

## 2 Corinthians: An Expository-Devotional Study (Selected Texts)

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### About this Study

1. Selected passages in 2 Corinthians will be studied to learn how Paul defended his conduct, character and calling against people who were trying to discredit him. We will use Paul's exhortations in these passages to help ourselves guard our conduct, character and calling as ministers of Jesus Christ.

### 2. Topics

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### 3. A Quick Introduction to 2 Corinthians

- 3.1 This letter was probably written about A. D. 54-57 (a year after 1 Corinthians) from somewhere in Macedonia (northern Greece) during Paul's third missionary journey.



(<https://missionbibleclass.org/new-testament/part2/acts-paul-the-prisoner-spreads-the-gospel-from-jerusalem-to-rome/paul-goes-to-jerusalem>)

- 3.2 After writing 1 Cor. and before writing 2 Cor. Paul wrote a sorrowful letter to Corinth in which he instructed them to discipline a sinner.

- 3.3 At the time of writing 2 Cor. some false teachers had tried to influence the believers there to turn against Paul.
- 3.4 Also at this time, there was a famine in Jerusalem, and many churches were giving to the needs of the believers there.
- 3.5 In this letter, Paul gave his views and instructions on how to deal with the conditions in the Corinthian church.
- 3.6 He also wrote to defend himself against the false teachers, to reconcile his relationship with the Corinthians, to call the church to repent, and to complete the collection of the Corinthian church for the suffering believers in Jerusalem.

## I. God of All Comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-2:4)

When I was teaching at the Singapore Bible College, I had a colleague whom I would call the “modern Job”. He and his wife had three children—a girl and two boys. Due to some genetic incompatibility, all their three children were born with a rare disease. It would destroy the brain cells and damage the motor functions of their bodies.

The physical and emotional drain in caring for the three children had been tremendous on the parents. The oldest girl and second son had since died.

One time, the father said to me, “Other parents are growing their children to live meaningfully in society. My wife and I are sending our children to die prematurely in their graves.”

Indeed, even godly believers in the all-powerful and all-good God have sometimes wondered about the ways of God. They will look to heaven and cry out in their suffering, “Lord, why? Why must we suffer like this?”

There’s an answer in 2 Cor. 1:3-11 that helps us to understand our sufferings and heartaches.

### 1. A divine purpose (1:3-4)

#### 1.1 First, God is called “the Father of compassion”.

- To have compassion here means to look upon people in need and have pity upon them—to feel with them and to do something for them to meet that need.
- Note that the Lord is described here as “the Father of compassion”, not “the God of compassion”.
- This means that the Lord doesn’t look at us as mere human beings who are in need. But He looks at us as the Heavenly Father who sees His own children in need.
- Note also that the word “compassion” in Greek is in the plural—literally, Paul is saying that God is “the Father of compassions”.
- This means that He does not show His mercy and desire to help us just once. Rather, the Lord is showering and wanting to shower His compassion upon us all the time. Just pause and consider what great compassion that is.

#### 1.2 There is a second title that Paul has given to the Lord in v. 3—He is called “the God of all comfort”.

- The word for comfort comes from the Greek word that means “to come alongside someone and help him out”.

- Here's what it means to comfort someone in the biblical sense—you see him carrying a heavy load and you take it and put it on your own back.
- Paul is telling us that God is like that—He sees us in our burdens, He sees us in our difficulties, and He sees us in our hard times; and He, the God of the Universe, comes and takes the load off and carries it Himself; He doesn't come to give us another kick to make sure that we remain down.
- The comfort God grants to us is to encourage us. God does not encourage us in the sense of consoling us and then leaving us to hide in our cave of fear and despair.
- Rather, God encourages us by putting courage into us so that we can get out of our cave of fear and despair and have the strength to face our world.
- Note again that the Lord is not just “the God of some comfort”, but “the God of all comfort”.
- It is the same idea as in “the Father of compassions” (plural)—i.e. when God comforts us, He does not do it at random or just sometimes, but He does it all the time.

1.3 Notice how Paul reinforces this idea in v. 4—“who comforts us in all our troubles.”

- That means when I am sick, God is there by my bedside; when I am oppressed and despised, God is with me in my pain; when I am in danger, God takes me by the hand and leads me through. Just pause and consider what great comfort that is.
- Now, see how Paul moves on in v. 4 to tell us that there is a great purpose at work in the comfort we receive from God—“... so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”
- God is at work in a very purposeful way in the hardships of our lives—God allows some things to come to you and me so that after He has comforted us, we might then go and lift the burden from someone else.
- Our afflictions soften our hearts so that when we have received the comfort of God it is easier for us to pass it on to someone else.
- Indeed, how much we need to do this in the church today—it is so easy to be callous and to be unkind; it is so easy for us to look down at our weaker brothers and sisters who go through hard times.
- We say so carelessly ...
  - “Why don't they just get tough?”
  - “Why don't they stop crying and get on with life?”
- It is so easy to be that way—i.e. to belittle the hardships of other people.
- The Apostle Paul is telling us that one reason God lets you and me go through hard times is to break us of that attitude; to

soften us up so that we will be able to minister in the name of Jesus Christ to other hurting people.

- Many of us have hardened places in our lives that will not become tender until we go through the fires of affliction—God lets it happen so that we might reach out to others and comfort them.

Moving on, Paul tells us today that there's a divine purpose for the compassion and comfort of God in our lives—so that we can in turn comfort other hurting people.

## 2. A divine provision (1:5-7)

2.1 Paul says in v. 5, “For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.”

- Paul is not saying that we somehow share in the sufferings of Jesus Christ because the work of Jesus Christ on the cross was not enough. He's not saying that as Jesus died for the sins of the world, there is a way in which we can also die for the sins of others. No, he's not talking about that.
- Let me explain it this way:
  - When Jesus was on earth He didn't walk an easy road. When Jesus was on earth He knew suffering, hardship, opposition and persecution.
  - Paul is saying that those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ will know the same things—we are not exempt from hardship and suffering.
  - All of these things are part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ—as He suffered on earth, so shall we.
  - But our text is telling us more than that—it's telling us that as the suffering overflows, even more so does the comfort.
  - Look back at v. 5, “For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.”
  - The two words are the same in Greek—“flow over” and “overflows”. Sufferings flow over. Comfort overflows.
  - When the suffering is great, the comfort will also be great.
  - And I am given this great comfort to share it with others.
  - What a thought—my sufferings qualify me to minister to other people because we are all wounded with the failures of life and the things that weigh us down.
- It is to wounded men and women that God has committed this great ministry of healing other people.
- That's what Paul is saying here—once we have suffered, we are able to comfort others out of the overflowing comfort of Jesus Christ as He offers us His healing to our wounds in life.

2.2 Paul then went on to share from his own experience and example. He states it quite plainly in v. 6—“If we are distressed, it is for your salvation and comfort; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.”

- Let's picture Paul's words this way.
  - He undergoes rejection and opposition to preach the gospel—in the midst of his trials, the God of all comfort comes alongside and takes the heavy load off his shoulders; and Paul is comforted.
  - The Corinthian believers see that and as they suffer the same things, Paul comes alongside and takes the heavy load off their shoulders.
  - So instead of quitting under pressure, they develop patient endurance.
- That's a picture of what God is doing in your life.
  - He is comforting you in your trials so that you might comfort another who may comfort another who may comfort another.
  - And the ripple effect spreads out from you to other people.

### 2.3A personal resolve

- There is no one answer that can fully contain God's purpose for the sufferings in life. No human could ever fully comprehend the Almighty. But 2 Cor. 1:1-7 offers a perspective we need to remember—God is at work in your life even in times of suffering; among many other things, He is preparing you to minister to others; God dries your tears so that you might do the same for someone else (Illustration: Iris's 1<sup>st</sup> miscarriage).
- Unfortunately, some believers never discover this truth. They are always complaining when things get difficult. Life is never fair, they always feel short-changed; they feel as if God has singled them out for punishment.
- People with such an attitude will find it hard to minister to others. They constantly fight against God's perspective on their trials. As a consequence, their life remains tough and hardened when it ought to be soft and tender. And they have nothing encouraging to pass on to others.
- I don't want to be that way.
  - Therefore, I want to ask God to help me take the good with the bad in life; I want to ask Him to help me share His comfort with the people around me.
- It is okay to be wounded in life. In fact, we can't avoid it all the time.
  - But what is problematic is to remain in a spirit of being wounded. If we want to be effective channels of God's comfort to hurting people, we need to first ask God help us work at healing our wounds.

- Otherwise, our spirit of being wounded will provoke us to hurt rather than to heal other people.
- There may be some very deep-seated pain and hurt in our life today—it may be so deep that it cannot be seen with the naked eyes, or nothing humanly possible seems to be able to resolve it.
  - So, we either deny it or we resign to it.
  - But the overflowing power of God's comfort can heal that deep-seated pain and hurt to bring about healing in the innermost being.

Paul tells us today that there's a divine provision for those who need comfort in their trials—i.e. the Lord Himself will provide His overflowing comfort to hurting people so that He can use them not as wounded people, but as channels already healed by Him.

