

A RESEARCH PACKET FOR II CALIFORNIANS  
A SERMON SERIES THROUGH 2 CORINTHIANS

1. GOD OF COMFORT   2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-11	1
2. AROMA OF CHRIST   2 CORINTHIANS 2:17-17	13
3. UNVEILED FACES   2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-18	21
4. TREASURE IN JARS OF CLAY   2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-18	32
5. MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION   2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21	43
6. UNEQUALLY YOKED   2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-18	49
7. GRACE OF GIVING   2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-15 & 9:6-15	60
8. DEMOLISHED STRONGHOLDS   2 CORINTHIANS 10:3-5	72
9. BOASTING IN WEAKNESS   2 CORINTHIANS 11 & 12	81
10. EXAMINING YOURSELVES   2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-14	95

## 1 – GOD OF COMFORT | 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-11

We embark upon a journey through the second letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. What we will read over the next two months is in my opinion one of the most beautifully crafted pieces of literature ever. The depth of 2 Corinthians is unparalleled. The letter itself is a puzzle in places, where Paul makes reference to these deep teachings that don't live on the surface of the letter.

What I'm trying to say is that 2 Corinthians takes time to understand. The first letter to the Corinthians was largely about forming their behavior. Paul took the opportunity to correct much of the sinful behavior that was taking place in the church at Corinth.

This letter seeks to form the soul. This letter points us to the deeper things of God.

Let's talk about the purpose for this letter: After Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth and while Paul was ministering in Ephesus, something happened in Corinth. Paul picked up his ministry in Ephesus immediately and headed back to Corinth to sort it out. There are likely two sources of issues in that church. First, some preachers arrived in Corinth whose message was not entirely consistent with Paul's. They countered and disparaged his words and also questioned in his character and his dignity as a preacher since he worked to support himself.

Second, a member of the community began causing trouble. We don't know who he was or what he did, but we do know that Paul took offense and decided to return to Corinth in order to deal with it. (If I had to guess, it was probably the guy having an affair with his stepmother whom Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 5:1).

Regardless of what happened precisely, Paul's visit did not go well. Paul was saddened by this and pained by his experience. So Paul returned to Ephesus and continued his ministry there. Paul did not feel it appropriate to return to Corinth again to deal with issues rising in the church again. Instead, he wrote a

letter, which we do not have access to. He sends his compatriot Titus to deliver the letter and to continue the work of raising financial support for the church. Paul finished up his time in Ephesus and then went to the port of Troas to wait for Titus to return from Corinth. When Titus didn't return, he moved on to Macedonia and likely Philippi, where he found support among the believers. It was there that Titus met with Paul and delivered a pretty good report! The community punished the guy making trouble (maybe a little too harshly) and repented and was ready to receive Paul's teaching again.

Therefore, Paul wrote another letter, which we call 2 Corinthians. He sent that letter with Titus in order to explain and defend his ministry and likely to clear up much of what had gone wrong on Paul's last visit and during their correspondence. And also he wrote to prepare the Corinthians for another visit from him. The letter was likely written around 54 AD.

Mainly, Paul writes this letter to correct the Corinthians on the deeper nature of their belief. The preachers who came to Corinth to dispute with Paul's teaching had inserted some wrong ideas into the church there. Paul was writing to correct it.

Now, let's talk a little about Corinth the city. By the time of Paul, it was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, which we today would call southern Greece. (Today, Corinth is about an hour drive away from Athens, so not too far at all.) After its destruction, the city was re-founded by Julius Caesar in 44 BC, as a destination city for former slaves to buy property.

Corinth was a major commercial center, sitting on two major trade routes. Since the city was located on the sea, it served as a port city for sailors wishing either to travel west to Adriatic Sea or east to the Aegean Sea. Corinth was also on a major land route called the Peloponnesian Way that ran north-south from Corinth in the south all the way to Macedonia in the north.

The city was also prone to earthquakes. A city that's a big commercial center and is prone to earthquakes? That sounds kinda like Los Angeles.

So, Paul is in the midst of trying to fix what has utterly broken in Corinth. Although the church has repented and is willing to listen to Paul's teaching, he

still has to deal with the false teachers who came in to muck everything up. He will spend this entire letter fixing the “deep stuff” of the faith. This letter is not for someone looking to learn Christianity 101. We’re stepping into upper level stuff.

***<sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,***

Let’s just get this out of the way nice and early. We’re going to see the word “comfort” spring up in this section of the letter nine times. It’s very clear that Paul at the very first wants to comfort the people to whom he’s writing. They’ve been through a lot. There’s been a lot of harsh words said. And the Christians in Corinth meanwhile cannot have been having an easy go of things in a major pagan city. So Paul wants to start with the right emotional tone.

Comfort. The Greek word is *parakaleo* (pronounced par-ah-kah-lay-o), which means “to call alongside.” The ancient Greeks would use the word to call someone over to them or to ask someone for help. Meanwhile, a *paraklete* is someone who “walks alongside you.” The way we translate the word *paraklete* is “counselor.”

And that picture makes sense. When you counsel or comfort someone, you walk alongside of them through their difficulty. In the Gospel of John, this word is what Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit. He is the Comforter. He is the Counselor. He will walk alongside you in the midst of trouble.

So when we say that God is a God of Comfort, it means that He is near to you. He isn’t a far-off deity who watches you struggle while He remains safe in His ivory tower in heaven. No, God walks with you through the darkness. He walks with you through misery. He walks with you through trauma and grief and sickness and death. God walks with you every step of the way through the Holy Spirit.

It makes sense that Paul begins with the emotional tone of comfort. It’s almost as if he’s saying, “Corinthians, I am walking alongside you through this mess, and God walks alongside each and every one of us.”

Paul begins his letter as he begins many of his letters, with a blessing. According to Jewish tradition, this is called a *berakot*, where you bless God before getting to the matters at hand. Now, when a person blesses God, they are not giving anything to Him. They're not offering blessings to Him. Instead, they are thanking for the blessings that He has bestowed. They are offering God praise for the blessings He bestows. In this case, that blessing takes the form of comfort.

It also takes the form of compassion, though. Because Paul says that God is the God of compassion. The Greek word for "compassion" is *oiktirmos* (pronounced oyk-tier-moss), which can also mean "heartfelt sympathy." God sympathizes with us, which means that He sees our point of view and He understands how difficult it must be. And that's another way in which God is our corner: He understands what we're going through.

Let's consider the words of Hebrews 4:15...

*<sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.*

Paul begins this letter with a very emotional view of God, and that makes sense because his situation with the church in Corinth is quite emotional as well. But Paul praises God because He understands what we're going through and He walks alongside of us. That's quite a powerful thing.

*<sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.*

Let's throw another Greek word into the mix, the one that means "trouble." The Greek word is *thlipsis* (pronounced thuh-lips-iss), which means "something that presses you down" or "something that crushes you" or "something that oppresses you." It's the word used for tribulation in the New Testament. Also, it's the word used for suffering in the New Testament.

And all of this forms a neat little picture for us. Imagine you're walking along in life and something knocks you down. Well, it's difficult to stand back up again and walk forward after you've been knocked down. You wonder if you're going to get knocked down again.

Suffering and tribulation and troubles are the things in life that knock us down or push us down or press us down or hold us down. They are the things in the life that prevent us from moving forward.

And so, in this verse we see that the Lord walks alongside of us while we're being knocked down or pushed down or pressed down. And He does this, so that we can help others who have been knocked down by life as well.

The truth is that we're all walking forward together. Or at least we should be. God picks us up when we fall, and we pick up others when they fall. That's the nice thing about comfort and counsel. The comfort that we receive, we can also give. And the comfort we give, can be given to others.

In fact, this is a good test for your spiritual health: When you receive comfort from God and from others, do you share that comfort with people who need it? Or do you vacuum up as much comfort as you can and never disperse it among others?

As a pastor, one trepidation I always have is being confronted by an emotional vampire. You know the type. You try to help them, but they won't put in any work to get better. They just expect you to fix them. They expect you to pick them up when they fall down. They expect you to be available to them 24/7 whenever they need help.

Don't be an emotional vampire. Don't just drain the joy and compassion from people's hearts. You need to take the comfort you have received from others and pass it on to others.

Why? Because you'll find that the act of comforting someone else brings you comfort as well. Remember, we're all walking forward together, side by side. Picking each other up when we fall down.

***<sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.***

Here's a weird concept: The sufferings of Christ flow over into your life if you're a Christian. What does that mean?

Well, the Greek word for "flow over" is *perisseuo* (pronounced paris-sue-oh), which means "to have an abundance" or "to have more than enough." Imagine you're a restaurant and the waiter begins to pour water into your glass, but he gets distracted and the water pours over and onto the table.

In that situation, you would have an overabundance of water. You have far more than you need, so much so that it spills over. In certain cases, having an overabundance is a good thing. If you had an overabundance of gold, that wouldn't be so bad. In certain cases, having an overabundance is bad. For instance, if you had an overabundance of mosquitos in your room.

It all depends on what we're talking about.

So, the sufferings of Christ spill over into our lives. What does that mean? Well, Jesus Himself told us what it meant when he spoke in John 15:18-25...

*<sup>18</sup> "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. <sup>19</sup> If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. <sup>21</sup> They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. <sup>22</sup> If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. <sup>23</sup> He who hates me hates my Father as well. <sup>24</sup> If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. <sup>25</sup> But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.'*

This is Jesus' way of saying: "Listen, they hate me for what I'm saying. I'm calling them out on their sin and asking them to repent. They think they're right. So they hate me, and they're going to hurt me and kill me. And guess what? If you're associated with me, you're going to receive the same kind of treatment."

It's at least nice to hear the truth rather than to be surprised by it. People have reacted negatively and even violently to the gospel for two thousand years. They reacted negatively when Jesus first preached it, and they've reacted negatively throughout history.

And the reason why is because the gospel bids people to change. The gospel demands you change the way you think and the way you behave. The gospel shows you the better way, the narrow road to salvation. But many people don't want to walk that path. They don't want to deal with the pain that arises when you go through a metamorphosis. They don't want to deal with the fact that what they've thought and done for years has been wrong. So, they react negatively. They hate Jesus, and they hate the people who represent Him.

The sufferings of Christ spill over to us. But so does the comfort of Christ. Because we're not alone. Remember, we're all walking forward together.

***<sup>6</sup> If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.***

Now, Paul switches to the defense of his ministry. Because there are preachers who have come to Corinth and are challenging the work of Paul in service of the gospel. And their argument is pretty easy to formulate from the context. They likely said, "If Paul is so correct about all of this, then why does he suffer so much? Where is the blessing in his life?"

And you could hear that argument in the mouth of a health-and-wealth televangelist today. If people suffer, then the way they're going about life must be wrong. Meanwhile, if people succeed, then we should follow them.

That kind of simple "a-to-b" thinking is wrong-headed. Instead, the truth is that the Christian life is fraught with trial and testing, especially if you dare to be a



leader in the church! And Paul defends himself and contradicts what the false teachers at Corinth have been saying. The reason why Paul suffers and is pressed down is so that the believers at Corinth can move forward toward salvation. And if Paul is relieved of his suffering, it's also so that the believers of Corinth can move forward.

All of this is instructional. Paul is trying to show the Corinthian believers what the Christian life looks like. Because until now, their expectation is that everything should always work out for them. If they've listened to these false teachers, they've believed that God will pad the corners of life for them and that God will only give them good days and good times as long as they believe hard enough for it.

But Paul is trying to show the Corinthians that the Christian life will have struggle and suffering and difficulty. Why? Because we struggle and suffer and go through difficulty so that others have a chance to be saved. We endure trial and tribulation so that others might have a chance to hear the gospel preached and a chance to find salvation from their sins. Until now, these Corinthian believers are immature in their faith. They believe that they are simply supposed to receive comfort when times are hard. That's how children are, by the way, and that's what they need. When they skin their knees or when they're bullied at school or when they fail a test, they need their parents to comfort them and to reaffirm their self-esteem.

But parents are different. Parents struggle at work and they struggle with the world and they struggle with the Parent Teacher Association, and they do all of this because they want to provide for their children.

The Corinthian believers are immature in their faith. Paul is calling them to step forward and become mature. Right now, they are spiritual children. Paul is calling them to be spiritual parents.

Paul is hoping to instill in them "patient endurance." The Greek word is *hupomone* (pronounced who-poh-moh-nay), and it means "to stand still" or "to courageously resist an enemy attack."

Imagine you are defending a city. Before you, there is an enemy of force of thousands. Behind you, the innocent women and children of the city are fleeing into the open country in order to escape. You are not sure if you have the strength to defeat the forces in front of you. But still, you do not run. You stand. You fight. You resist the enemy as long as you can so that the innocents of the city are able to escape. That's what the word intends to describe.

The truth is that in the Christian life, over and over, we will face trials. Is the Christian life a miserable existence? Of course not! We will experience joy and peace on the road to salvation from the Lord! But we will also face many troubles and we will have many nights of tears and of grief and anxiety.

In order to walk the narrow road to salvation, we need to have the patience to continue to withstand the enemy's attacks. Mature believers understand that they will continue to face difficulty and oppression in this world until they are together with the Father in glory. When we can embrace that, then we are on the road toward maturity in our faith.

***<sup>7</sup> And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.***

But now, Paul reaffirms the Corinthian believers. His hope is "firm." The Greek word there is *bebaios* (pronounced beh-buy-oss), which means "trustworthy" or "dependable." It spoke of a person who had unwavering and unshakable loyalty.

Paul is saying that his hope in the Corinthians is not unfounded. He has an expectation that these believers will indeed mature in their faith. He knows that big things are ahead for them. And the reason why is because these believers are already sharing in Paul's difficulties. Instead of running away from the issues, they are willing to sit in them with Paul.

***<sup>8</sup> We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence***

*of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*

Though there is some debate among scholars (as there always is), the event that Paul is talking about is likely the riot in Ephesus that marked the end of Paul's ministry in that city. Ephesus, of course, is in the province of Asia, and this was certainly an event that likely made Paul fear for his life:

<sup>23</sup> *About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way.* <sup>24</sup> *A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen.* <sup>25</sup> *He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business.* <sup>26</sup> *And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all.* <sup>27</sup> *There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."*

<sup>28</sup> *When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"* <sup>29</sup> *Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater.* <sup>30</sup> *Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him.* <sup>31</sup> *Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.*

<sup>32</sup> *The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.* <sup>33</sup> *The Jews pushed Alexander to the front, and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people.* <sup>34</sup> *But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"*

<sup>35</sup> *The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: "Men of Ephesus, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great*

*Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? <sup>36</sup> Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash. <sup>37</sup> You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. <sup>38</sup> If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. <sup>39</sup> If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. <sup>40</sup> As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of today's events. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it." <sup>41</sup> After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly (Acts 19:23-41).*

Imagine that this happened to you. Imagine that a massive mob came and grabbed two of your close friends and that you could not jump into the fray to save them. Imagine that they dragged your two friends and threw them into the local amphitheater and that you were very sure they would die.

That's a traumatic event. That's beyond trauma. Not only are you afraid you'll be hurt or killed, but you're afraid that you're going to get other people hurt and killed as well. I am convinced that this event weighed heavily on Paul's conscience for the rest of his life. I bet he could hear the shouting of the Ephesians in his ears: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians."

Paul says he was "under great pressure." The Greek word there is *bareo* (pronounced bar-ay-oh), which means "weighed down." It was a nautical term used to describe ballast, which were bags of sand or metal that you would place at different points on a ship in order to get weight just right so that the ship wouldn't tip over and fall. So, imagine Paul is being weighed down with bags upon bags of sand. The weight is too heavy for him to lift. He cannot lift it on his own. You could probably feel that weight upon your chest.

The pressure in Ephesus was so great at that point, that Paul believed he and his companions would surely die. They believed it was the end for them. This is the height of human turmoil.

But this happened for a reason. Paul, through the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, sees his situation quite differently. Instead of staying in the muck and mire of his

trauma and his anxiety, he reframes the situation. All of this happened so that he might rely on God.

The truth is that we will all enter a storm of some kind in our life. We will enter a situation that we do not have the power to face. The weight of life upon us will be too great for us to lift.

In those situations, we turn to the One who created the universe and who raises the dead back to life. Those situations are opportunities for us—painful opportunities, no doubt!—to enrich our relationship with the Lord. It's a chance for us to develop a relationship with trust with the Shepherd who leads us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

***<sup>10</sup> He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, <sup>11</sup> as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.***

Paul was delivered from the mob in Ephesus. He was rescued by the Lord. And the Lord will continue to rescue us.

Finally, Paul reminds us of the key to this whole process: prayer. All of the Christian life is a dance, where we pray to the Lord for deliverance and He delivers us and we thank the Lord for our deliverance and we get better at praying to the Lord.

The best part of this process of going through difficulty and finding comfort and deliverance from God is that we grow closer to Him.

## 2 – AROMA OF CHRIST | 2 CORINTHIANS 2:17-17

Well, this is a fun paragraph. What we have here is a multi-sensory experience. In a few verses, Paul writes so that his audience sees, hears and smells exactly what he is talking about. There are a few themes that will take some explanation for these four verses.

