when life proves difficult and unfair because of our allegiance to Christ.