### 3. The benefits of sufferings (1:8-11)

#### 3.1 Sufferings make us look to God—Paul talked about his hardships in v. 10.

- But we don't know the exact nature of the hardships he suffered; whatever it was, the Corinthians knew about it and they understood that Paul thought during his ordeal that he was going to die--He wrote to tell them that he was placing his reliance on God and his hope in God's deliverance of him.
- When tragedy strikes or when hard times come, we wonder why things happen the way they do.
  - Here we find one important explanation—hard times come to teach us not to trust in ourselves but only in the Lord.
  - Sometimes things happen that force us to our knees and sometimes all the way down so that we are flat on the ground.
  - At that point, when all human options are closed, our only hope is the Lord—we cry out to God in desperation, knowing that if He doesn't help us, we're sunk.
  - That's a lesson we have to learn over and over again.

#### 3.2 Sufferings bring out the power of prayer—Paul says in v. 11 - “as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”

- I love that phrase—“You help us by your prayers.”
  - Literally, it can be translated “You join together with us in helping us by your prayers”.
  - It is like what campers do when they raise up a tent in the field—they get under the frame, lifting it up together, and holding it up so that it can be put in the right place.
  - In the same way we join together and lift the burdens of life as we pray for each other.

- Many times we view prayer as the last thing we do when it should be the first.
  - I know that prayer sometimes seems unnecessary because we think we need to do something.
  - We fall into the trap of separating life into the “spiritual” and the “practical” as if bringing someone to the doctor is real help because it is practical while praying for someone’s healing is just some spiritual last resort when we can’t do anything else.
  - But it is through prayer that we release the power of heaven for the problems we face on earth—knowing that others are praying for us gives us strength to keep going (Illustration: praying for Foo Let as he went through 30+ sessions of radiotherapy).
- It makes a difference whether or not we pray—Paul is saying, “When I thought I was going to die, you prayed and God delivered me.”
  - We will never know until we get to heaven how many times the prayers of others have delivered us.
  - But I believe on that great day, when all the mysteries and secrets are revealed, we will discover that we would have fallen if not for the fact that someone prayed for us; we would have given up but someone prayed for us; we would have made a wrong decision but someone prayed for us; we would have given in to temptation but someone prayed for us; we would have retaliated but someone prayed for us; we would have crumbled under pressure but someone prayed for us.
  - When all is said and done, we will learn that God used the prayers of others to enable us to make the journey from earth to heaven—we will discover that without those God-inspired prayers, we would have fallen very badly.
- Indeed, our prayers matter.
  - When we pray, we join hands with God to bless others and to advance His cause on earth.
  - This is why “the devil trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees”.

#### 4. A testimony: Nelson Mandela

In 1994, Nelson Mandela became the first black president of South Africa after three centuries of white rule. He himself was imprisoned for 27 years by the whites for his fight against apartheid.

When apartheid was dismantled and the blacks came into power with Mandela as president, some militant elements in the African National Congress (ANC—the political party that Mandela belonged) were crying for the big “R”—“Revenge”. But Mandela had a different agenda. He had a different big “R”—“Reconciliation”.



When I was first in South Africa in 1999, I watched with great interest the TV news coverage on Mandela's response to the campaign of the whites who were seeking constitutional protection for some of their rights in South Africa. Without doubt, many in the black camp were raising their arms in protest of such an intention.

But Mandela said something like this to his black comrades in the ANC on TV:

It is a very painful experience for the whites to have lost their political power. Now they are only asking for some of their basic rights to be protected in our new democracy. We know how painful it was for us to have our basic rights taken away from us during the apartheid years. If we now refuse to consider granting those rights to the white people, we will be no better than them when they were in power.

Mandela claimed to be a Christian who had been strengthened by God in his trials. As his country's 1<sup>st</sup> black president, he wanted to use his power not to seek revenge, but to reconcile the black and white people in his country.

Indeed, God dries our tears so that we might do the same for someone else. Some things happen to us so that when we are comforted by God, we are then able to comfort someone else. Don't waste your pain. Use it to grow closer to the Lord. Use it as a means to minister to others.

##### 5. Question:

How do we let the overflowing comfort of God reach us and heal us?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Three things we can do:

- One, admit our need for healing. If you are hurting, God says, "I want to heal you." If you feel helpless to change, God says, "I want to help you." If you are grieving and feel like no one really understands your pain, God says, "I want to comfort you." If you feel anxious, worried and afraid, God says, "I give you peace."
- Two, accept that God cares about us personally. God knows our situation, our hurts, and our struggles. God knows our pain. God knows our sinful and self-destructive habits. God knows our deep-seated ugliness, and so, there's no need to pretend to look good before Him. But God does not use this knowledge of us to condemn us, but to care for us. He wants to heal our brokenness.
- Three, acknowledge that God has the power to change us. In Christ, there is power to change. My sins, habits, and obsessions are not who I am in Christ. Change is possible with Christ working in me. Maybe you're afraid that your faith is too small to get you through the process of change. If that's your fear, then remember this—the power to change comes not from a great faith in God, but from faith in a great God. The healing process may take a long time. But for it to begin, you must believe and take God at His Word, and act in obedience one step at a time.

## II. When We Are Misunderstood: Paul's Example (1:12-2:4)

We see Paul facing such a situation in our text today. He wanted very much to do something for the Corinthians. But as he followed the leading of the Lord rather than his own heart, he decided to hold back that thing. Unfortunately, some among the Corinthians thought the worst about him and started a slandering campaign against his character. They doubted his sincerity and integrity, and misunderstood him for one who would not keep his word.

### 1. Paul's action was misunderstood.

1.1 To understand why Paul said what he said in 1:12-2:4, we have to read different parts of 1 and 2 Corinthians to put the whole situation in perspective.

1.2 Paul said in 1 Cor. 16:5-7 - "After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits."

- Paul had planned to go to Macedonia and then to Corinth—He planned to pass through Macedonia and hoped to spend the winter with them in Corinth.
  - He didn't want it to be a brief visit but a longer time so that he could spend more time with them.
  - But he qualified by saying "if the Lord permits" (v. 7); however, as the Lord would have it, that trip never took place.

1.3 Paul said in 2 Cor. 1:15-16 - "Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea."

- We see here that Paul changed his decision.
  - He now planned to go first to Corinth, then to Macedonia, and then back to Corinth—"I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice" (v. 15).

1.4 Paul later said in 2 Cor. 2:1 - "So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you."

- What happens here is that Paul finally decided to postpone his trip altogether because he wanted to spare the Corinthians of another painful visit by him.

1.5 So Paul made three different decisions regarding his visit to Corinth.

- And Paul's opponents used his changing plans as a way to attack his credibility—"See, you can't trust him. He calls himself an apostle, he says he's coming but he never shows up. He says one thing and he does another thing."
- Well, that is a problem, isn't it?
  - Keeping your word is very important, especially for spiritual leaders—it's all about integrity, proving yourself to be trustworthy, and doing what you said you would do.
  - If people feel they can't count on you, it will be very easy for them to be suspicious of you.
  - When we are suspicious of someone, we immediately begin to look for evidence to validate our suspicion of that person.

1.6 From Acts 18:1-8 we know that Paul spent 18 months in Corinth winning people to Christ and establishing the church.

- After he left, a group (probably influenced by some false teachers) arose in the congregation that questioned his leadership—they challenged his authority, attacked his character, and accused him of using the Corinthian church for his own gain.
  - And the chief complaint of these believers who were critically suspicious of Paul was this—Paul couldn't be trusted because he hadn't come back to visit the Corinthians as he said he would.
  - That proved he was a fickle man whose character and message could not be trusted—"He said he would come visit us. Then he said he wouldn't. He's not sincere. He's looking for excuses. He didn't like us."
  - When we are suspicious of people, we end up believing the worst about them.
  - We've all been guilty of drawing wrong conclusions on the basis of some weak evidence.
  - Note that it all started over something small—just some change in travel plans.
  - That's how it usually happens—little things, small stuff, and petty complaints.
  - But a tiny spark of suspicion has become a mighty flame of unhappiness; that flame soon becomes a wildfire that threatens to destroy a relationship.
  - Congregations have split and friendships have ended over things that started very small but grew all out of proportion.

1.7 Paul changed his plan to visit Corinth because he believed any visit during that period would not be in the best interests of the Corinthians and himself.

- Unfortunately, the Corinthians doubted his sincerity and integrity, and misunderstood him for one who would not keep his word; they had mistaken his well-intended action.

## 2. Paul's words were misunderstood.

2.1 It is true that Paul had changed his mind more than once regarding his visit to Corinth.

- But his overriding concern was for their welfare—He wanted to come and see them but only if his visit would bring about healing and spiritual growth.

2.2 He didn't say "yes" and then "no" without any good reasons or any real interest to visit them.

- Clearing up of misunderstanding is not always easy no matter how much you speak from your heart.
  - The reality of life is that sometimes all you can do is to simply speak the truth from your own heart.
  - If that's not enough, talking for hours isn't likely to make a difference.
- Often times, we can only pray, "Lord, let your will be done and let the truth be known"—it's a prayer that God will clear your name as He brings out the truth of your words in His time and way.

## 3. Paul's motive was misunderstood.

3.1 When he didn't show up as expected in Corinth, those against him concluded that he didn't love them.

3.2 Paul said in v. 23 - "I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth."

- He stayed away so as not to have an angry confrontation.
  - That's why he made up his mind not to make another painful visit to them (see 2 Corinthians 2:1).
  - He had paid them a painful visit earlier to address some issues in the church, following his hard letter to them (i.e. 1 Corinthians).
  - Now he said, "I had already said what I needed to say and I wrote what I needed to write so I won't do anything more right now."
  - Paul was calling "time-out".
- Paul revealed the real motive of his heart in 2 Cor. 2:4 - "For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you."
  - Paul told them that the motive of his no-show in Corinth was not to grieve them because he had severed his relationship with them, but to love them because he

treasured his relationship with them so much that he did not want to further jeopardize it.