Here's the context: Paul has just finished catching up the Corinthians on the goings-on regarding his ministry. Now, he is about to launch a lengthy defense of his missionary efforts around the world. If we remember the whole point behind the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing partly because false teachers have infiltrated the church in Corinth and are teaching that Paul's ministry is illegitimate.

So now, Paul will begin to defend himself and speak to what his ministry has accomplished in the world. When we read "we" in these verses, Paul is specifically speaking about himself and his missionary companions. However, we can identify with these verses.

For the believer today, this is an encouragement to share your faith. If you are engaged in the act of sharing your faith with others, then these verses apply to you. In these verses, Paul is sharing his experience as a man committed to sharing the gospel wherever he can. I pray it's our experience as well.

***<sup>14</sup> But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ ...***

Traditionally, a letter from Paul begins like this, where he offers thanks to God. And what this signals to us in this particular letter is that this is where the meat of Paul's intention will come out. Let's remember: This letter is about Paul defending his ministry against people who have questioned him.

Paul thanks God because He has led Paul in a "triumphal procession." Let's unpack this big metaphor because instantly Paul's readers would have seen a huge picture in front of them. A triumphal procession is a parade. In particular, it's a parade where a conquering general gets to ride on a chariot through the city after he has accomplished victory for his people.

We are actually fortunate enough to have an account of such a triumphal procession written for us by the Jewish historian Josephus. This is a quick summary of the account of the procession after Titus and his father Vespasian sacked Jerusalem. *(In case you wanted to read the whole thing, I copied the text into the next section after the notes).*

- The Romans took 700 of the tallest and handsomest Jewish soldiers in order to march them through the city as their conquered foes.
- The entire city emptied out to see Titus and Vespasian as they returned from victory. It was almost like a homecoming parade. People would crowd along the route of the procession, and it would be standing room only.
- The soldiers went out to the city gates in order to receive their conquering heroes.
- Titus and his father Vespasian were crowned with laurel wreaths and wore the royal purple and marched out to meet the Senate.
- Once they arrived at the Senate, they sat down in white chairs as their soldiers cried praises unto them. Then, Vespasian and Titus offered prayers and short speeches and then all of their soldiers left to the feasts prepared for them.
- Then Vespasian and Titus traveled through the Gate of Pomp and marched through the city and through the local outdoor theaters and amphitheaters so that the people could get a good look at their conquering heroes.
- Along the parade, men would carry ornate figurines of silver and gold and ivory. They would also carry old Babylonian artwork and rare purple cloth hangings.
- The parade also had animals! The Romans would lead exotic animals along the procession route.
- Also in the parade, the 700 captured Jewish soldiers were marched so that the crowd could get a good look at the men who were defeated by the Romans.
- On the procession, there were floats carried by strong men. Upon the floats, men and women acted out stories from the Jewish War. The floats were sometimes were three and even four stories tall, and on the top stood commanders from the defeated Jewish cities. (Josephus had no

clue how they were carried along the parade route. He was positive they would fall over.)

- The greatest attraction of all was a gold table, presumably taken from the Temple in Jerusalem. (The Temple was completely destroyed except for the Western Wall which still stands today). They also carried a Torah scroll at the back of the parade.
- The procession ended at the Temple of Jupiter, where they executed Simon bar Giora, the man who led the revolt against the Romans which ended in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

All of that took place because the Romans defeated the Jews in battle and leveled the city of Jerusalem in AD 70. The Romans knew how to celebrate their victories. For them, it was a morale booster for the people of Rome. It was an excuse to celebrate and show their might and to give the people a hero to cheer for.

The Romans would throw these parades any time they had a major military victory. So when Paul writes to the Corinthians about a victory parade, they've likely seen and experienced them before. They know what Paul is talking about.

Paul uses this image to describe his missionary journeys. Imagine that a victory parade like the one we see in Josephus kept going forever. Imagine that they left the city gates of Rome and they went up the length of Italy to the city of Florence and then they wrapped around and headed down to Macedonia and kept the march going through Thessalonica and Athens and Berea and Philippi and then they all got on boats and crossed the sea to Ephesus and kept the parade going on and on and on.

First of all, that would be a challenging feat to pull off! Second of all, the entire Roman world would be buzzing about it and couldn't wait for the parade to come to their city.

Paul describes a never-ending victory parade. The king and general that is being honored is Jesus Christ, the One who conquered death. And the slaves that are being pulled along are Paul and his fellow missionaries.



Because Jesus defeated Paul. Remember that Paul used to be named Saul and he was a persecutor of the church. Saul's mission was to destroy the Way. And on the road to Damascus, he was knocked over by the Son of God and was blinded. Saul was defeated by Jesus.

The Bible says in Romans 6:16-18...

*<sup>16</sup> Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? <sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. <sup>18</sup> You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

That was written by Saul, who changed his name to Paul. That's the same man, by the way, who often described himself in his letter as a slave of Jesus Christ. If Paul was in the triumphal procession, he knew exactly where he was. He was one of the defeated soldiers. He was a slave of the kingdom of God.

For Paul, this was how he described his approach to ministry. He would never present himself as "the guy," the hero who everyone needed to follow. He would never place himself at the front of the parade. No, Paul understood that Jesus was the conquering hero and that he was the conquered. And as the conquered soldier, Paul was an incredible mouthpiece for the victory that Jesus was already bringing to sinners all around the world.

*... and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. <sup>15</sup> For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.*

So, Paul has appealed to our sense of sight and sound. But now, he appeals to the sense of smell. Let's unpack a few Greek words in succession.

The Greek word for "fragrance" is *osme* (pronounced OSS-may), which means "a pleasant smell." It can also mean "a putrid or terrible smell," but mostly it refers to the nice scents.

The Greek word for “aroma” is *euodia* (pronounced you-OH-dee-ah), which means “a sweet smell.”

These two Greek words were often used *together*, especially in the Greek version of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint). Here’s an example of a verse where both words are used together in the Old Testament, in Genesis 8:20-21a...

*<sup>20</sup> Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. <sup>21</sup> The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma...*

So, now, let’s talk about sacrifices. In the Old Testament, the ancient people didn’t have a perfect view of God. I mean, we don’t have a perfect view of God in 2019 either, but you get my point. As far as they knew, God lived in the sky high above the earth. The ancient peoples believed that the earth was a flat disc of land that sat in a puddle of seawater and that the heavenly beings lived above the earth, separated by the sky.

When you sacrifice something, you’re literally giving it up for God. But the ancient civilizations couldn’t get into a rocket ship and take their fattened calf beyond the stars to God. There was difficulty in getting your sacrifice up to heaven. Therefore, people would burn their sacrifices. And the smoke would go up into the sky. And the belief was that God could smell the sacrifice and would receive it in that way.

For Paul, this is another image for how the Corinthians should think about his ministry. He’s saying that he is a sacrifice. He has written this very thing elsewhere in his letters...

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.*

Again, this is how Paul views himself in terms of his ministry and his missionary journeys. He isn’t the conquering hero at the head of the parade. He’s one of

the conquered slaves bringing up the rear. Paul isn't the dynamic and well-esteemed high priest. He's the sacrifice on the altar.

Paul's message is clear: His ministry is all about Jesus. When people smell Paul, they're not smelling his Axe Body Spray. They're not smelling a thousand-dollar cologne. They're smelling the grace of Jesus Christ. They're smelling the story of how Jesus gave up His life and opened the way to salvation for each and every one of us.

If people are swayed by what they see or hear or smell during Paul's ministry, it's because of Jesus and not because of Paul. He has no interest in being the hero of the story. He wants Jesus to be famous.

There's a couple more things I should point out about these one and a half verses. Paul is spreading the fragrance of the "knowledge" of Christ. For Paul, knowledge is not about facts and figures that you can recall from memory. Knowledge is about your experience.

Through Paul's ministry, people are experiencing Jesus. They are smelling Jesus. They are hearing Jesus. They are encountering Jesus. And this, of course, is because Paul is one part of the body of Jesus. He is part of the church, the physical manifestation of Jesus in the world.

What I should also point out is that Paul says that his ministry and missionary journeys are a pleasing aroma to God. That, too, is significant. Because this is the kind of sacrifice that the Father seeks. His desire is that each of us would share with the world the news of the sacrifice that saved us from our sins and from death.

***<sup>16</sup> To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?***

Paul again uses the Greek word *osme* twice here in this verse to assert again his image of the smell of a sacrifice. But Paul goes a step further. Remember that Paul is defending his ministry in these verses, and here is doing his utmost to state the seriousness with which he takes his calling.

Paul has never gone about his ministry as if his actions are “no big deal.” He understands that this is life-and-death stuff. He knows that he is placing a choice before people—salvation or judgment. And for him, the seriousness of his task is what drives him.

Paul did not go on his missionary journeys for money. In fact, Paul never took payment, but instead, he supported himself financially by making tents. And while this would have been easier for a man like Paul to accomplish since he was single and had no family, it was also for him a sign that he cared deeply about his ministry and that he was preaching not for wealth or for fame but because he wanted men and women to be saved. (The Apostle Peter brought his family with him on his missionary journeys and received wages for his apostleship so that he could take care of his family.)

Again, Paul knew that his words brought life to many but death to others. He did not take his station lightly. And that’s why he asks who is up to such a task.

The Greek word for “equal” is *hikanos* (pronounced hick-ON-us), which means “sufficient quality” or “enough.”

Paul is asking, “What preacher is sufficient to speak the words of life and death? Who is good enough to do such a thing?”

The answer to that hypothetical question is: no one. There is no person sufficient for the task. Even though the false teachers among the Corinthians likely carried themselves with a certain swagger, they were not worthy to do so. Because preaching the truth is a task no man is sufficient for.

Paul knows that when he speaks a message of salvation to sinners that he’s not sufficient for the task. That’s why he doesn’t view himself at the front of the parade. That’s why he sees himself as a sacrifice. Because in the act of humility, of lowering yourself before Christ, Paul finds the ability to speak and to preach because Christ speaks through him through the Holy Spirit.

Paul finds sufficiency to preach through Jesus alone.

***<sup>17</sup> Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.***

The Greek word for “peddle” is *kapeleuo* (pronounced cop-ay-LIEU-oh), which was a term used in the ancient world to describe phony philosophers. In the ancient Greek world, there were men who traveled around and gave shallow philosophical speeches for money. They would lecture and they would gain money for it, but none of his listeners would gain much of anything.

Today, we could accuse many “self-help gurus” of selling the same snake oil. We could certainly point to “social media influencers,” who tell people varying degrees of “fight for your dreams” and “never give up.” And yet, when you really open up their words, there isn’t much there. It’s shallow and bland and all designed to get you to open your pocketbook.

Paul didn’t do that. His fellow missionaries didn’t do that. Remember, Paul was never paid for his preaching. For him, that was a sign that he didn’t speak for personal gain. He spoke so that others could find salvation.

He says he speaks with “sincerity.” The Greek word there is *eilikrineia* (pronounced eye-lih-KRIN-ay-uh), which stands for the “light of the sun” or “spotless.” It’s a word used to denote moral purity.

For Paul, there’s no hidden agenda. His words are his words. There are no hidden shadows with him. Everything he is presenting to the world is pure and completely visible. He’s not like the false preachers with hidden agendas and hopes of getting rich. Instead, he’s doing this because he wants others to be saved.

### 3 – UNVEILED FACES | 2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-18

In order to understand these verses, we need to get the background. Paul is still defending his ministry. And in particular, he is defending it against false teachers who have come in to question Paul's preaching. Now, we can be reasonably certain that these false teachers are something that we would call Judaizers. Here is a sample of what the Judaizers would teach, from the book of Acts...

*Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."*

Among the church, there were some highly conservative believers who used to be Jews and who taught that anyone who wished to be saved would still need to follow the law of Moses. They were very strict in their faith, and they did not appreciate how Paul taught believers that they were no longer bound by the Old Testament covenant.

These false teachers leveled a number of accusations against Paul:

- If his gospel was true, he wouldn't suffer for it. God would protect him.
- If he actually believed his message, he would receive a wage for it.
- He should treat the Law of Moses with respect and require believers to keep it.
- He has no letters of recommendation. How can anyone trust him?
- He seems incompetent. He writes these heavy letters, but is he just as impressive in person?

These are insidious claims, and Paul goes to great lengths in this letter to unravel all of them. He already answered the previous two questions in the prior texts that we looked at, but now he'll attack the final three in that list above.

Regarding the letters of recommendation, who says he needs them? Paul has a heck of a recommendation: the Corinthian believers themselves! They are proof that the Gospel is effective and true because their lives have all been changed from the inside out!

Regarding his competence, Paul's not going to argue for himself. Instead, he's going to argue that God has made him competent to serve and to preach. His competence has nothing to do with his rhetorical ability or his leadership skills or his inherent magnetism. Instead, his competence relies entirely upon the power of God.

Regarding the Law of Moses, that's the subject at hand in these verses. Paul will argue that the covenant that God made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai does not apply to these new believers, especially to the Gentile believers. Instead, we have a new covenant with God. We have a covenant of grace.

***<sup>12</sup> Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.***

A key question to ask in Bible research is the following: "What is the 'therefore' there for?" What has been going on before we arrived at this important verse?

So, Paul has divided the covenant of Moses and the covenant of Jesus into two separate camps. In fact, he calls them "ministries." The Old Testament ministry brought death because no person could possibly keep it perfectly. The Law of Moses was only good for judgment, for condemning mankind according to the sins.

But now, this new ministry brings life! This new ministry brings grace and salvation, washing away men's sins!

Therefore, if the Old Testament ministry brought glory, then how much more glory will this New Testament ministry bring? Paul is trying to make an argument saying, "Sure, we need to respect the Old Testament and acknowledge that God revealed His glory to Moses when He handed over the Law. But this new ministry and this new covenant has been given to us by Jesus! So how much more glory we will see through this new ministry that God has handed to us!"

That's why Paul is so bold. He's confident in the source of this new message. This was not divined by a man. This was not created by a committee of people. This ministry was instituted by Jesus Himself.

Now, Paul says that he has "hope." Why? Because he hasn't been saved yet. He hasn't seen the full effect of this new ministry. However, he is "leaping in expectation," knowing that if takes the jump into grace that he will be reward for his faith.

This hope makes Paul "bold." The Greek word there is *parresia* (pronounced par-ay-SEE-uh), which means "free speech" or "openness." And basically, it refers to your ability to speak freely. If you feel like you can say anything, openly and without edit, then you are experiencing boldness.

For instance, imagine you're at a car dealership and you want to buy a car. You're not going to tell the car salesman everything you're thinking. Why? Because he will exploit every little foothold you give him in order to get you to pay more money on the car! You cannot be completely open with a car salesman.

However, imagine you're about to speak to a room of veterans about how to come back from the battlefield and restart your life back in the United States. In that situation, you want to tell the truth! You want to tell those men and women about everything they'll experience. And you don't want to hide any information because if you do, that audience will sniff it out and they will discount anything you have to say.

In the ancient world, the great Greek speakers spoke with this boldness and openness. They spoke with *ethos*, meaning that their listeners trusted what they had to say. They didn't have any hidden agendas, so the crowds listened to their words and lived by them.

In the same way, Paul is completely open about his ministry. He doesn't hide anything when it comes to Jesus. He is willing to speak about anything and everything!



***<sup>13</sup> We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away.***

The story that this refers to is in Exodus 34:29-35. It says...

*<sup>29</sup> When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. <sup>30</sup> When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. <sup>31</sup> But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. <sup>32</sup> Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai.*

*<sup>33</sup> When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. <sup>34</sup> But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, <sup>35</sup> they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.*

This is the story of how the Israelites received the Law of Moses. First, Moses went up to Mount Sinai, where God told him to carve two stone tablets for the Ten Commandments. (The reason why Moses needed to carve two new tablets was because he had smashed the first two tablets after he saw the Golden Calf the Israelites had fashioned as an idol.) Then, after Moses received the Ten Commandments, the Lord passed before him and showed His glory to Moses.

Third, the Lord promised to Moses that He would make a covenant with the Israelites. The Lord promised to do wonders before the eyes of the Israelites and to drive out their enemies so that the Israelites could take possession of the Promised Land.

However, in order to do this, the Israelites had to fulfill their end of the contract. The Israelites had to refrain from making treaties with the pagan nations around them. They had to abstain from making idols. They had to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In total, they had to follow 613 laws in order to keep their end of the covenant they made with the Lord.

When Moses came back down from the mountain after having received the Law from God, he would come back with his face shining like the sun. The reason for this was because he was spending time in the direct presence of the Lord. Whenever Moses came back down from the mountain, he would place a veil over his face so that no one could see the radiance coming from him. And when Moses went back up the mountain, he removed the veil.

According to Paul in this verse in 2 Corinthians 3:13, Moses did this out of a somewhat hidden agenda. As Paul argues, Moses didn't want the people of Israel to see that the glory of the Lord was fading away. Apparently, Moses didn't want the people to see that the glory of the Law of Moses was not an everlasting glory. Eventually, the shine would leave Moses' face.

The glory of the covenant the Lord made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai was always destined to disappear at some point. For Moses, it was a sign that this was not a perfect covenant and that this wouldn't define God's people for the rest of time. This was only a shadow of something much greater to come in the future.