- Sometimes, we can't resolve a strained relationship or clear a misunderstanding quickly no matter how much we try.
  - In fact, the harder we try, the worse it may become. Why? Some people just won't listen; some people just love to argue; some people already have made up their minds.
- Evidently that was the situation in Corinth—because the church was so plagued with issues, and because Paul had already wrote them a very stern letter and paid them a very painful visit, and because he knew their feelings were still raw and hurt, he decided not to come to Corinth.
  - Paul knew that his presence in Corinth at that moment and in that situation would only make things worse.
  - Sometimes you need to back off, give people space, give them time to think and pray, and give the Holy Spirit time to soften hearts.
  - Paul didn't want to visit the Corinthians at that time because he had already written them a hard letter but with anguished tears and deep love for them.
- Indeed, true love must be tough.
  - And because true love is tough, the motive arising out of true love can often be misunderstood.

#### 4 An illustration

Noted Christian writer, Philip Yancey, tells about an African safari he was on where he saw a mother giraffe taking care of her offspring.

Shortly after he was born, she went over and kicked her offspring. It looked like she was really hurting her baby. Then she did it again.

Each time, the little giraffe would get up on his wobbly legs and try to walk. Still she continued kicking him. Finally, he got up pretty rapidly and ran away from her kicks.

Yancey turned to his guide and asked, "Why does the mother giraffe do that?" The guide answered, "The only defense the giraffe has is its ability to get up quickly and out-run its predator. If it can't do that, it will soon be killed."

Yancey said that while it looked like it was a cruel thing, it was really the most loving thing the mother could do for her offspring.

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/27636/philip-yancey-tells-about-an-african-safari-he-by-brian-bolton>)

Indeed, what seem to be a cruel thing that a person does to someone may be the kindest thing he can do to that someone out of the motive of love.

And because of that, the motive of love can be misjudged and the act of love unappreciated and even criticized.

In order not to stir up further trouble, Paul decided not to come to the Corinthians. Paul decided to wait for God to work so that he could share in their joy when he should come to Corinth at the opportune time (2 Cor. 2:2). But for the moment he would wait.

It's worth noting what Paul didn't do as he waited to come to Corinth. He didn't do to his critics what they had done to him. He simply and clearly explained himself, his change of plans, and in the process he revealed his heart of love for them. Perhaps, that's all any person can do in a situation like this.

## 5 Question:

What can we do when misunderstood?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> One, let God be the ultimate judge. Perhaps, the best response is an honest, clear, non-defensive explanation. Paul didn't complain, didn't blame, and didn't point fingers—He laid out his explanation so his readers could decide for themselves why he had not come back to Corinth. Some people will choose to misunderstand us no matter what we say or do, thus, at some point we must decide to leave our reputation in God's hands and walk away from the controversy. We then have to say with our conscience, "God is my judge. I rest my case with the Lord."

Two, do not return evil for evil. If we decide to let God be our final vindicator, this is what we must be prepared to do. Of course, it is hard, especially when our motives are repeatedly attacked. But in this we are to be like our Lord who when He was reviled did not return evil for evil. This is hard because it is not the natural way to live; that's why we need to practice the spiritual disciplines of humility and submission in our Christian life. When we are strengthened in these disciplines, it becomes easier for us to live the supernatural way of not returning evil for evil. Sometimes, the real test of your faith is not what you do but what you don't do; sometimes, you'll be a better Christian by not saying anything at all. And if you have to say something, then say a prayer to God for the one who misunderstands or does evil to you like what Jesus did—"Father, forgive them for they did not know what they were doing." We live in a fallen world; we are all imperfect people. People will misunderstand us and we will misunderstand people. Not all misunderstandings will and can be cleared in this fallen and imperfect world. But a day is coming when all imperfect knowledge of things and misunderstanding in relationships will come to an end. That's our faith and hope in Jesus Christ. Amen!

### III. The Power of Forgiveness (2 Cor. 2:5-11)

Christmas was nearing on the Pacific island of Palau. The DePaiva family, father Ruimar, mother Margareth, and children Larisson and Melissa were anticipating the holiday season with excitement, looking forward to having friends and other visitors to stay at the house. On the night of December 22 the missionary family went to bed for a peaceful night of rest after a busy time preparing for the holidays.

Larisson, age 11, awoke to the strange sounds of an intruder in the room. He thought the burglar was attempting to take some of his precious electronic equipment. When Larisson tried to stop the intruder, he was bludgeoned to death. After Larisson's father and mother entered the room, the intruder also clubbed them to death.

The criminal abducted 10-year-old Melissa. After a traumatic 20 hours as a captive, he strangled her twice and left her seeming lifeless body in a ditch. Regaining consciousness, Melissa crawled up to the roadside and flagged down an approaching car. She was taken to the police station and within a few hours the criminal was arrested. He was quickly brought to court and sentenced. The entire island of Palau was shocked by the brutality of the crime.

Ruth DePaiva, the paternal grandmother of Melissa, arrived from Mexico broken-hearted. As she prepared for the funeral of three beloved family members, she asked to visit the sentenced-to-death criminal. She walked into the cell to say two things to him: (1) "You need Jesus," and (2) "You are forgiven." In disbelief, the man's heart was broken, and his eyes flooded with tears. When asked if he accepted Christ, he said, "Yes." The prison pastor prayed with him.

At the funeral for the DePaiva family another remarkable thing happened. After all the tributes, the elderly woman learned the condemned criminal's mother was present. She invited the mother to come forward, hugged her warmly and said, "We are two mothers grieving for lost sons. The DePaiva family does not blame the Justin family for the tragedy. We raise our children; we educate them. We teach them right from wrong. That is all we, as mothers, can do."

(<http://hopefortomorrowministry.xanga.com/682711392/a-remarkable-story-of-forgiveness-repost>)

If you are anything like most people, you are likely shaking your head and wondering how Ruth DePaiva summoned the strength to offer such grace

in a time of unspeakable grief and suffering. And remember, even though she forgave she was still in deep pain.

Paul not only taught the Corinthians to be slow to react against those who misunderstood them. In 2 Cor. 2:5-11, we will see how Paul called on God's people to be quick to forgive the one who had hurt them but repented of his sin.

Paul challenges the Christians at Corinth to reach out and forgive a man in the congregation who had sinned. We don't know exactly who the man was or exactly what he did but it must have been sinful.

Bible commentators have connected this passage with the man Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 who was sleeping with his father's wife (very likely, his step-mother). Paul instructs them to come together as a congregation and put that man out of the church so that, having been cut off from Christian fellowship, he might eventually come to repentance.

If that's the same man in our text today, then this disciplinary action of the church clearly worked because the man repented and wanted to be back in the church. However, it seems that the congregation refused to take him back.

To judge sin and to forgive sin require courage, wisdom and love. But Jesus' last lesson on the cross for us is not to judge sinners, but to forgive those who sinned against us. His last words on the cross before he breathed His last were—"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." We are never more like Christ than when we forgive those who have sinned against us.

#### 1. Forgiveness displays the mercy of God (vv. 5-6).

- Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that what they had done was right and enough, but now the time had come to forgive and receive this man back into the fellowship of the church.
  - Forgiveness in that case displays the mercy of God.
  - Sometimes we mistakenly think that if we forgive, we are easy on sin—but God is forgiving yet He is never easy on sin.
  - Often times, the real problem is not that God is always picking on us, but we keep fighting Him—Psalm 103:8-9 – “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever.”

#### 2. Forgiveness restores the sinner who repents (vv. 7-8, 10).

We can be like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The sins of others disgust us to the point that we really don't want them to repent. Forgiveness seems too cheap, even too unfair.



The angels in heaven rejoice in one sinner who repents. Yet the older brother could not bring himself to rejoice in the repentance and return of his younger brother. When we read the story of the Prodigal Son, we have to ask, “Who is worse off? The son who left and returned? Or the son who never left but would not forgive his brother who returned in repentance?”

2.1 Notice something not mentioned in vv. 7-8 - Paul doesn't name the person involved nor does he specify the sin.

- That's a crucial point—Paul wants to protect that sinner from more public shame.
  - The Corinthians probably knew exactly who Paul was talking about and that was all that mattered.
  - Our discipline and our forgiveness ought to be tempered by a desire not to smear someone's reputation unnecessarily.
  - In this age when we can post anything on social media for the world to see and hear instantly, we would do well to follow Paul's example.

2.2 Paul said in v. 9—“The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.”

- This is a two-fold challenge: Will you be obedient in exercising discipline? Will you be obedient in extending forgiveness?
  - In this case forgiveness proves the genuineness of our Christian faith. Do you love enough to forgive when discipline has led to repentance?
  - This can be very hard to do, especially if the person involved hurt us deeply or if he hurt those we love deeply.
  - But there must come a point when we let go of the pain and reach out with the love of God to say, “You are forgiven in Jesus' name.”
- We forgive because we have been forgiven—we release others because Christ has released us from our sins.
  - Love covers their sins because Christ's love covered our sins.
  - Forgiveness always flows this way—from Christ to us to others; we do for others what God has done for us; we have been forgiven and so we know what it is like.
  - Now we do the same for others—our forgiveness releases the pain and bitterness in us; restores the sinner who repents.

### 3. Forgiveness defeats the work of Satan (v. 11).

3.1 Paul ends his appeal by reminding his readers of the high price of unforgiveness in v. 11—“... in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

- “Schemes” has the idea of an enemy who comes under cover of darkness and get into our camp.

- Because we were sleeping, we never saw it coming.
- And that's exactly what has happened to many Christians—our unforgiveness has allowed Satan to set up a “camp” in our heart and personal life.
- We get angry without a cause; we slander others who have slighted us; we think about those “sinners and tax collectors” day and night.
- When this happens, Satan has sabotaged the Christian joy in us.
- Until we remove that “camp” of satanic work in our lives, we will continue to be miserable.
- Forgiveness defeats the schemes of Satan in our personal, family, church, social, and working lives.
  - Forgiveness is God's medicine for a broken heart; forgiveness heals the deepest wounds; forgiveness repairs what the devil has destroyed; forgiveness opens the door to even greater blessings.

#### 4. Three levels of forgiveness

##### 4.1 Level of the will.

- This has to do with forgiving with our will.
  - We choose to forgive—we have full and complete control over this level of forgiveness.
  - I believe this is the forgiveness commanded in the Bible—we have control over it and we can choose to do it or choose not to do it.
  - Therefore we are responsible for the choice we make here.
- Someone may say, “I can't forgive him because he has not repented of what he did to me.”
  - Think about those men who crucified Jesus on the cross. Do you suppose these men were repentant for what they were doing to Jesus?
  - Of course not! They didn't see their act as sinful, and hence, didn't see their need to ask for forgiveness.
  - Yet Jesus forgave them anyway.
  - Our sense of justice says, “I can't forgive him until he is sorry for what he has done to me!”
  - But forgiveness means saying, “You are guilty, even if you never repent. However, I still choose to release my right to seek revenge, and I release this to God to settle in a just way as He sees fit.”
- Forgiving with the will doesn't mean the wrong doer doesn't have to pay.
  - It does mean that we choose to forgive and are willing to trust God to settle the account in a just fashion.

#### 4.2 Level of the emotions.

- We can make the choice to forgive and yet for a time still feel hurt and anger when we think about what was done to us or when we see the wrong doer.
  - Does this mean we have not forgiven? Yes and no.
  - If we have sincerely chosen to forgive, we have exercised forgiveness with the will.
  - But even once that choice is made, a wounded heart still takes time to heal—emotional forgiveness can take months or even years.
  - And that's why that saying "forgive and forget" can be a bad though well-intended advice.
  - Do you think that when Jesus cried out for the forgiveness of His enemies, He forgot they were doing an evil thing to Him? Of course not!
- A man who cheats on his wife can be forgiven, but that doesn't mean that hurt is instantly forgotten by his wife and trust is instantly restored.
  - Forgiveness is granted, but trust and credibility need to be rebuilt over time—emotional forgiveness often takes much longer time to come about.
  - However, forgiving with our will and standing by it can help emotional forgiveness to take place.
  - E.g. you can repeatedly go back to the Lord in prayer and telling Him that you have chosen to forgive and asking for healing grace to fully let go of the hurt.
  - On the other hand, if you choose to replay the wrong over and over and fume over it, you inevitably slow down any chance of reaching a point of full forgiveness and healing.

#### 4.3 Level of relationships.

- It is the relational closeness between the one who has been hurt and the one who has hurt.
  - We cannot give full relational forgiveness to someone who is unwilling to receive it or admit that he has done wrong to us.
  - In fact, without true repentance on the part of this person, it will be very hard, even unsafe, to reach relational forgiveness.
  - Working towards relational forgiveness is not giving this person freedom to hurt us again and again—forgiving doesn't mean we are to be doormats for people to run over again and again.
  - In fact, it is appropriate to build barriers and set boundaries and say firmly, "You will not take advantage of me in this way ever again!"
- There is power in forgiveness because to forgive is to obey the Bible.

- The Bible calls us to—forgive so as to restore a repentant believer (Matthew 18:15-17); forgive so that our prayers are not hindered (Mark 11:25); forgive so that the Holy Spirit will not be grieved (Eph. 4:30-32).

5. Question:

Which level of forgiveness do you find difficult to reach at this time in your life? Explain.

How would you seek the Lord to help you work towards this level of forgiveness?

#### IV. God-Dependent Success (2 Cor. 3:1-3)

Let's suppose your church is looking for a pastor. Someone applies and says this of himself:

- I have been arrested many times.
- I have gotten myself into many public quarrels.
- I have never stayed very long in one place.
- I am not a very eloquent preacher.
- But I can preach long sermons that can bore people to sleep.

Would your church bother to give this man a second look? Not likely. That's why the Apostle Paul will be passed over by many pastoral search committees today. But in the sight of God, Paul could be counted as one of His most faithful and successful servants on earth.

Paul gives us a picture of what true success is in the sight of God in 2 Cor. 3:1-3.

##### 1. Some weak measures of true success (3:1)

1.1 Paul mentions "letters of recommendation" in v. 1—"Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation ("commendation" in NASB) to you or from you?" In essence, Paul is saying, "I really don't need a letter of reference to prove the validity of what I am doing for God."

##### 1.2 What things make letters of recommendation look good?

- Bigness
  - In church ministry, we often measure success by the 3 Ps—Property, Programmes, People
  - If you have big property, big programmes, and big number of people coming to your church, you will be esteemed as a successful church.
  - One common question posed to me at many Christian functions was this—"How many people worship in your church?" That matters because 100 is better than 50, 200 is better than 100, 500 is better than 200, 1000 is better than 500, 2000 is better than 1000.
  - The Bible tells us that God is infinitely big and God is also love. God is big yet He loves you enough to want to be intimate with you; God is big yet He loves you enough to want to sit with you in your times of loneliness; God is big yet He loves you enough to want to listen to your pain and bear your burden.

- Today, we measure success according to some standard of bigness. It is alright to be big and yet have love.
- It is when we grow big in something but small in love that we become strayed away by a false sense of success—without love, all the bigness is nothing.
- Connection
  - How well are you connected with influential and important people?
  - Knowing important people gives you clout--it helps you to get things done, it elevates you in the eyes of others.
- These are some things that Paul would call “letters of recommendation” in v.1.
  - These are the letters of approval and recognition given by men and for the applause of the world.
  - But Paul says, “These are inadequate measures of success because God sees differently.”

## 2. One thing that matters (3:2-3)

2.1 The changed lives of his hearers testified to Paul’s ministry success—in vv. 2-3, Paul says, “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

- He is saying that the real proof of his ministry was the changed lives of his hearers.
  - As he preached the Gospel, the Holy Spirit convicted his hearers so that they believed in Jesus; then their lives were completely changed.
  - Remember, Corinth was a pagan city, given over to idol worship and gross sexual immorality.
  - When the Gospel entered with its promise of life transformation through the power of Jesus Christ, sinners were converted; many were radically changed.
  - Imagine the impact in Corinth when an idol worshiper came to Christ, and his friends at the pagan temple wondered about him—“Why didn’t he come to join us anymore? Why didn’t he offer sacrifices? What happened to him?”
  - And imagine this converted Corinthian saying, “I met a Jewish teacher by the name of Paul and he told me to believe in Jesus. I did and that completely changed my life.”
  - This is what Paul meant when he said to the Corinthian Christians, “You show that you are a letter from Christ written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

- The Corinthians had not been changed by merely going to church.
  - This has no power to change us; only the Holy Spirit working within can write God's truth in our hearts and change us from inside out.
- In the Old Testament, the 10 Commandments were written on stone, giving them permanence as a rule of life for ancient Israel.
  - If someone asked, "Is it okay to sleep with another man's wife?" the answer would be, "Check what the tablets say."
  - Rules can do many things—they can tell you right and wrong; they can provide guidance in tough situations.
  - But only the Gospel can change us from the inside out.
  - When that happens, Christians become "living letters" whose lives are like written words anyone can see and read.
  - Just think about it—by the deeds you do and by the words you say, people are seeing and reading your life like a letter.
  - When you read a letter, you see the ink when you see the written words; when others look at our deeds and hear our words like reading a letter from Christ to them, do they see the mark of the Holy Spirit in us—i.e. the unmistakable mark of a changed life?

2.2 Paul is responding to his critics in Corinth this way, "You question my ministry success. But look at the many lives that were transformed by the Holy Spirit through my preaching of the Gospel. In those lives changed by the Holy Spirit I give you my answer."

- Today, when a church has many members, big buildings and much money, we say it is a successful church.
  - Of course, these things are good, but these things ALONE are not enough to measure true success in God's sight.
- One thing real in life is this—no matter how well you think you have done, you cannot please everybody all the time.
  - Sometimes you may feel that no one notices the much good you have done, but everyone never misses that one small mistake you've made.
- So what is one thing that matters as true success in God's sight regardless of what others may say to us?
  - For Paul, it is the lives changed by the power of the Holy Spirit through his preaching of the Gospel.
  - Paul tells us today, "If you want to know about my success in ministry, check out the people who listen to me. Look at what God has done in their lives. They are my living letters."