***<sup>14</sup> But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup> Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.***

I would like to look at some Greek words in rapid succession, and then uncover what Paul is saying here:

The Greek word for "minds" is *noema* (pronounced NO-ay-mah), which means "thoughts" or "concepts."

The Greek word for "dull" is *poroo* (pronounced poh-RAH-oh), which means "to harden" or "to make stony."

The Greek word for "remove" is *anakalupto* (pronounced ah-nah-kah-LOOP-toe), which means "to uncover" or "to unveil."

The Greek word for “taken away” is *katargeo* (pronounced kah-tar-GEH-oh), which means “to render inactive” or “to destroy.”

The Greek word for “cover” is *keimai* (pronounced KAY-my), which means “to lie” or “to be laid upon.”

So, let’s put that altogether: (1) The Israelites at the time of Mt. Sinai had a certain way that they thought about God. And here’s some evidence for that: When the Lord was giving the Law to Moses, they built a golden idol to worship. Why did they think that was acceptable when they were pledged to the Lord? Clearly, it was because they still didn’t understand a lot about the Lord.

(2) Their thoughts about God were like stone. They were cemented into place. You couldn’t do much to change them. They had a clear bias that was unmovable.

(3) There was a clear disconnect between the truth of who God really is and who the Israelites thought He was. That disconnect is symbolized in a veil. Moses saw the truth of who God was. He stood in His presence, and the traces of God’s glory were left on Moses’ face. However, there was a separation between the Israelites and God. That separation was also symbolized in the massive curtain that hung in the Temple that guarded the Holy of Holies.

(4) Even to the day when Paul wrote his letter, when the Old Testament was read in the presence of the Jews, there was still a very big disconnect between the reality of God and the way that the Jews conceived of him. Their ideas about God did not line up with the reality of God. And that’s because when they read the Old Testament, they were not hearing what God wanted to say to them. They were only hearing what they wanted to hear.

(5) The disconnect is only destroyed through Jesus. And that makes sense because when Jesus, the curtain in the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The division between God and mankind was eradicated. Through Jesus, we can understand the reality of who God is. Why? Because Jesus is God in flesh.

(6) In Paul's time, however, people rejected Jesus. So, the disconnect stayed. As long as people reject Jesus, they will never fully see God. They can read the Old Testament as much as they want, but they don't have the key to understanding its true meaning. That key is Jesus.

***<sup>16</sup> But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.***

Let's keep going with the Greek word theme. The word for "turn" is *epistrepho* (pronounced epp-iss-TRAY-foh), which means "to twist upon something" or "to convert." Imagine you're riding a bike and you leave the road and start riding on gravel. You're bumping up and down. You look to your right and see some black top that would be much better for riding. So you twist and turn your handlebars and your body to steer the bike toward the blacktop and you get the bike on a better surface. That's the meaning of the word.

The best way to translate it, of course, is "to convert." When anyone converts to the Lord, Paul says, the veil is taken away.

The Greek word for "taken away" is *periaireo* (pronounced perry-eye-REH-oh), which is the same word used in Acts 27:40 to mean "to cut anchor." And that's a wonderful picture of the word.

So, here's the picture. For hundreds of years, the Israelites did not understand who God really was. There was a separation between God and them. Sometimes, it was a veil that Moses wore on his face. Sometimes, it was a curtain in the Temple. Whatever it was, they just didn't understand who He was.

What's worse, the Israelites had deeply ingrained ideas about who God really was—ideas that were wrong. And we see many of those bad ideas when Jesus showed up. The Israelites believed they should never come into contact with a Gentile or that they would be unclean. The Israelites believed that there were certain people that God didn't love.

Those ideas weighed down upon them like an anchor. And that's such a strong metaphor because the Israelites desperately wanted to see God and know God and live in God's presence. But their wrong ideas of Him held them back.

They couldn't walk forward to God's kingdom because they were anchored down by who they thought He was.

However, if anyone converts to Jesus, that anchor is cut. Because Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. Jesus is the road by which we find the Father and by which we enter paradise. Jesus is the One who cuts the anchor of our biases and our wrong ideas and helps us find the road.

And listen, the Israelites weren't the only ones who had wrong ideas about God! Let's talk about the Gentiles who believed there were *multiple gods* and that they gave you gifts when you sacrificed to them and they punished you when you forgot about them. Let's talk about the Buddhists who believe there is no God and that everything we see is an illusion and that we must be reincarnated many times in order to find nirvana. Let's talk about Muslims and their many wrong concepts about how God saves us.

We have to leave those wrong-headed ideas behind and admit that we really didn't know anything about God until we met Jesus. But when we see Jesus face to face and when we meet him and when we experience him, then that anchor is severed. Then, our stony hearts become flesh. Then, the veil is taken away, and we can see the truth of who God is.

We see the truth of God through Jesus.

***17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.***

When we convert to the Lord, we are filled with the Holy Spirit. And because we are no longer anchored down, we are free.

The Greek word for "freedom" is *eleutheria* (pronounced ELL-you-thair-ee-ah), which has a storied history. It's a word that has defined the Western world for over two thousand years. The Greek word means "to act on your own behalf," and that notion is what formed the great republics and democracies of the world. The fact that people will be able to live for themselves and for their families rather than under the wishes of a slaveowner or a king is what made the great nations of that time and the great nations of today.

In this verse, we are free from the anchors that hold us back. Because the Holy Spirit guides us into the truth. The Corinthians should have known this because Paul wrote them this in his first letter:

<sup>6</sup> We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. <sup>7</sup> No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. <sup>8</sup> None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. <sup>9</sup> However, as it is written:

*"No eye has seen,  
no ear has heard,  
no mind has conceived  
what God has prepared for those who love him"—*

<sup>10</sup> but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

**The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. <sup>11</sup> For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup> We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. <sup>13</sup> This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. <sup>14</sup> The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. <sup>15</sup> The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment:**

<sup>16</sup> *"For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?"*

*But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).*

The Holy Spirit guides us into truth. The Holy Spirit frees us from our wrongheaded notions about God. The Holy Spirit breaks through the stone of our bias and helps us see the reality of God's kingdom.

When the Spirit of the Lord is living in your heart, you are free. You are no longer stuck in the muck and mire of your sin or of your ignorance or of your blindness. Because now you have found the road to paradise—the road called Jesus Christ.

***<sup>18</sup> And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.***

When we untangle the previous verses of this section, this verse that at first glance looks so daunting is now easily understood:

(1) We have unveiled faces because there is no division between us and God. There is no disconnect between who God is and who we think He is. And the reason there is no disconnect is because we have met Jesus, God in flesh.

(2) We reflect the glory of God. Moses hid the glory of God on his face because the Israelites would not fully understand it. But we reflect the glory of God because Jesus has come and has shown us the full extent of God's love on this earth. Our job is not to hide God's glory but to shine it all throughout the world. We are mirrors, reflecting the light of God into the dark corners of the world.

(3) As we reflect God's light into the darkness, we are transformed by that light. And the reason we are transformed is because we are experiencing Jesus. When we spend time with Jesus, we cannot help but be transformed by Him and look more like Him. The goal of the Christian life is to be transformed into the image of Jesus, to love like Jesus loved and to serve like Jesus served and to live like Jesus lived.

(4) The glory of God is ever-increasing. And the reason for that is when we turn to God, we are reflecting His glory throughout the world. But we are also reflecting that glory back to God. When we are transformed into Jesus, our

friends and neighbors will take notice of the changes in our lives. And they will begin asking questions. How did you get so kind? How did you get so loving? How did you gain such self-control? In those moments, we tell the truth about what God has done in our lives. He gets the glory.

There is no limit on the glory of God. There is no room that can contain it. There is no vault that can hold it. There is no universe that can command it. The glory of God is always increasing exponentially. It's always rising. Because as more and more people come to the faith, they reflect the glory back to the Father.

(5) This is a Trinitarian verse. Because we see God the Father and God the Son and God the Spirit all here. This is a joint effort. The Father sent the Son. The Son showed the world what the Father was like. The Son returned to the Father and sent the Spirit to show what the Son and what the Father is like. God is self-reinforcing. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit all work together in concert to transform this world.



## 4 – TREASURE IN JARS OF CLAY | 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-18

So, we embark upon what is likely my favorite chapter in all of Scripture. Some say that the chapters of the resurrection should be my favorite. Or Romans 8. Or Revelation 22. Or Genesis 1.

Nah. This is it. This is what I live for. This chapter speaks to my soul. It spoke to me as a child, as a young adult, as a college kid, as a post-college adolescent and now as a 33-year old father of two.

I haven't gone through intense persecution in my life. Not like what the Corinthians likely encountered. And certainly not like many, many believers throughout history have faced. To be sure, on this day in heaven are many faithful followers who read these words and found power within them much more than I have.

All that being said, this is my favorite chapter in the Bible. Let's dive in.

***Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.***

Maybe I should speak a bit more to what's going on here. Paul is in the middle of defending his ministry to the Corinthians. While he has been away from the church, false teachers swept behind him in order to steal away the converts. These false teachers probably taught a message similar to that of the Judaizers, that converts to Christ still had to submit to certain tenets of the Old Testament. Like circumcision, for instance.

The exact content of the false teaching is uncertain. What is certain is the nature of the attack these false teachers launched on Paul. Basically, the false teachers argued:

*Look at this dude, Paul. He's just an unsuccessful punk. If his message was legit, he'd be making boatloads of money from it, and he'd be super popular. But he isn't either of those things. He's an unimpressive, poor twerp. So don't listen to him, and instead, you should listen to us.*

The false teachers argued that if Paul's message was true, then his ministry would be far more impressive and large. So Paul here defends himself and writes to the Corinthians to explain why this won't necessarily be the case.

The good news is that Paul isn't sweating what these false teachers are saying. He knows the origin of his ministry, that he has been called by the Lord. That's why he doesn't "lose heart." The Greek word there is *enkakeo*, which means "to give in to the bad" or "to go into the bad." Honestly, I think this Paul's best word for saying, "I'm not going to allow this to sink me into depression."

Paul is saying that he knows things are a bit rough right now and they don't look too good for him, but he knows that the Lord has entrusted this ministry to him and he also isn't going to let himself get down on himself and sink into despair. He's going to fight.

***<sup>2</sup> Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.***

Now, Paul launches back on his would-be attackers. He isn't going to deal in the trade of these false teachers who are peddling a false version of the gospel. Here is what he and his fellow missionaries have renounced:

- secret ways – Greek word: *kruptos*, meaning "something concealed or hidden."
- shameful ways – Greek word: *aischune*, meaning "something that brings shame or disgrace"
- deception – Greek word: *panourgia*, meaning "cunning" or "craftiness," probably thinking about the serpent from Genesis 3 who was more crafty than any of the other animals in the Garden of Eden
- distort the word of God – Greek word: *doloo* (pronounced do-law-oh), which means "to falsify" or "to tamper with."

So, let's put that all together. Paul isn't using rhetorical tricks to manipulate or hypnotize people. He isn't using hidden techniques to befuddle people. He isn't shaming himself or other people in order to get laughs or to get people's

attention. He isn't outright lying. And he isn't tampering with God's Word in order to make it sound better.

These other false teachers were definitely doing those things. But rather, Paul is just trying to tell the truth. He is "commending" himself, the Greek word being *sunistremi*, which means "to make known" or "to display."

All Paul is interested in doing is showing exactly who he is. No tricks. No lies. No fibs. It's just him, so that when men hear him they know they're speaking with a genuine human being.

***<sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.***

The reference to a "veil," recalls the previous chapter. In the previous chapter, we see that Paul uses the image of a veil to symbolize the disparity between who the Israelites thought God was and who He actually is. That veil was also the sign of a hard heart, or we could go even further and call it confirmation bias. The Israelites had hardened and calcified ideas about God and refused to change them.

That's what Paul is saying here in this verse. Some people are gonna reject the gospel because it doesn't line up with what they are so convinced is true. Paul can't worry about wasting his time with them. They've heard the gospel and they've rejected it, and they rejected it because they're on the road to perishing.

In the fourth verse, Paul brings up the "god of this age," which could mean a couple of different things. Traditionally, people have taken this to refer to the devil. And that's a good assessment because Paul talks quite a bit about the Enemy in this letter.

However, there's a different and somewhat compelling interpretation of this turn of phrase, that the "god of this age" is Paul referring to the zeitgeist of the Greco-Roman world. Of course, the zeitgeist is "the spirit of the times." In every generation, there's a particular feeling and pathway of the people. In

these days in the United States, the zeitgeist has turned toward political correctness and equal rights for minority groups (and the other half of the country, of course, has veered the opposite way). In ten years, the zeitgeist of the country will be different.

This very well could be Paul saying “the way things are these days” has blinded the minds of unbelievers. At this point, I should probably throw in my personal opinion, that both options are correct. The devil is a manipulative and broadly-thinking fellow. He likes to get people swept up into what everyone around them is saying is true.

The effects of the devil’s lies on the world has blinded people, Paul says. Everyone around thinks they have the answer. They think they know the way the world works already, so when they hear the gospel, they’re not able to see its truth or its light. They’ve closed their eyes and have stopped searching for what’s really going on in the world.

So Paul is saying, “Of course we’re having a tough time. We’re against some tough opposition!”

***<sup>5</sup> For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.***

We don’t need to dig too much here beyond what is on the surface of the text. Paul continues his defense by saying that he isn’t at the center of the message. And that makes sense because Paul almost always introduces himself as a “slave” or a “bondservant” to Jesus. He isn’t the front and center person, even if he’s preaching front and center.

Jesus is front and center in Paul’s preaching. Paul is just a servant of the ministry of Jesus.

And of course Paul would serve the Lord because he saw the light. For just as the Lord created light on the first day of creation, so also the Lord made his

light shine in Paul's heart. He illuminated his soul. He turned his heart into an incandescent light bulb.

Because when Paul met Jesus, he could see clearly. Which is actually funny because Paul was blinded after he met Jesus for the first time. And perhaps Paul is using that meaning in these verses. Paul had to become blind to realize that he was blinded to the gospel. When he realized this, he received his sight.

***<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.***

This isn't the most famous verse out of this chapter, but it's my favorite. And I'll admit it's because I was a big fan of the band Jars of Clay back in the day. But this verse has always spoken deeply to me.

This is also the central verse of the chapter upon which the rest of the verses hinge because this is Paul's foremost argument for why the message he preaches is true despite appearing so unimpressive in person and in wealth and in success.

The symbol at the center here is a clay jar. And the reason Paul selects that image is because of how ordinary and fragile it is. There is nothing remarkable about a clay jar. They were all over the place in that day. And they broke all the time. They were disposable. Replaceable.

However, the treasure within that jar was irreplaceable. The treasure in that jar was the truth of the gospel.

Here's what Paul is saying: Yes, I'm not the most impressive guy, but that's only to show that the power is coming from the Lord and not from us. All of the changed lives. All of the performed miracles. It's not because of Paul or his fellow missionaries. They're replaceable dudes. The power is coming from the Lord.

***<sup>8</sup> We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.***

Oh hey, these are the most famous verses in this chapter. Let's rip through some Greek words to pull out what Paul is saying...

- hard pressed – *thlibo*, which means "to be pressed down" or "to be squashed" or "to be oppressed"
- crushed – *stenochoreo*, which means "to be cramped into a narrow place" or "severe affliction"
- perplexed – *aporeo*, which means "to be uncertain" or "to be at a loss"
- in despair – *exaporeo*, which means "to fall completely into embarrassment" or "to be without any direction whatsoever"
- persecuted – *dioko*, which means "to be pursued with an intent to harm or kill" or "to be hunted"
- abandoned – *enkataleipo*, which means "to be forsaken" or "to be left alone," this was the Greek word used in Matthew 27:46 when Jesus cried: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- struck down – *kataballo*, which means "to be thrown down" or "to lay a foundation"
- destroyed – *apollumi*, which means "to totally annihilate" or "to bring to nothing"

In sum, Paul and his fellow companions have certainly been (1) oppressed by false teachers and by government officials, (2) they've often doubted which was the right way to go, (3) they've been hunted by others who seek to harm them, and (4) they've been knocked down.

However, Paul and his companions have certainly not been (1) crushed into a place where they cannot get out, (2) they have not completely at a loss for what to do, so much so that they would be an embarrassment, (3) they have not been abandoned by the protection of God, and (4) they haven't been brought to nothing or erased from history.

Paul is saying, "Yeah, it's been rough. My missionary journeys haven't been glamorous. But we're not done. We haven't been beaten. These false teachers gave us a good punch across the jaw, but we ain't knocked out."

***<sup>10</sup> We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. <sup>11</sup> For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. <sup>12</sup> So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.***

Now, Paul goes a step further into his argument. Not only will he and his fellow missionaries always experience mistreatment from the outside world, but also he and his companions will be handed over to death. Stephen has already been killed for his faith. James, as well. Paul will be executed for his faith. So will Peter. Many of the apostles will be murdered. And throughout history, many Christian believers were burned or run through or eaten by lions because of their faith in Christ.

This, too, is a defense of Paul's ministry. He admits that he and his companions will likely die for the words they preach. But that should be some kind of proof that he is saying isn't real. On the contrary, through Paul's death, others will find life. More than that, others will find eternal life.

Interestingly enough, sociologist Rodney Stark in his book *The Rise of Christianity* argues convincingly that the persecution of Christian believers was one of the reasons why the church grew so rapidly in the first 400 years of its existence. The fact that believers were martyred for their faith was a proof to their neighbors of how seriously they took their belief. It brought a seriousness to the gospel.

In the same way, Paul is saying that his death will bring life for others. And in truth, it did.

***<sup>13</sup> It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, <sup>14</sup> because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. <sup>15</sup> All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.***

There is a subtle philosophic beauty to these words. In this section, Paul borrows the words of David from Psalm 116:10. Let's go back to those words to get the context...

<sup>8</sup> *For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling,*

<sup>9</sup> *that I may walk before the Lord  
in the land of the living.*

<sup>10</sup> *I believed; therefore I said,  
"I am greatly afflicted."*

<sup>11</sup> *And in my dismay I said,  
"All men are liars."*

<sup>12</sup> *How can I repay the Lord  
for all his goodness to me?*

<sup>13</sup> *I will lift up the cup of salvation  
and call on the name of the Lord.*

<sup>14</sup> *I will fulfill my vows to the Lord  
in the presence of all his people.*

In these verses, King David was suffering a great illness. But God delivered him from death, and therefore, David gives a testimony of how the Lord healed him. For David, this action is a repayment for what the Lord has done for him. The Lord healed David and saved him from death, and therefore, David will tell anyone with ears to hear it about how the Lord healed him and saved him from death.

Paul, too, offers the same words here. The Lord saved him from the sickness of sin and from death. Therefore, he will tell everyone about it.

I love the philosophic beauty of those words from the psalms. Too many times we speak not from belief, but from doubt or from anger or from insecurity or from low self-esteem or from shame. There are many inner motivations that propel words forward from our mouths.



If we wish to speak truly, we must speak from belief. And belief comes from being convinced and fully persuaded.

The challenge of the human life is to find meaning. After we've ascended Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and we've provided food and shelter for ourselves and we've found safety from enemies and we've found love and we've learned to respect ourselves, we still long for meaning and for purpose.

We long to transcend ourselves and to make our mark on the world and on history in a good way. In order to discover the meaning of our lives and the purpose behind our existence, we must make careful inquiry of the dueling truths of the world. And after that inquiry, we must come down on one side or another and place our belief and speak from that belief.

It is good to speak from belief and from faith because there is power in those words. There is truthfulness in those words. Paul spoke from belief and from faith, and his words continue to touch hearts thousands of years later.

That belief is salvific and eschatological. We believe that we are saved from our sins. We believe that we will enter glory with the Father.

***<sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.***

The word that Paul uses at the beginning there, the Greek word *enkakeo*, comes back again at the end of the chapter. Paul does not allow any of this to allow him to sink into a depression or into a cycle of bad thinking. The fact that he faces death doesn't get him down in the dumps.

On the outside, he is "wasting away." The Greek word is *diaphtheiro*, which means "to be destroyed throughout" or "to be condemned." It was actually a curse used in the ancient world that carried the meaning of, "Go to hell."

On the inside, he is "being renewed." The Greek word is *anakainoo* (pronounced anna-kai-naw-oh), which means "to have newness upon you" or "to be made new again."

Again, this sentiment is understood better against the false teaching that Paul is fighting against. The false teachers are preaching a very karmic message: If you preach good things, then good things should happen to you. If you preach bad things, then bad things should happen to you.

That runs contra to the words of Jesus, however, when he says in Matthew 5:45b, “[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” The truth is that sometimes good things happen to good people and bad people. And sometimes bad things happen to good people and bad people. And karma isn’t really a thing at all.

On the outside, it looks like Paul is gonna go to hell. He’s getting the crud beaten out of him. But on the inside, the Lord is restoring him and his strength. On the inside, God is making him pure and clean and holy and righteous. On the inside, God is restoring his heart and preparing him for the glory of heaven.

***<sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.***

All of the rough stuff that Paul and his companions face are “achieving” an eternal glory. The word for “achieve” is *katergazomai*, which means “it’s working pretty well.”

Paul isn’t sweating what those false teachers are saying. He isn’t sweating the fact that everyone wants to kill him. He isn’t jealous of the fact that others seem to have easier lives than he has. Because all of the trouble in his life is working out for him. All of that trouble is being converted into a glory in heaven that outweighs any trouble he might find earth.

***<sup>18</sup> So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.***

What a beautiful ending thought for this chapter. The Greek word for “fix our eyes” is *skopeo*, which means “to have a watchful gaze” or “to scout” or “to spy.” The word was used to describe Zeus, who watched over all the earth with an intense gaze.

Paul uses this word to describe when we need to place our focus and our intent. If you're in a race, you're gonna run toward the thing you're looking at. That's what Paul is saying here. Where are your eyes locked?

And there's some fun irony here in this verse because Paul says, "Don't look at the stuff you can see. Look at the stuff you can't see."

How in the world do you look at stuff you can't see? Well, you need walk toward the eternal.

Don't live for the material wealth and the accolades that those false teachers are seeking. Who cares if they're successful or if they're rich? All of that is temporary. They die, and they can't take it with them.

Instead, live for the eternal glories of heaven. That's what Paul is living for. In fact, that's what he will ultimately die for.

## 5 – MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION | 2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21

What a pivotal landscape of Scripture we have found here in these verses. This is such a beautiful angle on the essence of the Gospel and on Paul's heartbeat for communicating that Gospel to as many people as possible. Let's dive in.

*<sup>11</sup> Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. <sup>12</sup> We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart.*

Knowing that future judgment was coming from the Lord (5:10), the apostles rightfully feared Him. Now, fearing God is a prominent Old Testament basis for ethics. That may not jive particularly well in today's day and age, but in the Old Testament times, the ethics of mankind were directed by the gods. Men and women would seek to act uprightly because they wanted Zeus to send rain on their crops.

However, things with the Lord were different. We don't fear the Lord so that He will be nice to us. We fear the Lord because we understand that our eternal destination is judged depending on how we chose to live, and more specifically, depending on the person in whom we placed our trust.

Because they knew him, he had no need to boast. The Lord who would judge them already knew their hearts, and it was that invisible heart rather than the appearance that mattered. Therefore, the Corinthians should know Paul's heart as well, for it is open wide to them.

According to the rhetoricians of the day, there were three main aspects of a speaker that were essential above all others. They are three words: logos, pathos and ethos. Logos referred to the internal logic of what the speaker was saying. Pathos referred to the emotional charge that the speaker spoke with. But ethos is the extent to which the crowd trusts the person who is speaking. How ethical does a person appear to be? Paul apparently knows that their memory of his heart is a strong part of his case because they know that he cares about them (pathos) and he's a guy who lived his life above reproach

among them (ethos).

Paul quickly explains that his description of his confidence in ministry is not about self-commendation (5:12). Some Corinthian Christians had apparently objected to him defending himself, as if that was a bad thing.

In Greco-Roman times, to reduce the offensiveness of self-boasting, orators often denied that they were doing it or complained that it was necessary (12:1) or that their audiences had forced them to do it (12:11).

Paul emphasizes that he is not boasting but merely giving his audience opportunity to boast about their church planter, just as he boasts about them. Had they defended his honor as they should have, he would not be compelled to do so (12:11)! If he boasts, then, it is for their good only (10:8).

Obviously, Paul believes that his rivals have been boasting (11:12, 18) and commending themselves (10:12, 18). Probably this includes worldly criteria like social status and being an impressive speaker. (Paul leaves his rivals anonymous, although he likely knows their names, may follow a convention of refusing to dignify opponents by naming them.) Paul points out that his rivals commend themselves on the basis of outward attributes rather than the heart. And Paul actually borrows the key terms of 1 Sam 16:7, a story in which God chose David over his brothers (and perhaps most tellingly for Paul here, over Saul).

Many thinkers in that day emphasized the inadequacy of appearance. Paul, too, focuses on that aspect. Like Moses, however, Paul has more freedom for his heart when speaking with the Lord, and (despite his “uncovered face,” 3:12, 18) uses more restraint with the Corinthians (5:13). The point is that the heart is less obvious than outward appearance.

***<sup>13</sup> If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. <sup>14</sup> For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. <sup>15</sup> And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.***

Whether Paul was serving God or the Corinthians (5:13), he was clearly not

living for self (5:15) as his rivals did (5:12). The Stoic philosophers at that time considered all foolishness to be “madness.” Nevertheless, Paul is “beside himself ” for God. This also connects to the fact that many at that time associated prophecy and divine possession with temporary *mania* or insanity, a charge sometimes leveled against prophets (2 Kgs 9:11; Jer 29:26; Hos 9:7) or philosophers.

Such insanity could be contrasted with sobriety. Paul gets crazy when it comes to the things of the Lord. But when he thinks about the Corinthians, he’s logical all the way down. Since Paul wanted everything to teach and help others, he had kept most of his deep spiritual experiences (12:2–4) to himself rather than sharing them with the Corinthians.

In 5:14–15, we learn that not only “the fear of the Lord,” but also “Christ’s love” motivated Paul. “Christ’s love” is written here as an example of sacrificial service (5:14–15). Or here it may mean “love for Christ” expressed in serving him (5:14–15). Or a combination of these.

Paul is ready in any case to lay down his life as Jesus did to spread his message (2:14–16; 4:15), because sharing the suffering of the cross also welcomes resurrection power (4:7–14). Dying and rising with Christ (5:14–15) reshaped the identity of all those in him, so that they could not be evaluated by the flesh and the external appearance, but by the new creation.

***<sup>16</sup> So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.***

The human perspective that Paul envisions in 5:16 boasts in outward appearance. His rivals apparently boasted in their rhetorical skill and their status higher than Paul’s, rather than in the heart.

Paul rejected his pre-conversion understanding of Jesus. Most significantly, the cross, like Christ’s suffering apostles, was meaningless to those who saw it merely outwardly and were unaware of Jesus’s resurrection. Paul’s point is that Jesus’s resurrection provides a new framework of faith for seeing Christ and all who are in him. Anyone in Christ already belongs to the people who are being new in order to ascend to heaven at the Second Coming, although this becoming new can only be seen in the heart, not in appearance.

***<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!***

Jewish texts often refer to the idea of a new creation (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). Jewish teachers often use that term “new creation” to talk about personal renewal, and more specifically about converts to the Jewish faith. But it was also about Israel experiencing God’s forgiveness on the New Year’s festival or the Day of Atonement. Although Paul does think of conversion in the context and of new hearts in general, the central theme for him is the newness of becoming prepared for an eternity in heaven while still living on earth.

Jesus’s resurrection has begun a new creation, and Jesus is the prototype of what that is supposed to look like (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). Those who hope to share Christ’s resurrection fully in heaven will find a foretaste in the Holy Spirit. In this new creation, the image and glory of God that we lost through Adam’s sin (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 11:7) are being restored in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4; 1 Cor. 15:49; Rom 8:29).

***<sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.***

In 5:18, Paul begins to transition to his appeal to the Corinthians. The new creation of which Paul speaks comes from God, and is the result of a reconciliation made between God and us through Christ’s death.

Reconciliation is about enemies making peace or becoming friends (Rom 5:10; Eph. 2:14–16). But in Roman politics and ancient Mediterranean culture in general, friendship included accepting the friend’s friends as one’s friends and his enemies as one’s enemies. If that is true, then how can the Corinthians be reconciled with God if they mistrust his agent, the Apostle Paul?

This is why Paul is talking about becoming a new person. When Adam sinned, he alienated humanity from God. But becoming new and becoming sinless is

how we bridge the gap and join back together with God. In the same way, God in the Old Testament promised peace for Israel with Him as He was restoring them (Isaiah 52:7; 54:10).

Even though Paul writes in 5:19 that God reconciled the world to himself in Christ, who died for all, the world has not yet become completely a new creation. So Paul is talking about how the world will become a new creation again, through the ministry of reconciliation, a message and truth that is available only to those who accept the message and those bring it (5:17–20). Missionaries like Paul bring the good news of peace offered by God the Father.

This is why Paul envisions himself and missionaries like him as ambassadors or legates of the Lord. Because the way a person treats an ambassador reveals their attitudes toward those who sent them. The way someone responds to an evangelist is actually a response to their message, so they're actually responding to Jesus himself (Matt 10:40; Lk 10:16; cf. Ex 4:16; 7:1).

Paul says they're making an appeal. Pleas of various sorts were conventional in persuasion in ancient Greek literature. Sometimes, we have found pleas used to invite reconciliation between two conflicting parties, although often these were pleas for forgiveness from the offenders.

Now, we could understand the plea to be reconciled to God as a quotation, that maybe it is Paul summarizing the message of the ambassadors' entreaty to the world. It seems clear, however, that Paul is summoning these specific Christians in Corinth to be reconciled to God. This is a vibrant way of reminding them that they cannot straddle the fence between the world and God. They have to pick a side.

This would not be the only place where Paul warns Christians to attend to their salvation (Rom 8:13; 11:22; Gal 5:4; Phil 2:12; cf. 1 Thess 3:4–5), but like a good speaker, Paul clearly intends to jolt his audience to attention.

***<sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***

We can assume the Corinthians were familiar with Paul's teaching that Christ's death appeased God's wrath, and as a result, it reconciled humanity to God (Rom 5:9–11). What Paul says here about Jesus becoming sin may combine



with the notion of unblemished sacrifices and with the scapegoat that came to represent or embody Israel's sin (Lev. 1:3; 16:21–22).

As Christ, bearing the judgment of our sins, became sin's representative on the cross, so also the ministers of this new covenant represent God's righteousness to those they teach. Although Paul would no doubt apply the principle to any believers who shared the gospel with others, they are "God's righteousness" not as "the justified" but as agents of the message of God being reconciled with the world.

## 6 – UNEQUALLY YOKED | 2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-18

We begin where the last message ended, by realizing that we have been reconciled to God and that we now carry the message of reconciliation. The dividing wall of sin that stood between us and God is no longer, and now, instead of living and acting against him we are working with Him and carrying His message throughout the whole world. In this section, Paul tackles an aspect of what it means to be reconciled to God.

Because in order to be reconciled with God, that means you cannot be reconciled with the world and with the forces that are actively working against God. And Paul knows this but the Corinthian Christians likely do not. They likely believe that they can play both sides and that they can dip their toes in both pools and that they can sit on the fence between the forces of God and the forces of darkness.

Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. You have to pick a side.

Now, Paul knows that what he is asking the Corinthians is a difficult thing. Of course it is! And that's why he writes as he does in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13...

<sup>11</sup> *We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you.* <sup>12</sup> *We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.* <sup>13</sup> *As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also.*

Let me translate some Greek words here quickly in those verses:

- “spoken freely” is the Greek phrase *stoma hemeis anoigo*, which means “our mouths are open”
- “opened wide” is the Greek word *platuno*, which means “to expand” or “to make open”
- “withhold” is the Greek word *stenochoreo*, which means “to make thin” or “to squeeze” or “to make narrow”
- “fair exchange” is the Greek word *antimisthia*, which means a “repayment” or “an exchange of money based on what is deserved”

So let's take all of that together. Paul is saying that he's speaking openly with the Corinthians, and more than that, his heart is also open to them. He isn't holding anything back, not what he thinks or how he cares about them. On the other hand, the Corinthians have closed themselves off to Paul. They're not communicating with him. They don't seem to care about him.

So Paul says, let's match things up. I'm speaking openly to you and caring openly about you. Please return the favor here. Speak openly to me. Care about what I'm saying because I'm saying it on your behalf.

And then Paul launches into some harsh truths. This is stuff the Corinthians need to hear and stuff the church today needs to hear. Because Paul is about to dig into the themes of separation and holiness and the dwelling place of God.

And actually, it might help us to freshen up on those important themes from the Old Testament.

## ON THE THEMES OF HOLINESS AND SEPARATION ON GOD'S DWELLING

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth and created mankind in order to share it with Him. He made man in His own image and gave him dominion over the animals and a helpmate in order to share this life with him. The man was named Adam and the woman Eve. God created Adam and Eve for Himself and created both of them to need God as well, and they walked together in the Garden of Eden, which God had made for their pleasure.

But He also gave them consciousness, so that they could act on their behalf rather than exist as a puppet of God. God gave them a choice, to obey His wishes or to act against them. He placed within Eden the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a tree from which Adam and Eve could never eat. To do so were to disobey God and allow Adam and Eve to know what it was like to live outside of God's purpose. At the present, Adam and Eve only knew what it was like to do as God wishes. They were ignorant of what it meant to be sinful.

The Serpent played upon this ignorance as he tempted Eve to eat some of the fruit. Her curiosity of what might happen, of being like God, overcame Eve and

she ate. It also overcame Adam who ate. At once, their innocence disappeared. They knew what it was like to sin.

It was at this moment that the idea of holiness was born, because mankind could no longer dwell with God due to their disobedience. Through Adam and Eve's sin, earth and heaven were split. And Eden, a place of unity between heaven and earth, was lost.