- God can take the words we say and write them on the hearts of those who hear—that they become God’s people and have the mark of the Holy Spirit.
  - If it is dependent on us to save people, no one would ever be saved.
  - I can preach from sunrise to sunset, but if God doesn’t work, no one will ever be saved.
  - If we must boast about our success, let’s boast in the Lord’s sovereignty and stop boasting in our human ability.
  - We must remind ourselves that we will always be servants serving the Almighty God, not superstars serving ourselves no matter how successful we may look before people.
  - And you know why? It is because we will never be so successful that we don’t need God or to serve Him anymore.

### 3. Question

What are some ways that can help us be God-dependent as we serve and strive to be truly successful in our life calling?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One, I have a part to play and I must do my part in where I am now. Circumstances change all the time. Look at Paul’s life. He had great success in one city and was chased out of the next. He stayed in one city for months and in another for just a few weeks. He was loved and hated, admired and reviled, praised and criticized. Not everyone who heard him believed his message. And yet he determined to go wherever he was led so that by God’s grace, he might win some to Christ. Be faithful. And trust God to bear fruit in His time and in His way. That’s what God wants from you and me. That is my part and I must do my part. No one else can do it for me. When the fruit is still not seen, God is still faithful.

Two, I won’t really taste success until I learn to receive from God with gratitude and give to others with generosity. Whatever success we have in serving the Lord comes because the Lord Himself has granted it to us. It all belongs to Him. In His sovereign choice and grace, He gives to us in different measures—some have more; some have less; but all to have gratitude and generosity.

Three, I must be true to what God has called me to do and not compare myself unrealistically with another. Here is Jesus’ calling for each of us—“Follow me, and don’t fuss about the others. Follow me, and let me take care of the others. Follow me, and you’ll have plenty to do.” If we do that, the word of the Lord when He welcomes us home in heaven will be—“Well done, good and faithful servant. Welcome to the joy of the Master.” And that’s the only success that really matters. When our time on earth comes to an end, what “living letters” will testify that our lives on earth mattered because we made a difference in some people’s lives?



## V. God-Dependent Resilience (2 Cor. 4:7-12)

When you are knocked down by defeat, failure, setback; when you feel like a loser all the way, you need resilience—that quality that makes you fight back from a losing position to be a winner. And you need someone to continue to believe in you to make a comeback.

I believe God loves losers. He loves people who know their weaknesses, see their flaws, admit their mistakes, and cry out to Him for help. God is in the business of picking up losers and displaying His power through them.

Perfect people are found only in heaven. The ones on earth are people with imperfections. God works with these people on earth because they are the ones He has to work with on earth. So God works with and uses broken, imperfect people who fall short in many ways. And He begins to do amazing things through them. That's why God allows us to read in the Bible the weaknesses of even the heroes of faith.

Paul tells us that there's someone of ultimate importance who believes in you when you are knocked down by defeat, failure, setback; when you feel like a loser. That someone is the Lord Himself. And He says to you today, "I still believe in you even when you feel like a loser. I believe in you because I am not done with you."

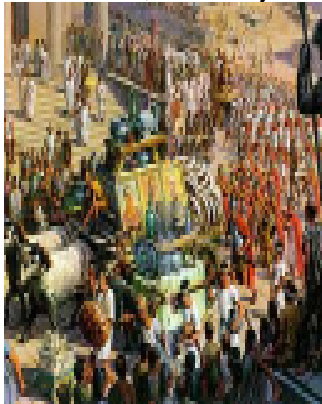
By choosing flawed people, God alone gets the glory when they accomplish amazing things by His power.

1. When you think you are losing, God has a winning thought for you (v. 7)—"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

### 1.1 "Treasure"

- Paul gives this treasure a couple of different names—"The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (v. 4); "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (v. 6).
- Notice that both times Paul talks about the treasure in terms of "light" and "glory".
- Paul probably has in mind his conversion experience—if you remember, he saw "a light from heaven, brighter than the sun" at his conversion (Acts 26:13); that light was so brilliant it blinded him (Acts 22:11; 9:8); that light was the brilliance of Christ's glory.
- The treasure that Paul mentions, then, is the wondrous Gospel story about Jesus Christ.
- Paul borrows an image from the Roman army—after victory in battle the Roman army would march into the city and display all the things and prisoners they brought back from the war; in these victory processions, they carried gold, silver,

and jewels in jars of clay—i.e. what is precious is the treasure inside, not the jar.



Pic: Roman victory procession with jars of treasures

- God wants all the attention drawn not to the outside packaging but to the treasure.

### 1.2 “Jars of clay”

- These refer to ordinary earthenware—these clay jars were used by common people to store grain, hide valuables, and to keep oil for lighting lamps.
- Paul is saying, “We are like cheap earthen pots bought from a street vendor.”
- And one thing we know about such cheap stuff—they are fragile; they can be easily broken.
- And that’s us—you and I; we are such jars of clay.

### 1.3 God puts the Gospel treasure in jars of clay like us so that the lost will respond to the treasure rather than the packaging—i.e. the packaging can change but the treasure must remain as it is; BUT when you try to change the treasure, it becomes corrupted and false.

- God’s winning thought for us is this—we may feel like an ordinary jar of clay; but in His power, God wants to use us to carry the extraordinary Gospel grace and hope to a lost world.
- Sometimes God has to humble us and make us feel like a real loser—so that when the battle is over, He alone gets the glory.
- God put His Gospel treasure in earthen vessels on purpose so that when great things happen, the people around us will come to only one possible conclusion—“All I know is that it can’t be him. It can’t be her. He’s not that smart. She’s not that strong. It’s got to be God.”
- I believe in using our God-given gift to do God’s work, but there’s one danger—we can use it in such a way to show off our human greatness rather than to display the power of God’s grace.

- God blesses us with a gift so that when exercised, people will see much of Him and little of us; they will see how great God is and not so much how good we are.
  - Success is a lousy teacher when it makes us feel so good about ourselves that we think we cannot lose—winners tend to think they don't need God very much.
  - But when we see how small we are without Him, we cry out, "Lord Jesus, help me for without you I can do nothing."
  - That's why God loves and uses losers—the less we are in ourselves, the more He becomes in us.
  - John the Baptist said in John 3:30—"He must become greater; I must become less."
2. God gives four promises to help us be resilient in Him (vv. 8-9) – "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."
- 2.1 Promise 1: Pressure will not defeat us - "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed" (v. 8a).
- The word "pressed" is sometimes used for walking through a crowd where people surround you and literally press against you.
  - The idea is this—the pressures of life may squeeze us but we can still return to our normal shape.
- 2.2 Promise 2: Confusion will not discourage us - we are "perplexed, but not despair" (v. 8b).
- Sometimes we just don't know which way to go, but when we are confused, Jesus is not confused.
  - So we are not driven to despair because Jesus knows the big picture.
  - When we are at our wit's end, God is just getting started—often He does His best work when we have completely surrendered to Him.
- 2.3 Promise 3: Opposition will not deter us - we are "persecuted, but not abandoned" (v. 9a).
- The Greek word translated "persecuted" means "to pursue" as a hunter pursues his game.
  - Paul knew about this from personal experience—everywhere he went his Jewish opponents followed him; they stayed on his trail, attacking his character and his preaching, mocking his message, and stirring up opposition inside and outside the church.
  - But imagine the richest man in the world saying to you, "Don't worry about your business. I've got confidence in you."

I've got more money than you ever dreamed of. And I like you so I'm backing you."—how do you feel?

- Suddenly your fear vanishes; bring that idea into the words of Jesus—"Go into all the world and make disciples. But remember this. You're not going alone. I'm going with you. I'm backing you. I'm right beside you. I am with you wherever you go."
- When the Lord calls us to a task, He enables us AND He goes with us.

#### 2.4 Promise 4: Hard blows will not destroy us - we are "struck down, but not destroyed" (v. 9b).

- We can be knocked down, but we can never be knocked out!
- I believe our best apologetics to the world is not some clever arguments to prove that Jesus Christ really rose from the dead.
- Our friends will judge our Christianity mostly by how we respond to hard blows in life; our testimony given in the midst of hardship and sorrow will be loud and clear because it comes in the dark night of our soul.
- Paul's view is this—"Yes, I face trouble every day, and sometimes I despair of my own life. I'm under pressure all the time. I get confused. People attack me. Sometimes I get knocked down by life. But that's when the power of Christ shows up to help me. If I have victory, it is victory through trouble not victory apart from trouble."
- Our victory in the Lord is not apart from trouble, but through trouble; sharing our victory in the Lord through trouble may just be the most powerful testimony we can ever give to the unbelieving world—that's the difference between the resilience of the mere human spirit and the resilience that comes from God.
- When this divinely inspired resilience is displayed, people see a great God and not just a strong man.

#### 3. God's challenge for His people in the face of adversities (vv. 10-12) - "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 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. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you."

3.1 Paul admitted that the sufferings which came upon him daily in his work for Jesus were gradually wearing out his strength—the pains, the dangers, the pressure.

3.2 Paul's answer to why he kept going under all the pressures—"I survived all that because Christ was living in my mortal body."

- It's not as if Paul took pleasure in what he had suffered and counted it as a badge of honour, but he did mean to say that what had happened to him had happened for a reason so that through those hardships the life of Jesus might be clearly seen in him.