As men and women multiplied and spread over the earth, they continued to act against the life to which God had called them. They became a wicked and depraved people, filling the earth with sinfulness. In God's justice, He could not let His creation spoil and die so He flooded the earth and allowed His creation to start over with Noah and his three sons and their families.

In time, God called a descendant named Abram to leave his family and his household and journey to a land he had never seen before. The Lord also promised Abram that he would have innumerable descendants and that through him, all peoples in the world would be blessed. Abram, later called Abraham, was followed by Isaac and later Jacob, a young boy who stole his brother's birthright. As Jacob fled from his older brother Esau, he was sought by the Lord and wrestled with him throughout the night. After his wrestling, the Lord called him Israel and promised him that he would be a great nation.

From Jacob came Joseph who brought the Israelites, the descendants of Jacob, to Egypt. But the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians until the Lord called Moses to free them from Pharaoh. After ten plagues and crossing the Red Sea on dry ground, they arrived at Mount Sinai, the place where God had arranged to meet His people.

This was the place where heaven began to meet earth, where the holy began to reunite with the broken world. The holiness of God arrived in fire and darkness upon Mount Sinai, a sight terrifying and dangerous to the sinful Israelites. And when Moses walked into that thick darkness—the presence of the Lord—he came back to them with a Law, comprised of 613 commands that would determine whether the Israelites were living holy lives or not.

At Mount Sinai, God called the Israelites his 'holy' nation, a people that belonged *exclusively* to Him and in turn He belonged *exclusively* to them. They would fight for Him and would carry out His mission. The other nations had their own pagan gods who they believed would fight for them, but the Israelites served YHWH, the one True and Holy God.

As a sign to them that God was among them, He dwelled in the Tabernacle, a tent that the Israelites constructed at the very center of their camp. At the center of this Tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant, a golden box which contained the Ten Commands, a jar of the manna that the Israelites consumed during their stay in the wilderness and Aaron's staff that had budded. This was kept in a section of the Tabernacle called the Holy of Holies, the most holy place on planet earth. No one could enter this Most Holy Place except for the High Priest of the Israelites, and he could only enter once a year on the Day of Atonement when he asked for the sins of Israelite nation to be forgiven.

For the ancient Israelites, holiness was about distance. You could not enter the Tabernacle if you were not priest and you could not enter the Holy of Holies unless you were the high priest. If you wanted to cover your sins, you could not make the sacrifice yourself but needed a priest to help you.

This was how God worked among His people. He would work through a select few, the priests, the holy ones in order to deal with His people. The priests would represent YHWH to Israel and vice versa. This is also precisely how Israel was supposed to function toward the rest of the nations. Israel would represent YHWH to humanity and then Israel would represent humanity to YHWH. This is why the Lord called Israel "a kingdom of priests."

This same way of thinking was established when Israel finally settled down in the Promised Land and established a Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, the Temple also contained a sacred space called the Holy of Holies where the ark of the covenant dwelled and where the high priest would enter once a year on the Day of Atonement.

You could go only so far to meet the Lord, for to encounter Him in His holy presence would completely destroy you. At times, He would appear to His prophets or servants in dreams or visions in order to communicate with His

people. To Isaiah, God showed him a glimpse of heaven in Isaiah 6. And all Isaiah could do was cower in fear and exclaim that he was an unclean man of unclean lips in the presence of the Holy, Holy, Holy and Almighty God.

And yet, it was not God's will to live apart from His creation. The promise that He made to Abraham all those years ago, to bless him with a descendant who in turn would be a blessing to all nations, had not yet been fulfilled. Israel had not been a blessing to the nations but rather a curse. Her holiness had been defiled by pagan worship and disobedience. Even after Israel was defeated and sent into exile during the Babylonian and Persian invasion and then brought back to the Promised Land, she was still not functioning as the kingdom of priests that God had envisioned.

The Israelites had come to believe that God's holiness belonged to them and only to them. They believed that this was the end goal: to enjoy the favor of God to themselves, to keep God's presence in Israel. The Jews, and especially the religious elite among them, operated under the assumption that God's intent was to stay in Israel, that He would stay in the Temple and bless their nation exclusively.

Therefore, their idea of holiness was concentric, the further you travelled into the inner circles of religion, the more holy you were. And so, they pushed the poor and the foreigners among them as far from God as they could. In the temple of Jerusalem, you could only get so close if you were Gentile. And you could only get so close if you were a woman. And you could only get so close if you were a normal Jewish man. And you could get so close if you were a priest. And you could only enter the Holy of Holies once if you were a high priest.

But the Lord does not live in houses made by human hands nor does He act according to their whims. This was not the Lord's will, but instead, His will to dwell with His creation forever in Paradise. Therefore, He sent his Son, the one who between earth and heaven, the one who could reconcile God and His creation together—Jesus Christ.

He came teaching a new form of holiness—actually, its truest form—that holiness is not determined by how close you follow the Law or what you abstain from.

Instead, holiness was found in compassion. Holiness is not about how far you could travel into the Temple to meet the Lord within. Holiness is about how far our compassion and love can reach others who are in desperate need of experiencing a bit of heaven while they toil down here on earth.

Jesus died for this reason: to reunite man and God together. After Jesus' death, the curtain in the Temple keeping outsiders away from the Holy of Holies was torn in two. God had finally come to dwell with His people. He did this through His Spirit, since those who belonged to Jesus Christ were now part of His body, and those in the body of Christ enjoyed the guidance and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Together, the church formed God's Temple, with God's Spirit living inside.

What then does this mean for us?

It means that we are called to be holy. To be holy means not only that we must live pure lives, but it also means that we have a divine purpose. The mission in our lives is not the same as the common man.

We have been fashioned for a different purpose, like the censers and bowls and lamps in the Tabernacle. No one could use these instruments for ordinary use or for worldly use or for wicked use. Those instruments were used only for sacrifice and worship.

It is the same of us. Our lives, bought by Christ, are fashioned for sacrifice and worship of the Lord.

To be holy does not mean we cut ourselves off from the world, to remove ourselves from the equation. However, there is a separation of purpose and of character. We do not live for what the world lives—wealth, control, power, fame, selfishness. And we are not influenced by what influences the world—corrupt leaders, false teachers, fake wise men, social pariahs.

We are different. And what makes us different? We follow Christ, and we love as He loves us.

***<sup>14</sup> Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?***

These verses call upon the “two traditions” teaching that was common among ancient Israel writings. What was sacred to God was not sacred to the foreign deities. The Israelites had to choose who they would serve—the Lord or the foreign gods of the nations around them. For instance, here is the famous Joshua 24:15...

***<sup>15</sup> “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”***

And of course there’s a bit of a difference between the Lord and the forces of darkness. While God enlightened His people, Satan blinded the world, as we see in 2 Corinthians 4:4–6. Therefore, the Corinthian Christians—as God’s people—must choose between those options. They must either be like the perishing world, which rejected Paul’s message, or must be reconciled with Paul and trust him and his teaching.

We also need to remember that Paul still has conflict with those false teachers in mind, the ones who are affecting the Corinthians. If the Corinthians must be reconciled to Paul to be reconciled to God, they also must reject his rivals for their affection.

Urban Roman colonies understood quite well the custom that one could not be friends with a friend’s or patron’s enemies. There needed to be some separation between them and the false teachers that Paul is trying to protect them from. In a very real sense, the Corinthians needed to choose if they would receive the gospel that Paul was preaching or if they would choose the version of the gospel that the false teachers were presenting. The Corinthians couldn’t choose both.

This rift is visualized so well in the book of 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 as a division between the world who has been blinded to the truth and those who see



Christ's glory and light, and that's basically the same as the conflict between light and darkness we see here. And not only that, but Paul's rivals bear a kind of false "light" that we see in 2 Corinthians 11:13–15...

<sup>13</sup> *For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ.* <sup>14</sup> *And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.* <sup>15</sup> *It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.*

In this verse, Paul writes that we should not be "yoked" together with unbelievers. The Greek word there is *heterozugeo*, which means "to be mismatched" or "mismatched" or "yoked together with a different species." It was a word common among Diaspora Jews who adopted Greek culture and would no longer practice circumcision. In a sense, they "joined themselves" (a term also used for "yoking") to Gentiles.

In one text written between the Old Testament and New Testament, *Jubilees* 37:22, Esau could no more befriend Jacob than an ox and lion could be safely yoked. Of course, complete separation from Gentiles was not possible in the Diaspora, so much so that many rabbis were very selective in what they choose to restrict. But strict Jews (and Christians) would forbid compromise of one's faith and heritage.

Paul's warning against being "mismatched" would at least include marital unions. The only related term in Scripture appears in Leviticus 19:19, warning against interbreeding. Even using an ox and donkey together to plow a field apparently risked interspecies relations.

The Greek often uses words that could mean "yoking" with reference to marriage or sexual unions. Latin expressions cognate to "yoke" also were used for marriage, although relevant to some other close partnerships as well. Judaism clearly objected to mixed marriages. For instance, read Deuteronomy 7:3...

<sup>3</sup> *Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons...*

However, the story of Ruth and Boaz (ancestors of Jesus) would surely run contrary to this command. Of course, many Jewish thinkers at the time would consider Ruth to be spiritually a Jewish woman. Therefore, marriage may not be the biggest thing that Paul is worried about here. The next verse may give us more clues.

***<sup>15</sup> What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?***

Out of early Judaism, “Belial” was a title for Satan that they came about by combining an Old Testament term for “worthlessness” with the pagan deity Baal. The Qumran scrolls warn against the counsel of Belial and his snares. They also speak about his oppression. Followers of Belial seek to hurt the righteous. Belial rules evil spirits as well as the Gentile nations. However, according to the Essenes, he would be judged.

***<sup>16</sup> What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.”***

In this verse, Paul appeals to Leviticus 26:11–12...

*<sup>11</sup> I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. <sup>12</sup> I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.*

If Israel rejected idols, as written in Leviticus 26:1, then God would make his dwelling among them, walk among them, and He would be their God and they His people. God promised to dwell among his people in his sanctuary (Exodus 25:8) and be their God if they put away their idols (Ezekiel 14:11; 37:23; 43:9).

The promise that God would be His people’s God and they His people is a central covenant theme in the Old Testament. God would fulfill His promise to the Israelites, but that was conditional on obedience to his covenant (Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4). The Law of Moses was meant to keep the people of Israel as holy to the Lord. Since they observed those commands, they would be different from

the pagan nations around them that indulged in sin and wickedness and uncleanness.

As Paul talks about being the temple of God, that harkens back to what he wrote back in his first letter to the Corinthians on multiple occasions...

*<sup>16</sup> Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).*

*<sup>18</sup> Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. <sup>19</sup> Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup> you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).*

In those verses above, Paul urges the Corinthians to adopt a new lifestyle and a new identity. They are no longer people of the world. They are now the temple of the Holy Spirit. And as a result, they need to abstain from the sins that their neighbors are indulging in.

*<sup>17</sup> "Therefore come out from them  
and be separate,  
says the Lord.*

*Touch no unclean thing,  
and I will receive you."*

*<sup>18</sup> "I will be a Father to you,  
and you will be my sons and daughters,  
says the Lord Almighty."*

These last two verses are quotes from 2 Samuel 7. In fact, let me just put the entire section down here...

*<sup>8</sup> "Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. <sup>9</sup> I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. <sup>10</sup> And I will provide a place for my*

people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning <sup>11</sup> and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

*" 'The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: <sup>12</sup> When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup> He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. <sup>14</sup> I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. <sup>15</sup> But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. <sup>16</sup> Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.' "*

The Lord spoke these words to King David regarding his son Solomon, and these words are about the Temple that Solomon would build. There is a lot going on here, but let's just try to put it all together.

The Lord asks for His people to be separate from the nations of the world in terms of how they live. When they are separate and when they obey the Lord, the Israelites are holy. When the Israelites are holy, God will dwell among them. And in this story, God will dwell among them in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Now, from a Christian perspective: We are expected to live differently than the rest of the world. Instead of living from a selfish point of view, we are expected to adopt a lifestyle of compassion and holiness. When we do this, we are holy to God, and we honor the Holy Spirit who lives inside of us.

## 7 – GRACE OF GIVING | 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-15 & 9:6-15

As Pastor Jeff Walling once said, “Second Corinthians is a fund raising letter.”

I suppose, uh, maybe ... hmmmm ... you could convince me that's true. I'd like to think it's so much more than that. There are some rich tapestries of theology woven throughout these pages. Among this book is the chapter that might be my favorite in Scripture (2 Corinthians 4) and the chapter I have read the most in Scripture (2 Corinthians 12).

But yeah, uh, maybe ... hmmmmmmmmmm. Maybe at the heart it's a fund raising letter. And of course it is because Paul isn't looking to serve himself and feed himself and fund his desire for mansions and jet liners. He's looking to take care of the needy among God's people, namely in Jerusalem.

When you think about it, the entire book has been leading up to this point when Paul was going to make the Big Ask of the Corinthians. He's been careful to impress that he has walked alongside the Corinthians to comfort them and that he has introduced them to the God of comfort. And he has made himself quite clear that his opposition's opinion of him is unfounded and that the charges they bring against him are untrue. He has stated clearly that the false teachers who have descended upon the Corinthians have only done so in order to pad their own pockets. They are bringing a ministry of death, whereas Paul is bringing a ministry of freedom and of transformation and of reconciliation.

And now, he builds up to these two big chapters in the middle, which are almost entirely about raising funds in order to take care of God's people. That makes sense because Paul has to be careful to simply ask for money straight up at the beginning of the letter. No, first he needs to impress upon the Corinthians why they should divert their funds through Paul and his companions. He needs to show them that they need to stop throwing away their wealth on pseudo-preachers, and instead, use their funds to help the people who truly need it.

This is like getting people to stop throwing away their hard-earned money on televangelists who make fake promises, and instead, beginning to invest on

taking of the impoverished and the oppressed in their hometowns. You can't just tell people they're making a mistake. You have to show them how to make a better choice.

In any case, sure, Second Corinthians is a fund raising letter.

You win, Jeff. You win.

So, let's bullet through these verses with some efficiency. I'm going to try to cut down on the expansion and just get the nitty gritty out of these 25 verses we have before us.

## NOTES ON 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-15

***And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. <sup>2</sup> Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.***

In this first verse of the chapter, Paul appeals to the human motivation of competition. Among the ancient Greeks, it was not rare for generals to use rivalry and competition in order to drive men to action, as we see in the writings of Xenophon.

By Macedonian churches, Paul primarily means the church of Philippi. Now, Philippi was an exceedingly wealthy city. In fact, Lydia the purple cloth dealer would have been fabulously rich, since her buyers were the political elite throughout the Roman Empire and since purple dye was horribly difficult to obtain (you needed to catch around 10,000 sea snails in order to collect one ounce of the dye Tyrian purple).

However, even though Philippi was a very wealthy city, the poor in that region would not have felt the benefits of that cashflow. There wasn't much of a middle class in the Roman Empire. You were either very wealthy or very poor, and many of the low class workers in the city depended on handouts from the rich in order to feed themselves and their families. That is why Paul indicates that many in Philippi were extremely impoverished.

Note the floating opposites in verse 2: deep poverty became rich generosity.

Also notice the word “grace” in verse 1. This may have been due to the economic conditions at that time. In the Greco-Roman world, all of the wealth was controlled by a small percentage of people. In order to survive, you needed to find a patron, someone who would provide you with food and clothing and shelter. In return, you would work for the patron’s interests and serve his needs and you would also speak in the city about the good deeds and the honor of your patron. When you would honor your patron before others, this was actually called “faith.” And when you received what you needed to survive from your patron, that was called “grace.”

In Corinth, this was likely the same. Many of the believers were impoverished and needed patrons in order to survive and to feed their families. However, Paul is telling them about a different way to do things. Because the poor among the churches in Macedonia actually pooled their resources together to take care of those who had nothing. Instead of needing to rely upon a patron, they were able to rely upon the church.

If I was a social revolutionary, I would think that Paul was helping to rewrite the oppress economy that you would find throughout the Roman Empire. And of course he would! After all, he was preaching about the kingdom of God and about it’s superiority to Rome.

***<sup>3</sup> For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, <sup>4</sup> they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. <sup>5</sup> And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.***

“Entirely on their own” in verse 3 is the Greek word *authairetos*, which is a compound word made up of *auto* and *hairetizo*. *Auto* means “myself.” *Hairetizo* means “to choose.” So put together, it means “to choose for myself.” The Macedonian churches gave not because anyone twisted their arms. They did it because they wanted to.

In verse 4, we see multiple Greek words ("privilege," "sharing," "service") that often ended up in business documents and referred to business relationships. Paul did not choose those words accidentally. Paul wants these Corinthian Christians to believe that they are the same enterprise as the Christians in Macedonia and in Jerusalem, regardless of ethnicity or gender or economic background.

The Greek phrase for "urgently pleaded" could literally be translated as "with much encouragement they begged." And if you understand that the Greek word for encouragement (*parakaleo*) means "to walk alongside" someone, the Macedonian churches were literally begging to walk alongside those who were begging.

You want a solution to poverty? Start begging to walk alongside those who are begging.

Pay attention to verse 5. The Macedonian Christians weren't making Paul happy with their gifts, and they weren't acting according to his wishes. They were acting according to God's wishes and His will first. Paul was simply the conduit for an exchange between God and His people. This is the proper mode of the pastor or the missionary. Their job is not to guilt others or cajole others into giving. Their job is to serve as a conduit by which people can give to the work of God.

***<sup>6</sup> So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. <sup>7</sup> But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.***

Here we get a greater part of the story. Apparently, the Corinthians *pledged* to give a gift to the poor among the church before even the Macedonians had. However, the Macedonians *completed* their pledge before the Corinthians.

And perhaps why Paul is writing as he does here (and honestly, maybe that's why he wrote this letter in the first place) is because he believes some hiccups have arisen. Of course he should believe that hiccups have arisen because



false teachers have infiltrated the church and have slandered Paul's name and character. In fact, you can really hear the voices of those false teachers when you line up with what Paul writes through this letter.

Perhaps the false teachers were saying, "Why do you need to send money to this guy Paul? He's probably going to pocket it. If his gospel was actually true, then he would be financially successful and wouldn't need your gift."

Of course, such an accusation from the false teachers would have only amounted to a projection of their own insecurities. The truth is that the false teachers likely made their money by preaching a false and watered down version of the gospel. What they probably cannot understand most is why Paul would receive a cash gift from the Corinthians and then pocket none of it.

Because of these accusations, Paul is sending Titus to encourage the Corinthians to *complete* their pledge. He also likely serves as a mediator between the Corinthians and Paul to ensure that everything is cool between them.

In verse 7, Paul does a very important thing. Some might view it as emotional manipulation. I view it as something very different. Paul goes to some lengths to communicate to the Corinthians that he doesn't simply care about them due to their money. Their money isn't what he loves about them and it isn't what impresses him. Paul is impressed by the depth of their belief, by the quality of their logic, by their understanding and experience, by their eagerness and enthusiasm to do good and by their compassion.

Paul simply wants their grace to match all of these other good things about them. Much of this has nothing to do with Paul at all. The truth is that he understands that those believers will not be able to transform Corinth until they attack the city and the culture at an economic level. If the church can provide a means by which the poor in the city are taken care of so much that they don't have to rely upon a patron, then they can shake the very foundations of the city on a greater scale than any earthquake (and Corinth had a lot of earthquakes).

*<sup>8</sup> I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. <sup>9</sup> For you*

*know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

Just as the Macedonians earlier decided to give of their own accord, so too Paul will allow these Corinthian Christians the same opportunity. He's not going to force them. He's not going to employ his apostolic authority here. Instead, Paul employs another method of human motivation here. Again, he uses rivalry with the Macedonian churches. But he goes a step further and employs the human need to accomplish and beat goals that others have set.

Paul will test them. The Greek word for "test" is *dokimazo*, which means "to be tested in battle" or "to be trustworthy" or "to be reliable." In order to see if a ship is seaworthy, you throw her into the ocean and see how she handles it. In order to see if a soldier is battleworthy, you throw him into a battle and see if he survives. In order to see if a person is leadership worthy, you throw her into a situation where she must lead and see how she handles it.

This is what it means to test. And people love being tested and they love watching other people being tested. For Exhibit A, allow me to present to you **BASICALLY ALL OF REALITY TELEVISION**. We love watching game shows and we love watching Survivor and we love watching competition cooking shows and we love watching movies with big training arcs like Rocky or The Karate Kid or The Matrix. And the reason why we love those things is because we love watching people grow in order to accomplish a goal that someone else has set for them. We love watching people accomplish great feats.

And we, too, love accomplishing goals that others have set for us. We love to prove ourselves.

Paul is giving the Corinthians a gift. It's an opportunity to prove their mettle. It's a chance to see if they can achieve something far beyond what they initially hoped they could.

It's an opportunity to test your "sincerity." The Greek word is *gnesios*, which means "true born," and is actually a little bit of a racist term. Figuratively, the term would refer to wine or another good that is genuine and unfalsified. And for us, that means our walk matches our talk. It means we do the very things

we say that we do, and that we live according to the values we shout so loudly to others.

Paul goes on to use the example of Jesus to speak to the level of sincerity they need to ascribe to. Jesus loved you so much that He gave up the riches of His divinity and owned neither land nor possessions and gave it all up—including his life—so that we could have eternal life. In the same way, the Christians in Corinthians needed to sell out and go for broke in order to ensure that the poor and the oppressed and the belittled around the world would have an opportunity to inherit the whole earth by placing their faith in Jesus Christ and by being baptized in his name.

***<sup>10</sup> And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. <sup>11</sup> Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. <sup>12</sup> For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.***

Here's the nice thing Paul says: "I don't care at all about a dollar amount. I don't have a particular number in my head that you need to hit. This isn't even about me at all. This is just my opinion about what's best for you."

Paul builds wonderfully on the good things that the Corinthians already possess. They have already given a gift before. They have already shown a desire to give. They have already met some of what they pledged to give.

They simply need to finish. And again, Paul isn't looking for a particular number. Give according to what you do have and not according to what you don't have.

***<sup>13</sup> Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. <sup>14</sup> At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, <sup>15</sup> as***

***it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."***

So yeah, well, this sounds a little bit like communism, doesn't it? Paul likely isn't advocating for that kind of thing where everyone receives the same universal income, but at the very least, Paul is challenging the economic norms of the day. In the Roman Empire, the rich had the money and the poor did not. The church would not reflect that reality. In the church, people will have the things they need.

They will be equal. The Greek word is *isotes*, which means "to be the same." Consider for instance that an isosceles triangle has two sides that are the same length. In the church, there will be no division of rich or poor. There will be no division of powerful and weak. There will be no division of able and unable, of privileged and oppressed.

Instead, we will all eat at the same table of forgiveness. Paul already ordered this in his previous letter, in 1 Corinthians 11:18-21...

<sup>18</sup> *In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. <sup>19</sup> No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. <sup>20</sup> When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, <sup>21</sup> for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.*

Paul called for equality during the Lord's Supper. Everyone gets to eat. Everyone gets to drink. Everyone gets to receive the forgiveness of their sins.

Paul simply wants this equality to extend beyond the Lord's Supper throughout the church itself.

## NOTES ON 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-15

<sup>6</sup> ***Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.***

Paul uses an agricultural example for people who lived in a city not known for agricultural pursuits. Perhaps, then, they needed to understand this principle:

You don't get to harvest grain that you didn't plant.

The Greek word for "sparingly" is *phaidomenos*, which means "to do something to a limited extent" or "to do something with negligible quantity." The Greek word for "generously" is *eulogia*, from which we get the word "eulogy." It means "to speak well of someone" or "to do something that deserves praise."

If you sow so much that what you sacrificed doesn't matter, then what you gain won't matter either. If you sow so much that people would congratulate for it, then you will gain something that others will congratulate for as well.

The math of heaven is simple. God multiplies in proportion to what we put in. God isn't doing this work by Himself. We are participants. We are expected to put our chips on the table. If we don't, then it's because we don't really care about the game.

If we don't sow seed into a field, then that means we don't necessarily care about the harvest. However, if we sow an extreme amount of seed, that means we care about the harvest to an extreme degree. Our work reveals our level of caring about the work itself.

***<sup>7</sup> Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.***

The Greek word for "reluctantly" is *lupe*, which means "grief" or "sorrow."

The Greek word for "compulsion" is *ananke*, which is a word with cosmological weight. It was used in order to describe necessity on a universal scale. For instance, if you throw an apple into the air, it will come back to the ground due to the necessity of gravity. It is also used as a word to describe "oppression."

The Greek word for “cheerful” is *hilaros*, from which we get the word “hilarious.” It means “glad” or “merry” or “radiant” or “bursting with energy.”

So, altogether, God doesn’t want us to give because we feel bad or ashamed or guilty about not giving.

And God doesn’t want you to give because you’re *supposed to* give. He doesn’t want you to give because you feel this cosmological pressure to do it.

He wants you to give out of the gladness of your heart.

The way I teach this is by saying, “You will give money when you’re excited about something. Without fail. If you’re excited about video games, you will pay money to play video games. If you’re excited about a band, you will pay tickets to see them and buy their merch. If you’re excited about baseball, you will buy jerseys and tickets to see games and a subscription to watch your favorite team online.”

Your money follows your joy. Therefore, make sure that you are part of something that brings you joy.

We don’t go to church because we feel guilty about not going to church. And we don’t go to church because we’re supposed to go church. We go because going to church brings us joy.

If going to church doesn’t bring you joy (not happiness by the way, I’m talking a gladness and a mirth for life), then figure out where the joy of the Lord is taking up residence near you. Find the community of people who are excited about what the Lord is doing and are joyously pursuing the salvation of the world.

If you’re not excited about what your church is doing, figure out why you’re not excited. Maybe it’s because the church has abandoned the call of the gospel. Maybe it’s because the church has adopted a questionable culture. Maybe it’s because your heart is no longer in the right place and while the church moves on to do the will of God, you’re stuck on yourself.

Figure it out. Get your heart aligned with the purposes of God. Find that joy that you can have even in the midst of misery and depression and sadness. Find that buoyant, childlike and creative energy where God is working through you to do incredible things.

Find that, and your money will follow.

***<sup>8</sup> And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. <sup>9</sup> As it is written:***

***"He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."***

There's that grace word again! Remember, "grace" was the word used of gifts that patrons would give to the clients who depend on them for survival. What is Paul saying here?

God is our patron. God provides for our needs. And He will ensure that we have everything that we need.

***<sup>10</sup> Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. <sup>11</sup> You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.***

***<sup>12</sup> This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. <sup>13</sup> Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. <sup>14</sup> And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of***

*the surpassing grace God has given you. <sup>15</sup> Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

This last section is a benediction, a good word to the Lord. I just want to translate two last Greek words here. The one for “generosity” and the one for “thanks.”

There are many different words for generosity, but here, Paul chooses to use *haplotes*. It means “to be simple” or “to have a singleness of heart” or “to be open-hearted.”

The word for “thanks” is *eucharistia*. It means “to be grateful” or “to give thanks.” We use this word to refer to the Eucharist, another term for the Lord’s Supper. And we use that term because as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we give thanks for the Lord has done for us. With a prayer and with a sacrament, we remember and feel gratitude for what God has given to us.

Here’s the thing: Our hearts need to be singly focused on Christ. When we do, how we live and speak and spend our finances will become an expression of gratitude and thanks to God. The Father has sacrificed His Son to cover our sins and to save us from death.

What can we give back to God for the blessing He has poured upon us? We will give our gratitude. We will give our thanks. We will give our openheartedness. We will direct our lives onto the road He has made for us to walk. We will take care of His people. We will love others.



## 8 – DEMOLISHED STRONGHOLDS | 2 CORINTHIANS 10:3-5

As soon as Paul is done asking the Corinthians to bless the poor in the churches among them and in Jerusalem, he gets right back to defending his ministry in 2 Corinthians 10. Paul will not let off the gas in this regard. He will not take the slander of the false teachers in Corinth lying down. He will defend himself at every point.

He says in 2 Corinthians 10:2 that he hopes he doesn't have to be bold toward certain people and put them in their place. Whether he's talking about the false teachers who have infiltrated the church at Corinth or whether he's talking about the people who have been affected by those false teachers, you can hear Paul's frustration in his words.

And why is Paul so frustrated?

Because people in the church at Corinth are judging him according to the standards of the world. The Greek word for "standard" is *logizomai* (pronounced law-GEE-zoh-my), which means "estimating the value of an object" or "to come to a conclusion." It's a word that the philosophers would use to describe your logical thinking. In fact, Aristotle actually taught that this was the activity that makes you human.

Think about Descartes's quote: "I think, therefore I am."

Descartes is saying that since he has the ability to reason and to imagine and to dream, that therefore he knows he exists. Perhaps Aristotle would conclude the same thing. The fact that we are able to come to logical conclusions is what differentiates us from animals.

So what is Paul saying? He's saying that we should not have the thought patterns or way of thinking that the rest of the world has. And of course that's true because believers and nonbelievers value different things.

In his groundbreaking work, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, psychologist Daniel Kahneman teaches that we have two Systems of thinking. System 1 is fast and automatic and deals largely with how we feel and what we value. System 2 is

slow and takes effort and deals with how we think and come to conclusions about things.

In his book, Kahneman discovered that we think emotionally first and critically second. We literally think first about how we *feel* about something and then think about what we *think* about it. This is why confirmation bias exists. That's why we accept all of the information from the world that supports what we already believe and reject all of the information that contradicts what we believe. This is why people who live in the same town can disagree so strongly on political views. This is also why during political debates, almost no one actually listens to anyone else. Mostly, they're just thinking about what they're going to say next.

Which is why we need to be very careful about what we *value*. Because what we value drives what we think about and what we notice and what we pay attention to. If we value making money, then we will pay attention to information from the outside world that helps us make money and ignore information that might help us take care of someone in need or tell someone about Christ. Our values drive our thoughts.

And that is why we need to say—before we even get into the verses—that we should not value what the world values. Our thought patterns should not be the same as the thought patterns of the world. We should not pay attention to the information that the world pays attention to.

That's what Paul means when he says we do not live by the standards of the world. He means that we intentionally choose to value different things than what the world values.

<sup>3</sup> *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.*

I should correct one mistake that the NIV makes in these verses. The Greek word for "world" is *sarx*, which we translate as the "flesh" or the "sinful nature." Now, any time I want to explain the concept of the "flesh" or the "sinful nature," I find it best to simply quote the words of Paul in Romans 7...

<sup>15</sup> I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. <sup>16</sup> And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup> As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. <sup>18</sup> I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

<sup>21</sup> So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. <sup>22</sup> For in my inner being I delight in God's law; <sup>23</sup> but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. <sup>24</sup> What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The *sarx*—the “sinful nature” or the “flesh”—is a piece of all of us. It is the resistance within us to do what we should do. It is that piece of us that seeks our survival and our good above the good of others. It is a force within our mind and our heart that pulls us away from God's law to do wrong.

And as long as we live, we will be fighting against our flesh. Paul likely wrestled with his flesh until the day he died. And we will wrestle with it as well. Until we are caught up into glory, there is a piece of us that will desire to sin. We need to accept that.

Now, Christ rescues us from our flesh! He transforms us! Through a process, of course, but still—he transforms us!

And part of that transformation is changing what we value. Do we value the next time we get that fix for our addiction? Or do we value the next time we get to attend church? If we can change what we value, then we change how we think and how we behave.

Now, the NIV translates *sarx* as “the world” because that's how the world lives! The world lives according to the flesh. The world lives in order to make themselves feel good and happy in the moment rather than to live for the cause

of Christ. Therefore, there are two different camps: there are those who value what the flesh values (the world) and there are those who value what God values (believers).

In this verse, Paul says that we do not “wage war” as the world does. The Greek word for “wage war” is *strateuo*, from which we get the English word “strategy.” The Greek word means “to engage in battle as a soldier.”

Listen, in this spiritual war, we are soldiers. We are not generals, who sit above the battle and watch it from a distance. Nope. We’re in the trenches. We’re in the foxholes. We’re on the frontlines.

It’s our souls that are at stake.

All of us are in a spiritual battle, and we are the troops on the ground. Therefore, we need to make sure that we go through spiritual boot camp and make sure that our souls and our hearts and our spirits are aligned with the Father. We need to make sure that we understand how our armor can protect us. We need to make sure we understand how we can use the sword of the spirit to fight back against the devil and his schemes.

Because we do not fight the way that the world fights. The world uses power. The world uses force. The world uses deception. The world uses manipulation. The world uses advertising. The world uses greed. The world uses shame. The world uses fear. The world uses unchecked anger. The world uses doublespeak.

This is how the world survives. This is how the world adheres to the Darwinian lie—that this world is survival of the fittest and that we must look out for number one.

On the other hand, we fight as soldiers in different ways. We use love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. We use the gifts of the Spirit. We speak the truth of the good news. We sacrifice our desires to God. We treat others the way we want to be treated.

***<sup>4</sup> The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.***

The Greek word for “weapons” is *hoplon*, which means “the tools of battle.” We could use this word to talk about offensive weapons, like swords and spears. We could also use this word to talk about defense weapons, like shields and bucklers. However, in this context, the translation we should probably use is a “siege machine.”

The Romans were incredible in a siege. They would construct all kinds of weaponry in order to bring down the walls of a city. They would construct machines called catapults, that would launch large rocks. They would build trebuchets, which basically worked like a massive sling and it could swing massive boulders for hundreds of yards. They would build ballistas, which were basically massive crossbows.

And beyond that, they would also construct towers out of wood that they could move forward on wheels. The towers would shield soldiers from arrows, while they used battering rams and drawbridges to get soldiers through enemy walls. Romans would even construct hillsides of dirt that led up to city walls. They would *make hills* if that was what it took to bring a city to its knees.

I think this is what Paul has in mind. Because Paul doesn’t believe that the spiritual war is primarily a defense against the onslaught of the world. Oh no no no no.

Paul has been an aggressive dude his whole life. No, Paul is leading the charge! Paul is going to go out and attack and make the forces of darkness submit to the light and power of Christ!