3.3 Paul then expanded his thought by adding—"Death is at work in us, but life is at work in you."

- The NLT catches the idea with these words, "We live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you."
- If you have a light inside a jar, how will it ever light up a room?—the jar must be broken; once broken, the light shines everywhere.
- Of course, the breaking hurts, but out of that brokenness the light of Jesus shines clearly; and Paul would say, "It's worth it to me."
- We can live in such a way that others see Christ in us, and for that to happen we must be first broken so that the light of Christ can come shining through us.

#### 4. Question:

What can we do to demonstrate that Jesus is alive in our daily witness and testimony for Him?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> If we allow Christ to shine through our brokenness, people can believe Christ is real because they can see Christ in us is real. Paul's closing challenge is this—"Lost people may not listen to our sermons or pay attention to our doctrine. But they notice the way we live when we are broken by life. There's someone who believes in you when you are knocked down by mistake, defeat, failure, setback; when you feel like a loser. That someone is the Lord Himself. And He says to you and me today, "I still believe in you even when you feel like a loser. I believe in you. I have not written you off and I am not done with you. So pick yourself up and make your life count for me."

## VI. Choosing Sides (2 Cor. 6:11-7:1)

We have now come to the time when the Corinthian saints must also make a choice, between the true apostles (including Paul) and the “false apostles” who are influencing the Corinthian church. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul calls them “false apostles” and “servants of Satan” (vv. 13, 15).

The Corinthian saints have become partners with the wrong people. In our text, Paul calls upon his readers to choose sides. It is time for the Corinthians to separate themselves from the false apostles and their counterfeit gospel.

### 1. Choosing right relationships

#### 1.1 Paul warns the Corinthians to distance themselves from relationships with certain unbelievers.

- Why? It is because these relationships have a great impact upon their thinking and actions—“Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Corinthians 15:33).
- Those with whom we choose to have the closest fellowship are those who have the greatest influence on our values, attitudes, and actions.
- It is very important to clearly define here whom Paul refers as “unbelievers” and why he calls the Corinthians to keep away from these.
- We should be very careful not to conclude that every association with unbelievers is forbidden; even our Lord was also very clear that He purposed to associate with unbelievers in order to minister to them.
- But when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax-gatherers, they began saying to His disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with tax-gatherers and sinners?”
- And on hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2: 16-17).

#### 1.2 With whom then are the Corinthians not to associate?

- In the Old Testament, the holiness of God and His people (the Israelites) was demonstrated by their physical separation from the other nations (Joshua 23:6-12)—they were to live in a distinct way and to demonstrate that they were God’s special possession.
- It did not take long for Israel to abuse her privileged status—the Israelites (like Jonah the prophet) disdained the Gentiles and had no intention of taking the light of the Gospel to them, looking upon themselves as a superior people; the Jews of Jesus’ day loathed the Gentiles and became angry whenever

the evangelization of the Gentiles was mentioned (see Luke 4:16-31; Acts 22:17-22).

- Through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Jews and Gentiles were not only being reconciled to God, but to each other.
- The church is a holy temple, made up of all believers in Christ, Jew or Gentile, without distinction—in fact, all such distinctions are done away with, so far as one's standing before God is concerned (Galatians 3:23-29).
- But some Jews would not accept this and were aggressive in trying to convince Gentiles that being a Jewish Christian was superior to being a Gentile Christian.
- Some went so far as to insist that one could not be a Christian at all without being Jewish (that is, by being circumcised and becoming a Jewish proselyte—see Acts 15:1).
- Paul frequently attacks this error in his epistles, and he does so in 2 Corinthians 5:11-21; he also does not forbid us living as Christ's light in a godly way among the lost (1 Corinthians 5: 9-13).
- What Paul forbids is doing the work of God with those who may seem religious, but who are not Christians at all.
- His focus in our text is specifically on those who are in the church at Corinth, those who profess to be Christians, but in reality, are "false apostles".
- It is very important that we understand what Paul requires of us in 2 Corinthians 6:14 and that we not misapply his words in this text—Paul wants us to live in this fallen world having contact with the lost, so that they may see Christ in our lives, and so that they may hear the good news of the Gospel.
- But Paul warns believers against allowing "wolves" into the church and co-operating with them in God's work—e.g. the Corinthian church not only embraces a man whose moral life shocks the pagans of Corinth (1 Corinthians 5), but also embraces men who are not even "sheep" but "wolves".
- Paul calls upon the church to identify these wolves and put them out of the church; they need to embrace Paul and his associates and break off their partnership with these "false apostles".

1.3 Paul gives the reasons why the Corinthian believers are not to be yoked with unbelievers.

- Christians are all about the pursuit of godly righteousness; the common pursuit of unbelievers is that of sinful worldliness.
- Christians live in the light, unbelievers live in darkness; Christians worship and obey Jesus Christ as Lord of all, unbelievers knowingly or unknowingly follow Satan (Belial).

1.4 The “temple of God” has nothing in common with idols.

- Christians are so far removed from non-Christians in spiritual matters that they have no strong basis for a partnership in spiritual ministry.
- A Christian who is yoked together with an unbeliever in the work of God is like a policeman and a criminal trying to solve a robbery together.
- Paul is alerting the Corinthians to the danger that some of those whom they consider spiritual are actually not even saved—thus, they need to dissociate themselves from them.

2. An exegesis of 2 Cor. 6:14—“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”

2.1 Various English Bible translations of verse:

- “unequally yoked” (KJV, ESV)
- “yoked together” (NIV)
- “bound together” (NASB)—not a loose but a very tight union

2.2 The term is used to contrast incompatibles:

- Righteousness with wickedness (v. 14)
- Light with darkness (v. 14)
- Christ with Belial [Satan] (v. 15)
- Temple of God with temple of idols (v. 16)

2.3 Purpose of injunction

- “Do not”—Greek present imperative, meaning a warning not to start as well as an instruction to stop an action already started.

2.4 Call to “be separate” (v. 17) so that we will be pure in body and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1).

- This is also the purpose of quoted Old Testament texts in vv. 16-18.
- Yoking refers to having a very strong and intimate union, relationship or partnership.
- We are called not to establish such a union with “unbelievers” (note: some ties that bind are not established by us, but we are born into them—e.g. our relations with unbelieving family members).
- Unbelievers here refer to people with no (saving) faith (*apistos*); idol worshippers are only an example used by Paul in 2 Cor. 6:14ff.
- So unbelievers here include idol worshippers but not limited to them—e.g. may include business and social contacts with no saving faith in Jesus Christ.



- In fact, Paul did use “unbelievers” with a broader meaning than “idol worshippers” elsewhere—someone outside the Christian community (1 Cor. 6:6; 14:22-25); someone unsaved in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 7:12-13).

2.5 The point: Do not establish a strong, intimate union, relationship or partnership with unbelievers (those who have no saving faith in Jesus Christ) as it will be hard to remain pure and steadfast in the Lord because of their strong influences upon us. It is a warning and instruction not to be so bound together with unbelievers that we lose or compromise our ability to stand out as Christians among them.

2.6 Is Paul teaching Christians not to marry unbelievers?

- Not explicitly in this instance, but this is certainly on his mind though not in his exact words because of his deep knowledge of the pagan background of the Corinthians.
- Paul was probably warning the Corinthians against some “gospel peddlers” who were preaching a false gospel—one that was a compromise with paganism and idolatry.
- He was thus calling the Corinthians to reject this false gospel which would seduce them to stand with the world rather than to be separate from it.
- More specific to the context, Paul is warning against starting a serious relationship with an unbeliever, and instructing to stop it if already started so that there will be no developing into deeper commitment.
- A cross reference to support the likelihood of Paul forbidding a mixed-faith marriage is 1 Cor. 7:39 (NIV) where Paul mandates that one marries another who “must belong to the Lord”—in this instance, it concerns a believing widow who chooses to remarry.

### 3. Question:

What are some ways we exercise the “do not be unequally yoked” and “be separate” injunctions of Paul in our relationships in life?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> One, we need to be on guard and ever alert to the existence of false Christianity. There are and will continue to be false Christians who come into the church to lead men and women away from Christ to something or someone else. These people profess to be genuine believers, and they may even be religious leaders. But when we recognize them, we must disassociate ourselves from them.

Two, we do not use this text as an excuse for not being friends with lost people. If we are to reach and touch lost people with the love of Jesus Christ, we need to be among them, to speak a word for Christ to them, and to point them to Him.

Three, we are to be careful not to develop relationships with unbelievers that can lead to deep and emotional commitments (e.g. marriage). When a couple cannot look to a common Authority (i.e. same God) as they make decisions, do things, and face challenges in their life

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## VII. The Grace of Christian Giving (2 Cor. 8:1-5)

The Apostle Paul had a great burden for the poor Christians in Jerusalem and everywhere he went, he took up money to help them. Earlier he had appealed to the churches in Macedonia (northern Greece). They had responded in a generous way. Now Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth (southern Greece), and asked them to do the same thing. He used the generosity of the Macedonians as a good example for the Corinthians to follow. This is the context of Paul's words in 2 Cor. 8:1ff.

### 1. Truths about Christian giving (vv. 1-5)

1.1 Truth 1: Being able to give is an act of God's grace (v. 1)—“And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.”