The weapons we fight with have divine power, which is literally “the power of God.” The tools of our spiritual battle come from the barracks of the Creator God. Our weapons are so much stronger than the weapons of the world! The truth is stronger than fiction. The power of love is greater than the power of fear. The power of peace can defeat the power of shame.

Our weapons will demolish strongholds. The Greek word for “demolish” is *kathaireo* (pronounced KATH-eye-reh-oh), which means “to take down from above” or “to tear down walls” or “to dethrone” or “to destroy.” Imagine you are playing a game of Jenga and all of the sudden, you decide you don’t want to play. So you give the top of the Jenga tower a little push, and all of the blocks come tumbling down.

In fact, yes, think of the story of the walls of Jericho that come tumbling down. That’s a perfect picture of this word. It means to tear it all down, from the top to the bottom. It’s also a wonderful word for dethroning a king and taking away his power.

And this makes sense, because when the kingdom of God goes to war, it takes no prisoners. Just think of the many lies that the kingdom of God has left in its tracks. Think of the many false teachings and the many heresies and the many cults and the many false religions that Jesus Christ has left in rubble throughout history.

When we go to spiritual battle, we are ruthless. We do not tolerate deceit. We do not stand for compromise with the devil. We will not negotiate with terrorists.

The Greek word for “strongholds” is *ochuroma* (pronounced OCK-ooH-row-mah), which is a Roman military term for a “fortified place.” It’s any place that forces are trying to hold. Usually, it has walls.

Interestingly enough, this was the Greek word used to describe the Tower of Babel in the Greek version of the Old Testament. And that’s very interesting because the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 was man’s attempt to ascend into heaven. It was using the way of the flesh in order to ascend to the place of God. However, as we see in the story of the Tower of Babel, it all ended in disaster. The language of men was confused, so that they spread out over the earth.

In the same way, we are conquering the fortified places of the world. Because the world doesn’t just lie. The world builds defenses around the lie. In the case of abortion, the world doesn’t just deny that a fetus is living person who has a right to live. The world goes further and says that anyone who disagrees with

the right of abortion is against women and is against a woman's right to have autonomy over her own body.

The world is very clever. They build up walls that you have to conquer before you can get to the very lie itself. Our flesh will do whatever reasoning it can so that we continue to sin and so that we continue to act against God's will.

That is why we need to go on the offensive and why we need to take the enemy seriously. That is why we need to study our enemies defenses, so that we can find the weaknesses in the wall and pull down the defenses until there is nothing left to defend the lie itself.

***<sup>5</sup> We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.***

We have already seen the Greek word for "demolish." It means "to tear down from above."

And we have already seen the Greek word for "arguments." It's that word *logismos*, which means "a way of thinking."

I want to rifle through these last Greek words and put them all together at the end.

The Greek word for "pretension" is actually a phrase. It literally means "to lift yourself up on a height." And that's exactly what a pretension is. It's something that you say in order to take the high ground in an interaction. Any time you try to make yourself look more powerful than someone else or more wealthy than someone else or more important than someone else, that's a pretension. It's you, trying to set yourself up higher than someone else.

The Greek word for "take captive" is *aichmalotizo* (pronounced eich-mah-low-tee-ZOH), which means "to capture as a prisoner of war."

The Greek word for “thought” is *noema* (pronounced NO-ey-mah), which means “to perceive” or “to think directly about something.” If *logismos* is a pattern of thinking, then *noema* is a single thought in that pattern.

The Greek word for “make obedient” is *hupakoe* (pronounced who-pah-koh-EY), and it means “to listen under someone” or “to hearken at the door” or “to obey a spoken command.”

Let’s put that all together: We are in a spiritual war to destroy systems of thinking that plague our world. We see those systems of thinking every day. Materialism. Hedonism. Nihilism. Liberalism. Conservatism. Utilitarianism. Postmodernism. They are lies, which all end up in the same place: self-worship.

Those systems of thinking put themselves up on pedestals and surround themselves in defenses. They use big words to try to confuse us. They use broken arguments to get us to turn aside. They claim they are victims when truthfully they are perpetrators.

Those lies attempt to ascend to the height of truth. They try to stand where the truth of God stands.

But we are in a spiritual war, a war with no casualties. Because we are not interested in destroying people. We are interested in capturing and converting people. This is a war in which we don’t destroy lies. We convert lies into the truth.

For instance, let’s return to abortion. We could very easily say, “No, you’re wrong when you say this is an issue of a woman’s right to choose. This is an issue of life and death.”

But here’s the problem. That argument won’t do any good. Why? Because the people who have decided that abortion is good have chosen the value of *personal autonomy over the value of a fetus*. But the kingdom of God should not be deterred! What should say instead?

Perhaps we could say, “We, too, believe in a woman’s right to choose! But we do not believe that the act of abortion supports that. We think that is a poor



decision for any woman to make. Therefore, we teach that women should be respected in body and soul. We teach that sexual union should only be in marriage, between a man and a woman. We believe that the way of Christ gives us true freedom and true self-control.”

That’s not a perfect argument, but it’s on the way to something profound for people who have decided that *personal autonomy* is the most important thing. You do not have true control over yourself until you deny the call of the sinful nation and listen to wisdom of the spirit.

The sinful systems of thinking are strongholds. They are armies, made up of little thoughts. They are made up of small untruths. And we will capture them one by one and convert them to the faith.

That is how a battle is won.

## 9 – BOASTING IN WEAKNESS | 2 CORINTHIANS 11 & 12

The following section is an essential part of Paul's defense against the false teachers in Corinth who have been slandering his name. Because much of what these false teachers are doing is denigrating Paul's name and character. They have called him unimpressive in person. They have called him unsuccessful as a preacher and as a minister of the truth. And on the other hand, the false teachers have promoted themselves as men of means and of success and that therefore the Corinthians should listen to them.

And that's an argument that we should believe nowadays in our cultural situation, because when you consider it: Who are the people who get the loudest microphones? Who are the people that we listen to the most? Isn't the people who are successful by the standards of the world? Isn't it the people who are wealthiest and most powerful? We don't typically seek the wisdom of plumbers and carpenters and farmers as much as CEOs and Presidents and well-known actors.

The Corinthians are a bit befuddled in terms of who they should listen to. Do they listen to the successful dudes who seem to be rolling in cash? Or do they listen to the poor tentmaker who gets beat up an awful lot?

Paul knows that he can't just tell the Corinthians, "Hey, you should listen to me because you pity me more than the other guy." He knows he needs a more compelling argument. Which is why Paul is going to need to do a little boasting and self-promotion in order to make himself look better in the eyes of the Corinthians. (The kids these days are calling it "flexing.")

Paul is going to have the battle these boastful false teachers with a little boasting of his own. But he will do it his way.

So, this answers an essential question: What do you do when someone pulls you down into the mud? How do you fight in the mud like a follower of Jesus? How do you answer the foolishness of the world if the people around us will only listen to foolishness?

Paul will show us. Since we're covering two rather lengthy chapters, I will stick to the bullet points that make these chapters so interesting.

*I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. <sup>2</sup> I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. <sup>3</sup> But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. <sup>4</sup> For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. <sup>5</sup> But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." <sup>6</sup> I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.*

In 11:1, the Greek word for "foolishness" is *aphrosune* (pronounced afro-SUE-nay), and it means "an act of deliberate foolishness that will achieve praiseworthy ends." Paul isn't going to act deliberately like a moron. He's basically saying, "I know this is gonna sound silly, but follow me on this."

In 11:2, the Greek word for "jealousy" is *zelos* (pronounced ZAY-loss), which means "an intense passion for what belongs to you." This is different from the concept of envy, where you have an intense passion for what belongs to someone else. The reason why Paul says that it is a "godly" jealousy is because it harkens back to those Old Testament verses where it says that God is jealous for the Israelites. God is jealous because the Israelites belong to Him, and they belong to Him instead of other false gods because they made a covenant with Him at Mount Sinai.

In 11:2, Paul indicates that he wishes to "give into marriage" the Corinthians believers to Jesus. This speaks to the concept of the church being the "bride of Christ." In many ways, this is a symbol that speaks to the Second Coming of Jesus. According to Jewish culture at that time, a man would become betrothed to a woman and then he would go and build an expansion onto the house of

his father or a freestanding home so that they could live together. Then, he would return to bring his bride home with a festive parade.

In 11:3, there are two essential words to understand. The word for “sincere” is *haplotes* (pronounced hop-LOW-taiss), which means “single-mindedness” or “simplicity of heart.” The word for “pure devotion” is *hagnotes* (pronounced hog-NO-taiss), which means “moral purity” or “innocence.” Together, those two words identify the state of Eve when she was in the Garden of Eden. She was singly-focused on the bliss of walking with God in the Garden. And she was completely innocent to any wrongdoing whatsoever. However, just as Satan lied to Eve and twisted her mind away from God’s will, in the same way Satan is lying and twisting the minds of the Corinthians. Paul is trying to bring the Corinthians to a state of simplicity and innocence that we were supposed to enjoy in heaven. Satan wants to destroy that.

In 11:4, the Greek word for “put up with it” is *anechomai* (pronounced ahn-ECHO-my), which means “to tolerate” or “to endure.” Paul is confused as to why the Corinthians are enduring this false teaching rather than ending it.

In 11:5, the term “super-apostle” is one that Paul uses to describe either the Twelve apostles that Jesus sent out in Acts 1, or it refers to the Three apostles who were closest to Jesus (Peter, James and John). Very likely, the false teachers were arguing that the Corinthians shouldn’t listen to Paul because he’s not an apostle on the level of the Peter or James or John or the other nine apostles that Jesus sent out upon the earth. In this verse, Paul is saying that he isn’t inferior to those guys.

In 11:6, when Paul says he isn’t a “trained speaker,” he isn’t indicating that he has no skill in rhetoric or in speaking before crowds. What he is saying is that he didn’t receive any formal training from a Sophist or a professional rhetorician. The false teachers may have used this point to slander Paul.

***<sup>7</sup> Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? <sup>8</sup> I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. <sup>9</sup> And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia***

*supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. <sup>10</sup> As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. <sup>11</sup> Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! <sup>12</sup> And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.*

In 11:7-9, the issue that Paul is addressing has two parts: (1) Paul is talking about “lowering” himself by working with his hands as a tentmaker. In that day and age, people who worked with their hands were regarded as a lower class of citizen. (2) The Corinthians may have been angry at Paul because while he didn’t accept any financial aid from them, he was receiving financial aid from the churches in Macedonia. The Corinthians could have perceived some kind of threat, perhaps a question as to why Paul would accept money from the churches in Macedonia but not from the believers he was serving in Corinth. Paul explains that his aim was to lift up the Corinthians by refusing to be a financial burden to them.

In 11:10, the region of Achaia was the section of the Roman Empire in which Corinth was located. Achaia was the southern tip of modern day Greece, which also included the city of Athens in its purview.

We should probably also handle the Greek word for “boasting,” which is *kauchesis* (pronounced caw-KAY-sees). It means “to self-glorify” or “exult” yourself. It’s the word you used to talk yourself up or to tell stories of your renown or to make yourself look good in front of people.

In 11:12, pay attention to the irony. Paul earlier said that he was essential equal to the super-apostles, the Twelve or the Three whom Jesus sent out from Jerusalem. But here, Paul will strike down those false teachers who want to be treated equal on Paul’s playing field. Those false teachers are certainly boasters, self-promoters who go around and make themselves look good by making others look bad. However, Paul is about to cut them down to size.

*<sup>13</sup> For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup> And no wonder, for Satan*

***himself masquerades as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup> It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.***

In 11:13, the Greek word for “worker” is *ergates* (pronounced air-GAH-taiss), and it was a word used by Paul and other Christian writers to describe someone who was engaged in the act of Christian service. This person volunteered their time to help the kingdom of God.

The Greek word for “masquerading” is *metaschematizo* (pronounced meta-skay-mah-TEE-zoh), which means “to change your outward appearance.” This is an important word because during any transformation of this nature, the inside does not change. This is just a change of paint on the outside of a house without any renovation being done inside.

Together, then, Paul is saying that these men claim to be apostles of Jesus Christ. However, they are not true apostles because they preach a different gospel. They work in the kingdom of God in order to deceive rather than to tell the truth. On the outside, they look like apostles. On the inside, they don’t look like apostles.

In 11:14-15, we see a connection to the very example of Satan, who makes himself look like an angel of light on the outside. Since Satan is a shape-shifter, then his servants would be shape-shifters as well. In the end, the Law of Sowing and Reaping will apply to them. They are sowing deceit and destructive speech, and therefore, they will receive destruction as a result.

***<sup>16</sup> I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. <sup>17</sup> In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. <sup>18</sup> Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. <sup>19</sup> You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! <sup>20</sup> In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. <sup>21</sup> To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!***

In 11:16, the Greek word for “fool” is *aphron* (rhymes with laugh-phone), and it means “someone who isn’t thinking.” In this verse, Paul is reluctant to get into the mud with these other fools, the false prophets. Paul doesn’t want anyone to think that just because he’s going to dishonor himself by doing a little boasting in himself that he’s a fool like the false prophets who spend all day boasting about themselves.

In 11:17, we have a bad translation in the NIV. It is better understood that Paul is saying that his boasting is not “at the Lord’s direction.” Basically, Paul is saying that Jesus wasn’t the one who told him to do this. And why? Because Jesus didn’t engage in boasting about himself. After all, Jesus called himself the Son of Man during his ministry even though he was definitely the Son of God. So, Paul is about to employ a rhetorical device. He’s going to show the Corinthians how foolish it is to engage in self-promotion.

In 11:19, we need to read that verse with sarcasm. Paul is saying to the Corinthians that even though they believe they are “wise,” they are actually shown to be fools because they tolerate these false prophets who are fools. In 11:20, Paul talks about the five actions that the false prophets have done among the Corinthians without realizing it...

1. The Greek word for “enslave” is *katadouloi* (pronounced kah-tah-DO-loy), which means “to dominate” or “to subjugate and make a slave.” This might be a word used for the men who were conquered in battle and turned into slaves.
2. The Greek word for “exploit” is *katesthie* (pronounced cat-ess-THAY-ee), which means “to eat up until it is finished” or “to devour.” Paul is referring almost to a parasite, that sucks the life out of you until you ultimately die.
3. The Greek word for “take advantage” is *lambanei* (pronounced lahm-BAH-nay), which means “to steal by violence” or “to forcibly take something away.” Imagine a bank robber with a shotgun and you have a good picture.
4. The Greek word for “push himself forward” is *epairetai* (pronounced epp-air-ET-eye), which means “to lift yourself up.”
5. The Greek word for “slap you in the face” is a Greek phrase that speaks to the act of striking someone in the face in public in order to shame them

in front of the community. If you were struck in public, it put you in a difficult situation at that time in history. If you walked away, then everyone in your community would assume that you deserved being struck in the face. But if you confronted the person and struck them back, it could easily turn into a fight where one of you would end up dead.

All together, the false teachers were the equivalents of spiritual slave traders, parasites, armed robbers, organization climbers or outright jerks. These aren't good guys. Why are the Corinthians tolerating them and their behavior?

***What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. <sup>22</sup> Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. <sup>23</sup> Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. <sup>24</sup> Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, <sup>26</sup> I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. <sup>27</sup> I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. <sup>28</sup> Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. <sup>29</sup> Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?***

This list is often compared to a document of Caesar Augustus named the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, which is Latin for "The Deeds of Divine Augustus." As a means of political propaganda, Augustus posted his accomplishments all over the Roman Empire. It's a long document, about 35 paragraphs actually, but in those words, he never once talks about his setbacks. Paul's list, on the other hand, is full of nothing but setbacks.



Paul is about to show the Corinthians the great lengths to which he went in order to bring the gospel to them. And the reason he does this boasting is because the false apostles cannot match this list. They haven't bled like Paul has bled. They haven't been wounded like Paul has been wounded. They don't believe like Paul believes.

These false apostles brag that they are Hebrew-speaking, Jewish men who can trace their lines to Abraham. Well, so can Paul. He is all of those things, too. But they aren't servants of Christ. Paul has displayed his service to Christ far more than they have (because they aren't actually servants of Christ.)

In 11:24, we see the practice of 39 strikes that was practiced by the synagogue. According to Jewish law in Deuteronomy 25:2-3, a man could not be struck 40 times. And since Judea was occupied by Rome, they could not carry out the death penalty. Therefore, the maximum punishment allowable in Judea at that time was whipping a person thirty-nine times across the body.

Paul must have been quite resilient to survive *five* of these beatings. It was not rare for men to die during or after a scourging of this nature.

In 11:25, we see the practice of striking with rods. This was a Roman punishment. Roman magistrates were attended by officials called lictors, who would carry bundles of elm or birch branches with an axe in the bundle. This signified that a lector could either punish or execute people with the authority of his magistrate. On three occasions, Paul received this punishment, one of which was probably in Philippi in Acts 16:22.

We also see that Paul was stoned once, an event that took place in the city of Lystra. Paul was stoned until he was actually unconscious. However, when Paul came to, he got up and walked back into the city like an absolute boss.

We know of one shipwreck that took place in Acts 27, where it looked like Paul would certainly die. However, he was also part of two other shipwrecks that Luke did not record in the book of Acts!

In 11:26, we see the general dangers that Paul faced while he was on the road between cities. Travel could be dangerous, either due to the flooding of

rivers or due to bandits who would lie in wait for you. Paul also didn't really know where to turn for support in many cases. His own Jewish brethren would often turn against him, and the Gentiles wouldn't readily accept him. He has also been in danger from men who claimed to be his brothers but then later betrayed him. Inns that lay along travel routes were also largely unsafe.

In 11:27, Paul has faced the full gambit of the rugged life. He has gone without sleep, either due to his anxiety about the mission before him or due to the danger he was in. He has gone without food and water and clothing and shelter.

Because of this, Paul genuinely feels "weak." The Greek word there is *asthenes* (pronounced ahss-THEN-aiss), which means "to be impotent" or "to not have the power to change things." This is a key word over the next chapter, so it's important to face it here because this is the crux of everything.

Paul has been made to look weak by the false prophets. And the truth is that Paul certainly has felt weak. He has looked weak. He has had the life beaten out of him. His body was very likely broken over the course of his ministry. He probably did not look like a mighty soldier or an impressive speaker.

But Paul found power in his weakness. He found strength in his incapacity.

***<sup>30</sup> If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.***

***<sup>31</sup> The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. <sup>32</sup> In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. <sup>33</sup> But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.***

In the Roman Empire, a special wreath was awarded to the first soldier who would scale an enemy wall in order to take the city. Paul is literally doing the opposite of that here. Instead of scaling a wall, he is descending from a wall in a basket.

Paul brings up this story because it's embarrassing. He doesn't look like a hero here. He looks like a coward who is running away. But Paul doesn't care about looking weak or foolish or cowardly. He knows the truth about himself, which is a truth that we are about to learn even further in the next few verses.

*I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. <sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— <sup>4</sup> was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. <sup>5</sup> I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.*

Paul is very, very clever in this section. In 12:1, we must read Paul's words sarcastically. Paul is saying with tongue-in-cheek, "Hey, I just told you guys about all of the horrible stuff that has happened to me and about how I feel weak all the time, but let's go back to talking about how impressive I am! We won't really gain anything, but hey, let me tell about you some visions I've received from the Lord because that's probably what you want to hear about anyway."

The irony is so vital to understanding this section. According to the false teachers, experiences like ecstatic visions are indicators of an apostle's success. Meanwhile, failures or struggles are indication of an apostle's failure. It's much like the "health and wealth" version of the gospel we see from televangelists, that popular logical fallacy: If you're rich, then God likes you. If you're poor, then God doesn't like you.

When Paul says he must go on to visions and revelations, those are two interesting Greek words. The word for "vision" is *optasia* (pronounced op-TASS-ee-ah), which is the word using for the appearance of a heavenly being. It's the word used to describe the appearance of angels in Luke 1:22 and Luke

24:23. We know that Paul had a vision like that in Acts 16:9, when a man of Macedonia begged him to help.

The word for "revelation" is *apokalupsis* (pronounced *ah-pawk-AH-loop-saiss*), from which we get the word "apocalypse." It means "to unveil what is hidden" or "the appearance of something previously invisible." When John writes his book of Revelation, he is writing about seeing things on earth from the perspective of the heavenly realm.

This stuff is not for the occasional Christian. This is what serious believers experience. To see spiritual creatures or to see the unveiling of the heavenly realms is an indicator of being in lockstep with the Spirit. But the false teachers probably used that marker as one of success. And funny enough, Paul indicates that he definitely has had those experiences, but that is not what makes him powerful.

That is why Paul talks about himself in the third person in 12:2. He refuses to self-promote himself in the same way that the false teachers would promote themselves. The false teachers would probably stand up and talk about something fantastic vision they had in order to get people to listen to them. Paul writes that he actually has visions that other men lie about having, but he won't use them to his advantage.

In 12:2, we see the concept of the "third heaven." The ancient peoples believed that the heavens were stacked upon the earth. The first heaven was the upper atmosphere that you could see with your eyes. Beyond that, was the second heaven which was more like an ether that separated us from the heavenly realm. And above that, was the third heaven which was where heavenly creatures lived.

Paul saw heaven. He doesn't know if his body went there or if it was an out of body experience. One thing is for sure: Paul had an experience that he can't talk about.

He heard "inexpressible" things. That Greek word is *arretos* (pronounced *ah-RAY-toss*), which means "something that cannot be put into words." When we experience the heavenly realm, we get into the space where human language

no longer makes sense. You get into the place where it makes no difference how many words you use, you'll just never capture what you saw. This, of course, probably stands in contrast to the false teachers who used their oratorical skills to go into great detail about what they saw during their "visions."

*<sup>7</sup> To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Paul refuses to use this information in order to make himself look good. Instead, he chooses to display even more of weakness in 12:7, by talking about the thorn. In order to keep him from thinking too highly of himself because of what he was seeing in the heavenly realms, Paul received a thorn from Satan. The exact identity of the thorn is unknown. There are three primary arguments: (1) Paul is talking about the constant opposition he faces in the world, which constantly wears on him like a thorn in his flesh; (2) Paul is talking about a physical ailment that keeps him from operating at 100% and makes him seem feeble to others; (3) Paul is talking about a temptation to sin that wears on him all the time.

Regardless, the thorn hurts. It "torments" Paul, which is the Greek word *kolaphizo* (pronounced cola-FEE-zoh) and it means "to hit someone in the ear." When you're hit in the ear, not only does it hurt but you're also disoriented. You can't tell which way is up and down or right and left.

Paul wants this thorn removed, so he tells a story that is very similar to Greek healing stories of that day. In a traditional Greek healing story, someone would have a physical ailment. They would plead with the local Greek god a number of times for healing. And then, the god would answer.

This story is very different. Three times (a divine number since it's the number of the Trinity) Paul pleaded with the Lord to take that thorn away. But God instructs Paul that grace is more important than deliverance.

That's a hard lesson to teach, but it's true. There is enormous power to gain in learning to bear with pain. Take, for example, Jesus on the cross. What kind of extraordinary power does it take for a man on a cross to forgive the men who put him there? The power it takes is grace, the power that forgives sins and allows us to forgive the sins of others. And we learn the full extent of grace through moments of pain.

Remember, God did not send the thorn to Paul. The tormenting pain came from Satan, much like in the story of Job. However, God did not immediately take away this painful agent because it was an opportunity for Paul to experience the full depths of grace. And once Paul found those full depths, he found a power and a peace much greater than had his pain simply relieved the moment he asked for it.

All of this might sound sadistic, but it's anything but. Paul learned how to be okay despite terrible torment. He learned how to find the abundant life in the midst of agony and sorrow. That's a gift that is not easily obtained and that no one would ever let go once they found it.

While Paul won't talk about the details of his impressive visions and revelations, he will certainly talk about his pain. Why? Because that's what distinguishes Paul from this phony teachers. Those false apostles won't stand up in the midst of suffering. They'll fold like card tables. However, Paul has gone into the great depths of Christ's mercy and love. He has found the grace of God in the midst of torture. He has found the perfection of God's power.

Paul understands that the power of Christ finds its origin in the pain of suffering. And of course that is true because Jesus displayed his power by suffering on the cross for the sins of the world. Paul understood something that very, very few people on this earth will understand: the power of being unpowerful. The power of being weak.

That is why Paul delights in impotence, in being abused, in oppression, in being hunted with intent to harm, and in being pressed down.

Why? Because when Paul is weak, then he is strong. That's what it means to be a true apostle, to join Jesus in his weakness and to find the power of Christ as a result.

## 10 – EXAMINING YOURSELVES | 2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-14

Paul ends this letter with a challenge to the Corinthians. Over the course of this letter, Paul has gone to great pains to expose his intentions and his actions in order to defend himself against the slander of false teachers. He has shown himself to be trustworthy and true. In many ways, this letter was a test for him or an examination. The false teachers came to Corinth in order to challenge and test the quality of Paul's ministry. Fortunately, he had done the hard work by being tested in spiritual battle over years and years.

But now, Paul turns the microscope from his ministry and onto the Corinthians. They've accused him of quite a few shortcomings. But now, he will turn the challenge to them. They need to prepare themselves for his visit, and they need to make sure that they are listening to the gospel rather than to a false version of it.

With that in mind, let's dive in...

***<sup>5</sup> Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? <sup>6</sup> And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.***

In this verse, we come across two very important Greek words that will color the rest of the passage. The Greek word for "examine" is *peirazo* (pronounced pay-RAH-zoh), which means "to pressure in order to test" or "to test whether a city can be taken." For instance, if you were a general and you wanted to see if you had the military ability to take a city, you would start a light attack and test the city's defenses. The purpose of the attack is not to completely defeat the city, but instead, to simply test and see if you were able to defeat it.

Put another way, to "examine" means to "determine the nature of something by submitting it to testing." A general determines the strength or weakness of a city's defenses by testing them. We can determine a liquid's density by testing it. We can determine the strength of a woman's leadership skills by testing them. We can determine the accuracy of statements by testing them.



The other important Greek word in this verse is “test,” which is the Greek word *dokimazo* (pronounced dock-EE-mah-zoh). It means “to be tested in battle.” Imagine a soldier who has survived countless battles and who understands how to fight and how to win. In this case, the act of testing something turns that object into something valuable. A child is tested in school in order to become knowledgeable about math. A bar of gold is tested in fire in order to become pure. A dog is tested in an obstacle course to become excellent at following commands.

Put another way, to “test” something means “to test the genuineness of something with a view toward approving it.” So if the general sends a small detachment of soldiers to test the defenses of the city and finds that the city repelled his attack easily, then he would say that the city withstood his test and that it is strong. The general would decide to avoid the city rather than waste the lives of his men.

These two words are pretty important for understanding what Paul is telling the Corinthians to do. He is telling them that they need to put pressure on each other in order to determine if they are approved by Christ and that their faith is true.

How does one test if they are in the faith? Let’s skip over to James 2:14-24...

<sup>14</sup> *What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?* <sup>15</sup> *Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.* <sup>16</sup> *If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?* <sup>17</sup> *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

<sup>18</sup> *But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”*

*Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.*

<sup>19</sup> *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*

<sup>20</sup> *You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?* <sup>21</sup> *Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he*

offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. And again, according to the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:15-20...

<sup>15</sup> "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. <sup>16</sup> By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Paul has shown the fruit of his ministry. He went to great lengths to show that his ministry is one of Spirit and that he is engaged in reconciling the world back to God and that he has gone through great suffering and pain in order to preach the gospel.

Now, the Corinthians must test themselves. They must take the judgments that they leveled at Paul and measure themselves with them. Just as Jesus taught in Matthew 7:1-2...

*"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. <sup>2</sup> For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."*

We need this today. Wow, do we need this today. We live in a culture of blame, and we do not live in a culture of self-examination. We live in a culture of division, and we do not live in a culture of reflection. We live in a culture of instant outrage, and we do not live in a culture of wisdom.

*<sup>7</sup> Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. <sup>8</sup> For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.*

Again, Paul has to reassure the Corinthians that this has nothing to do with him. The faith of the Corinthians is not a measure for Paul. This is not some weird, co-dependent relationship where the Corinthians have to be spiritually pure in order for Paul to feel like a worthwhile missionary. Instead, Paul does not seem to mind if it appears as if he has failed.

The Greek word for failed is *adokimos* (pronounced *ah-dock-EE-moss*), which is the literally the opposite of the word we saw earlier about being tested in battle. That Greek word means “to not be tested in battle.” So basically, Paul is saying that it doesn’t matter if it appears as if he is not tested. What he cares about the most is the Corinthians, based on their own faith and for their own good.

In the context, we might better understand “doing good” or “doing wrong” as taking the right path or taking the wrong path. We might reach out again to the words of Jesus to understand this. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus teaches...

<sup>13</sup> *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. <sup>14</sup> But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

Paul wants to know that the Corinthians are walking the difficult path of following Jesus. He wants to know that they are seeking to be like Christ, by embodying the values He showed us on this earth. He hopes the Corinthians have not been pulled astray by the false teachers to walk on the wide road that leads to destruction.

And why does Paul want to be sure that the Corinthians are walking in the way of Jesus? Well, because Paul represents the truth, and he doesn’t have to spend his time in Corinth correcting behavior and getting everyone in line. Paul desires to have a good visit with the Corinthians. He hopes that it will be an encouraging trip for both parties.

But Paul and his companions represent the truth. He won’t sugarcoat anything. He won’t turn a blind eye to sin and sweep it under the rug in order to have a

good time. If Paul seems something sketchy, he's going to address it. He can't not speak the truth.

*<sup>9</sup> We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection. <sup>10</sup> This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.*

This is the state of affairs that Paul hopes he will find in Corinth when he arrives. He doesn't want to come and wield his apostolic authority and appear like a drill sergeant in order to get the troops in line. There is a place and time for being a drill sergeant, but that time is not now. Instead, Paul wants the Corinthians to look like spiritual heroes and for Paul to look like the weakling.

When Paul talks about weakness, we can harken back to what we learned in 2 Corinthians 11-12. He's talking about the numerous setbacks and the suffering he has had to endure for the gospel. He's talking about the danger he has faced. He's talking about the constant pain he endures from the "thorn" that Satan sent in order to torment him.

He does not want to appear to the Corinthians as a spiritual overlord. He wants to be able to share his weakness with them. He wants to change the nature of his relationship with them. Rather than being like a teacher and a student, he wants to be friends and fellow companions with them.

Paul's prayer is for "perfection" among the Corinthians. The Greek word is *katartisis* (pronounced cat-arr-TEE-seess), which was a medical term for "setting a broken bone back into place." There have been a number of fractures in the community at Corinth. Many of the believers probably stood against each other due to the false teachers who had infiltrated the church. And there was a fracture between them and Paul.

Paul's prayer is that everything will be healed and set right. He prays that the Corinthians will join the same path that Paul walks—the narrow road that leads to Jesus. And if they are all walking the same road, then they will find themselves on the same team.

In verse 10, we see that Paul doesn't want to be harsh, like a schoolmaster or a military general. Instead, he wants to build them up rather than tear them down. The Greek word for "building up" is *oikodome* (pronounced oy-koe-DOE-may), which is the Greek word for a "building." And in the context of the letters Paul has written to the Corinthians, we can assume that this building is a temple.

After all, Paul wrote the following to the Corinthians in his first letter in 1 Corinthians 3:10-17...

<sup>10</sup> *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup> his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup> If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. <sup>15</sup> If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

<sup>16</sup> *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.*

Paul gives the Corinthians this picture of building something beautiful for the purpose of dwelling together with God. And Paul joins into this process of building. He wants to build the Corinthians into a magnificent temple of God, a temple not build with walls of gold or marble but with human hearts and souls.

On the other hand, Paul doesn't want to "tear down" the Corinthians. The Greek word is *kathairesis* (pronounced cath-eye-RAY-seess), which means "to tear down from above." Imagine a tower of Jenga blocks and imagine you give a push to the top of the tower and watch all of the blocks fall and cascade down. Or envision the walls of Jericho, which were pushed out by the Lord so that the stones no longer sat on top of each other.

Paul wants to build them up into a beautiful temple, rather than tear down that temple. He wants to construct something wonderful among them. He doesn't want to pull them down or rework a bunch of things with them while he's there. He wants to encourage and help them move forward.

***<sup>11</sup> Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.***

These are wonderful measures by which to test the strength of your faith and of the body of believers. To "aim for perfection" is to go back to the Greek word we discovered earlier, which means "to reset broken bones." The Corinthians need to heal the fissures among themselves. They need to make sure that everything is set into place and that their faith is working correctly. Like mechanics, they need to make sure that the engine of their faith is timed and that every part is working together to propel the car forward.

To "listen to my appeal" is the Greek word *parakaleo*, which means "to be encouraged" or "to have someone walk alongside you during difficulty."

Paul's goal is to walk alongside them and to bring them back onto the path of following Jesus. With this word, he implores the Corinthians to come to their senses and realize that Paul is ushering them in the right direction and that the false teachers are trying to pull them in the wrong direction.

"Be of one mind" in the Greek language is a phrase which means "to think the same things." We know from modern philosophy and psychology that what we think about is determined by what we value. In order to align your thoughts with another person, you need to value the same things. The Corinthians need to get their values straight in order to get their minds on the same page.

To "live in peace" harkens back to the Hebrew notion of *shalom*. To have peace does not just mean resolving conflict. More than that, peace is about wholeness. A beautiful picture of peace is of a wall that has all of its bricks perfectly in place. If bricks are missing, then the wall is no longer whole. But if every brick is there and is aligned, then the wall is whole and it stands strong.

In the same way, the Corinthians need to get on the same page and live as a whole community. The false teachers have divided them. The false teachers

have broken up their wholeness, pulling some of them away from the faith in order to make money off of them. The Corinthians need to come to their senses and come back together so that they can form one piece again.

They also need to realize that God is with them! They don't need to accomplish all this on their own! The Holy Spirit is present among them to do this work if they will submit themselves to it.

***<sup>12</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss. <sup>13</sup> All the saints send their greetings.***

***<sup>14</sup> May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.***

A standard farewell from Paul. Here we end our study on 2 Corinthians.