- When Paul spoke of the “grace” given to the Macedonians, he meant that they had received the grace of God, so now that same grace motivated them to give to the poor saints in Jerusalem.
- This is the pattern of Christian giving. We love God because He first loved us. God always makes the first move. And even if we give, it is because we first have received grace from the Lord.
- If you feel that God has done nothing for you, then there is no reason to give at all. If your life has been truly touched and changed by God, you have a reason to give. If you have met the Lord and through faith have received new life in Christ, then you have a reason to give. We give because we have received from the Lord. And every believer in Jesus Christ has received forgiveness and new life in Him. So, every believer in Jesus Christ has every reason to give.
- Giving is practicing Christian discipleship and imitating Christ's example. Jesus Christ gave Himself so that He became “poor” in order to make us “rich” (8:9).

1.2 Truth 2: Giving is not necessarily related to positive circumstances (v. 2)—“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.”

- In this verse Paul brings four things together that we wouldn't normally join together—trial, poverty, joy, generosity. The first two and the last two don't seem to go together.
- The phrase “rich generosity” has the idea of opening your bag of money and saying, “Here, take some. I've got plenty in here.” Yet these Macedonians were actually very poor.

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together, the potential for conflicts is very high as they each seek to follow different voices of authority in their lives. It is true that some Christian marriages are even messier than non-Christian ones, but the problem is with the disobedience of Christians and not with God or the Bible.

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- Most of us would say to a person without much money, “Don’t spend anything. Hold on to everything. And don’t give any either. Save your money. You can always give later.” But not the Macedonians. They said, “We’re going broke. We’d better give it now before it’s all gone.” How is this possible?
- They understood that giving has nothing to do with how much money you have. Giving is about a heart set free from the love of things, and therefore, they could see giving as a blessing and not a burden. In short, giving is about a heart set free by full surrender to the Lord.
- Note that they had “overflowing joy”. I’m not suggesting that we should “give till you feel the pain”. That’s a negative way of putting things. I suggest that, based on this passage, we should “give till we are laughing with joy”. That’s how the Macedonians gave, and God blessed them for it.
- Paul speaks of a “severe trial” that had come to the Macedonians. But that did not stop them from giving at all. Since their giving was not dependent on good circumstances, it was not stopped by bad circumstances as well. They gave because their hearts were fully committed to Christ.
- Many are conditioned to think of giving as something we do when we have some “extra” money. Not the Macedonians. Not even their “severe trial” could take away their joy. And their poverty was no barrier to their generosity. Because they had given themselves completely to the Lord, they were free. Because they were free, they had overflowing joy. And because they had such joy, neither poverty nor trials could stop them from being generous.

One time, an unbeliever who was a habitual gambler came to me and asked, “I have won some lottery money. Can I give to the church?”

I answered, “Why do you want to give to the church?”

“I was in a church one day. There I prayed that I would win some money. I did win. So, I want to give thanks by giving part of my winnings to the church.”

I asked, “Does that mean you will pray in church to win money again?”

He said, “I might.”

I replied, “It will be better for you to keep the money.”

He asked, “Why?”

I said, “God is pleased with you if you give Him your winnings to demonstrate your desire to give up gambling. But He will be

displeased if you are just trying to get Him help you continue with your gambling ways.”

The motive of the heart matters to God. Joyful giving honours God because it is a way of saying, “Lord, we love you so much that we want to give to support those things that matter most to you and not us.”

- Giving is not doing charity for people, but doing worship of God. Giving is teaching us how to live by faith in God as we give, and not how to live on the charity of people.

1.3 Truth 3: When the heart is free, there is no limit on how much we give (v. 3)—“For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability ...”

- Here, I picture what happened when Jesus fed the five thousands. How much were the supplies? Just five small loaves and two small fish (John 6). Very little. But what happened when these were handed to Jesus? He distributed to the people after He had blessed the food with thanksgiving. The Greek expression has this idea of Jesus distributing and distributing and distributing—He gave and kept on giving. The food kept coming out of His hands without limit even though there seemed to be very little.
- In the same way, the Macedonians, though they were desperately poor, gave as much as they could, and then they gave some more. This sort of thing can only happen when the heart is set free from the stranglehold of things that tied us down to earthly possessions.
- That’s why the Macedonians could give and keep on giving, and even give beyond what people thought was reasonable. Giving becomes a joy and not a burden when the heart is free. And the heart will never be free until we first give ourselves to the things that matter to the Lord.

1.4 Truth 4: When the heart is free, we look for opportunities to give even more (v. 4)—“...they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”

- The Macedonians begged Paul for an opportunity to give even more. Here’s what people might say about preachers who preach about money. If they are Christians, they might question, “Why do you talk about money? Don’t you have faith that God will supply?” If they are not Christians, they might ask, “Why are you talking about money? Is your religion only interested in going after money?”
- But here’s a case where Paul didn’t have to beg for money. The people begged him to let them give. When the heart is free, we no longer feel like we have to hold on so tightly. We actually start looking for ways to let go some things.
- If we struggle with giving, the problem is not with how much we have or how much we lack. Our real problem—the one we all struggle with—is that we are tied down by some things of this world.

The Bible says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34).

- When giving is difficult, the problem is often not a lack of money. It usually lies within the heart because Christian giving should begin with the heart, not with the pocket. That’s why some people with much money in their pockets are unwilling to give, while some poor people with little in their pockets are so ready to give.

1.5 Truth 5: When we give ourselves fully to the Lord, we can then give freely to others beyond expectation (v. 5)—“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.”

- Because Paul knew of their poverty and their severe trial, and because he did not want to burden them, he expected them to give a certain amount and no more. And if they had given that amount, Paul would have been satisfied, and the Lord would have been glorified, and the poor Christians in Jerusalem would have been supplied. All would be well. There was no obligation for them to go beyond Paul’s expectation or what they themselves could afford to do.
- We cannot give freely until our hearts are given fully to the Lord. Here we come to the heart of the matter. Paul says plainly, “They gave themselves first to the Lord.” That means they did not give out of guilt or in response to pressure or manipulation. They gave because they wanted to. And they wanted to because they had willingly surrendered everything to the Lord.
- The heart is where all true giving begins. The “rich generosity” of the Macedonians is just an outflow of something that’s happening deep inside them. They gave with such generosity because deep in each of them, there’s great freedom and joy that comes from giving themselves first completely to the Lord.
- The poor but generous Macedonians gave the way they did because they had truly learned to love God and others.

## 2. How Christian giving in the New Testament is related to Hebrew tithing in the Old Testament

2.1 Tithing is an Old Testament teaching that relates directly to God’s Law for the people of Israel.

- The word “tithe” comes from the Hebrew word which means “one-tenth”.
- There are four main passages that teach about tithing in the Old Testament—Genesis 14; Leviticus 27; Deuteronomy 14; Malachi 3.
- In relation to God the tithe was meant to glorify God and recognize Him as the Lord Almighty and as the source of all human blessing.
- In relation to God’s people the purpose of the tithe is to teach them to put God first in their lives.
- In relation to the nation of Israel, the purpose of the tithe is to ensure that God’s work may be fully supplied.

2.2 As we move to the New Testament where we are taught to give in God's grace, how can the spirit of Old Testament tithing be evident in our Christian giving?

- Lessons from 1 Cor. 16:1-2—"Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should lay aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made."
  - Christian giving is to be regular—"on the first day of every week".
  - Christian giving is to be personal—"each one of you".
  - Christian giving is to be proportional—"set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income". What is proportional giving? It means the more that God blesses you, the more you are to give. That's New Testament grace giving.
- Which standard is higher? A flat ten percent in the Old Testament or proportional giving in the New Testament? Proportional giving is higher because if you are greatly blessed, you will soon be giving far more than ten percent. I believe the standard of giving is higher in the New Testament because grace always goes beyond the law.

2.3 What was a percentage in the Old Testament has become a proportion in the New Testament.

- In other words, while Israel received a command to tithe in the Old Testament, this command has become a guide for regular and systematic giving in the Church.

### 3. Questions:

What are some things we need to avoid when thinking about giving?<sup>6</sup>

Is the tithe as good guide for Christian giving? Explain.<sup>7</sup>

Why is it right to restrict giving to the ministry of the church to believers only?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Answer 1: Two things we need to avoid when we think about giving. One is giving a strict 10% and viewing the remaining 90% as ours. The other is using the lack of a standard (e.g. the tithe) as an excuse to give almost nothing at all. Remember, whether you choose to give 10% or 100%, God is the owner of all that you have. You are only giving back what belongs to God as His steward on earth.

<sup>7</sup> Answer 2: The tithe remains a very good guide for Christian giving. It is the beginning point for Christian giving. But no one should feel burdened. In other words, if you hear what I'm saying and you feel under pressure, it would be better for you to give one percent with joy than 10 percent under pressure. Give the one percent and let God speak to your heart. You are free in Jesus Christ to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>8</sup> Answer 3: Only those who believe in Jesus Christ are called to grace giving. That's why it is wrong for the church to appeal to the world to pay its bills. The Lord's work belongs to the

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What does it mean to say that Jesus wants our heart and not our money?<sup>9</sup>

What does Paul's example teach us about funding money for ourselves and finding money for others?<sup>10</sup>

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Lord's people and it is our responsibility to pay the bills. We ought not to ask the unsaved to give. That's why when the offering bags are passed round, we remind those who are not yet believers in Jesus Christ not to feel obliged to give. Rather, we urge them to consider giving their lives to Jesus Christ.

<sup>9</sup> Answer 4: In fact, money cannot buy entrance into heaven. That's why Paul emphasizes that the Macedonians first gave themselves to the Lord. Give yourself to Jesus first before you give your money to the church.

<sup>10</sup> Answer 5: Paul's generosity lies in the fact that he was very careful about funding money for himself, but very concerned about finding money for others. The secret of his attitude is in Phil. 4:11-13 - "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

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## VIII. Thorns of Life (2 Cor. 12:1-10)

It is in human nature to want people to always look at us as strong and not weak.

But Paul said in 2 Cor. 12 that the weakest and most difficult moments are often the most impactful moments in one's life.

Notice that Paul says to the church in Corinth in 11:30—"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." Paul is attempting to make clear that a true servant of the Lord is the one who boast about the Lord and not about himself.

### 1. Paul's weakness & God's strength

1.1 Paul told the truth about himself without talking big about himself (vv. 1-6)—"I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. 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. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. 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."

- Remember, Paul was facing a situation in which the false teachers in Corinth were trying to undermine his apostolic standing. They said many bad things about him—e.g. his preaching not good; he could not be trusted to keep his promise.
- On the other hand, these false teachers boasted about letters of recommendation they had from high-profile people in Jerusalem (see 3:1). They charged that Paul had none of that.
- Paul argued against these false teachers, and he began by saying in v. 1 that he would go on to speak of visions and revelations of the Lord.
  - His opponents had boasted about spiritual powers and encounters with God. In order to counter their claim, Paul told of a remarkable occasion. It's clear in v. 7 that even though he spoke in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, the man he is speaking of is himself—"To keep me from being conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh ..."
  - Paul said in v. 2—"I know a man ... caught up to the third heaven." He was going to tell them something that was awesome to hear, and yet he was deliberately trying to



- distance himself from it, not because it's not true, but because he was afraid to boast about himself.
- Listen to how he said it in v. 5—"I will boast about a man like that ..." Paul spoke as if this wonderful event happened to someone else.
  - We have a number of Paul's speeches recorded in Acts, and he had never brought this up. In all his other letters he had never once referred to it. There is no indication that any of his associates knew anything about it. It had been an untold story very much kept to himself.
  - Paul said twice that he didn't know if his body went with him or not. He was taken into the presence of God in such a way that he heard things, saw things, and was amazed by this experience of being in the very presence of God. He referred to it as the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven and paradise. Those mean the same thing. The ancients thought of the earth as covered with an atmosphere made up of air and clouds which was the 1<sup>st</sup> heaven. Beyond this were sun, moon, and stars, which was the 2<sup>nd</sup> tier of heaven. And beyond that is the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven—the world of the invisible spiritual beings, the throne of God. Paul said he was transported there by the Lord, but he didn't know if his body went with him or not.
  - A final note that sets this experience apart is the apostle's observation that he heard things he was not permitted to speak. He was allowed to hear what he must never say out.
  - Paul said in v. 6 that he did not boast about this so that no one would think more of him than was warranted. He didn't want what he just told them to make him a spiritual superstar.
  - In today's world, what would people do if they have such a powerful experience as that of Paul? I tell you what I might do.
    - I might write a book about my experience and make lots of money from it.
    - I might conduct conferences locally, regionally, and internationally.
    - I might tell and teach people that if I can have it, you can have it too. Here're 10 steps on how to have it.
    - I might appear on national TV and become a popular celebrity.
    - I might have the newspapers and magazines come and interview me and write stories about my experience.
    - I might preach in the mega churches and teach in the seminaries as an expert on visions.
  - But Paul would not have any of these. Yes, he told the truth about himself. Yet, he didn't boast about his experience and talk big about himself.

- How close you are to God is not so much how powerful your spiritual experiences are, but how powerful your life shines for Him.
- What would you do if the Lord has done something good in your life? Paul didn't say keep quiet about it. But Paul said, "Boast about it. But boast in the Lord about it" (2 Cor. 10:17).
- To boast in the Lord is to let people hear us talking big about Him and not about ourselves.

1.2 Paul then talked about his thorn without pitying himself (vv. 7-10)—"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. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

- Paul did struggle with pride because of this experience. To keep him humble, he believed God allowed him a suffering—a thorn in his flesh.
- We don't know exactly what the thorn in his flesh was. One possibility mentioned in some commentaries is that it is an eye disease of some sort. In Gal. 6:11, Paul said he had to write with especially large letters. It may mean that he had poor eyesight because of some eye disease. We don't know for sure. But in any case, he had something difficult that would make him low and humble.
- We read that he pleaded before the Lord three times to ask that this thorn in his flesh be taken away from him. The answer of God was the same each time—"My grace is sufficient for you."
- It was the grace of God that sustained him in times of physical difficulty. It was also His grace that used pain to prevent the greater evil of spiritual pride that would make him always talk big about himself (v. 7).
- Something else worth commenting here is that he called this thorn "a messenger of Satan". Satan is out to hurt, destroy, and cause pain and ultimately death. But Satan is limited in his role. He may do only what God the Father allows him for the ultimate good of His children. The thorn was used by Satan to hurt Paul, but God allowed it and used it to give Paul a great spiritual blessing—in his weakness, he became strong in the Lord.
- Paul said that God used his thorn to remind him that it was the grace of God that made him strong and kept him going. We are called to think less of the greatness of man and depend more on the grace of God.

- God refused to give what Paul asked three times. In Hebrew thinking, to say the same thing three times means to confirm that that thing is the final answer. Paul asked God three times and three times God answered, “No, I will not take the thorn away. But my grace is enough for you.” That’s God’s final answer to Paul. This thorn would be for Paul a lifelong experience.
- But God had a great promise for Paul as well, “My power is made perfect in (your) weakness” (v. 9). Therefore in v. 10, Paul is able to declare, “I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”
- Like Paul, we all have thorns in our lives—sickness, incapacity, pressure to do well, difficult people. What thorn is in your life right now? Remember, God wants you to be honest with your struggle yet not be overcome by self-pity.
- One thing to be clear—thorns don’t mean we are defeated or faithless or forsaken. Remember this—God is not battling it out with Satan to see who will win; God has won the battle. Satan cannot touch one of God’s children without His permission. When Satan does hurt one of the saints, it is always by divine permission, and in order to fulfil a divine purpose. Satan, the prince of pride, is used by God to produce humility in Paul. Yes, Satan weakened Paul, but only that God might manifest His power through Paul. So, the thorn in Paul or in us doesn’t mean we are defeated or faithless or forsaken.
- The same struggle can be used by Satan to make us go away from God or allowed by God to draw us closer to Him. We have to decide to obey God even if He does not answer in the way we pray. When we pray, God may not change our situation because He wants us to change the way we see our situation.

## 2. A testimony: Fanny Crosby

Because God’s grace is real, every difficulty can help us tell a story of God’s love. One such story is that of the life of Fanny Crosby.



Pic: Fanny Crosby (1820-1915)  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanny\\_Crosby](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanny_Crosby))

Fanny Crosby wrote over 8,000 Christian hymns though she was blinded at a very young age. A doctor did an eye surgery on her when she was just six weeks old. The surgery went wrong because of the doctor's carelessness.

However, she said, "If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me."

The hymn "All The Way My Savior Leads Me" is one of her songwriting masterpieces. The lyrics go like this:

All the way my Savior leads me  
 What have I to ask beside?  
 Can I doubt His faithful mercies?  
 Who through life has been my guide  
 Heavenly peace, divinest comfort  
 Ere by faith in Him to dwell  
 For I know whate'er fall me  
 Jesus doeth all things well

All of the way my Savior leads me  
 And He cheers each winding path I tread  
 Gives me strength for every trial  
 And He feeds me with the living bread  
 And though my weary steps may falter  
 And my soul a-thirst may be  
 Gushing from a rock before me  
 Though a spirit joy I see

And all the way my Savior leads me  
 Oh, the fullness of His love  
 Perfect rest in me is promised  
 In my Father's house above  
 When my spirit clothed immortal  
 Wings it's flight through the realms of the day  
 This my song through endless ages  
 Jesus led me all the way

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnEYfzkJgs&ab\\_channel=MartijndeGroot](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnEYfzkJgs&ab_channel=MartijndeGroot))

### 3. Question:

Why does God allow thorns in our lives? Share your thoughts.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> One, to remind us of our need for God. You know when people are closest to God? In my experience, people are closest to God when they're going through a dark valley of the soul. Why is that? I think it's because when things are going great we get complacent. We go about our happy lives and we forget all about God. In fact, without thorns, we might get full of ourselves and start to think of ourselves as "Super Christians" and get all prideful. Thorns are a great cure for human pride. Thorns are great reminders of our brokenness and vulnerability as well as our need for God. If not for the difficulties we face, we would never really experience the grace of God beyond salvation. But because of our thorns, we discover that God's grace is not only needed for the afterlife. It's even needed for the here and now.

Two, to teach us that God is always in control. God chose not to remove the thorn from Paul. But there were other times when He chose to remove those thorns. E.g. there were many diseased people whom Jesus had healed. So what it comes down to is this—God knows what's best in every situation, and so we can trust His judgement. And at all times, He calls us to come to Him with our difficulties, with our problems, and ask Him to care for them. It is in our weakness that divine power finds its way into our lives. Our weakness then becomes the channel of His strength in us. Yes, sometimes God grants us a measure of strength so that we can live in peace with our thorn. And other times He performs a miracle and brings healing to our lives. In either case (whether strength or healing), it is His sovereign grace at work.

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