

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 1

### 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1–2:17

#### THE BACKGROUND

What happened between the writing of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians? It wasn't pretty. Paul discovered the Christians in Corinth had welcomed certain "false apostles" who had cleverly and deceitfully turned the church against him (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). Then the apostle briefly visited Corinth from his ministry in Ephesus, a situation that turned ugly. He called this experience a "painful visit" (2:1). After returning to Ephesus, Paul wrote a now-lost letter of stinging rebuke to the Corinthians, sending it by Titus (2:3-4). He anxiously desired reconciliation with the Corinthians. When at last Paul and Titus reconnected, Paul learned a majority of the Christians had at last repented and been reconciled to Paul (7:5-7). The apostle composed 2 Corinthians partly to express his relief at the good news Titus had brought.

Chapters 1–2 of 2 Corinthians transparently reveal Paul's state of mind and his intense feelings for the well-being of the Corinthians, despite their flaws. He displayed his inner heart as one who did everything in his power to foster flourishing friendships with fellow Christians. The principles the apostle demonstrated are well worth implementing as we seek to live with integrity in our relationships with others.

#### 1. LIVE FOR OTHERS (2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7)

Paul opened the letter with his typical salutation (2 Corinthians 1:1-2). At this point in his letters, he usually offered thanks to God for his readers. Here, by contrast, he launched into a prayer of praise in which he recounted the fact that he'd endured overwhelming troubles for the sake of the gospel. Nevertheless, through all the difficulties he endured, he received God's comfort and passed it along to others who needed to be consoled.

**Verse 3:** *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort.*

Ephesians 1:3 and 1 Peter 1:3 contain similar kinds of blessings after the greeting. For believers to bless God is to praise Him. He's the Source of all blessings. The wording of 2 Corinthians 1:3 expresses both God's relationship to Christ as Jesus' Father and Jesus' relationship to

His people as our Lord, that is, our Sovereign Ruler. The mercies flowing from God refer to His compassion. Because of His mercies, He acts to bring comfort. The Greek term translated *comfort* refers to encouragement or consolation. So important was *comfort* for Paul that as he began the letter, he used forms of the noun and verb repeatedly in verses 3-7. Because Paul had personally experienced God's comfort, he was able to become an instrument of comfort to others who needed it.

**Verse 4:** *He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*

Here and throughout this week's lesson, Paul used the plural pronouns we and us. None of us has endured precisely what Paul and his companions in ministry experienced. Yet we can take heart that God means to encourage us "in all our affliction" for His sake just as He comforted Paul. Such affliction can sometimes come from believers as well as from those openly hostile to the gospel.

The apostle was quick to recognize that this blessing from God wasn't meant to be hoarded. The apostle knew he was to be a channel of blessing to "those who are in any kind of affliction." God encouraged Paul so he'd in turn encourage others, even those who perhaps didn't deserve to be encouraged.

**Verse 5:** *For as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so our comfort overflows through Christ.*

In what sense do "the sufferings of Christ overflow" to believers? We never experience the pains Christ suffered on our behalf *as our substitute*. He fully paid sin's penalty by dying on the cross so that we may be forgiven. However, he also endured hardship *as our example* of how to respond to undeserved suffering. As His disciples, we're to "follow in His steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Believers are in union with Christ. As the church, we're His body. This reality in part means we're to expect affliction, even our Lord suffered (Colossians 1:24).

After He suffered, Jesus received the joy and glory and comfort of the resurrection. Through Christ, the Holy Spirit is our Counselor or Comforter who now indwells believers (John 16:7-15). The Spirit will minister His comfort afresh for every difficulty Christians face. Thus, after Paul suffered, he received comfort. This comfort wasn't the ultimate joy of his final heavenly victory, but rather it was the encouragement the Lord sends His people in this

life. Paul wrote that this comfort was more than enough. It overflowed like a mountain stream in springtime, refreshing whatever it touched.

**Verse 6:** *If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is experienced in the endurance of the same sufferings that we suffer.*

Paul graciously wanted the Corinthians — who'd been so difficult and disappointing in their rejection of him — to enjoy God's comfort and salvation. The Corinthians had also experienced sufferings. We don't know exactly what their trials and troubles were at the time Paul wrote, but it makes little difference. The apostle wanted them (and us) to know they (and we) could experience endurance in difficulties, just as he had. Just as the Lord Jesus is an example of enduring undeserved hardship, so is the apostle Paul. Furthermore, we have the added examples of other believers through the centuries who've suffered for their faith.

**Verse 7:** *And our hope for you is firm, because we know that as you share in the sufferings, so you will share in the comfort.*

Paul saw a link between sufferings and comfort, which may strike us as odd or unusual. That the Corinthians willingly endured hardship — "you share in the sufferings" — was evidence for Paul that they were true believers. This fact gave Paul great assurance — "our hope for you is firm," despite the history of fractured relationships between the apostle and the Corinthian congregation. The apostle was confident that suffering would eventually give way to encouragement — "you will share in the comfort." All this assurance stemmed from the conviction Paul expressed at the beginning of this section of the letter: The Father of our Lord Jesus is the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians. 1:3). With Christ's encouragement and help, the Corinthians could endure their troubles as long as they were required to do so.

Verses 3-7 remarkably display Paul's integrity as he dealt with the Corinthians. Although they had a frayed or stormy relationship with him, the apostle bore them no ill will. He wanted them to experience the comfort he'd received from God.

#### 2. LIVE IN GOD'S STRENGTH (2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-11)

**Verse 8:** *For we don't want you to be unaware, brothers,*

of our affliction that took place in the province of Asia: we were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength—so that we even despaired of life.

Paul began updating his Corinthian brothers and sisters about his recent experiences, of which they were still unaware. Something particularly awful had happened to him in the province of Asia, part of modern Turkey. This event perhaps occurred in Ephesus, the main city in which the apostle had been ministering and where there'd been so much glorious success for the gospel (Acts 19). Although we're unable to tie Paul's description in 2 Corinthians 1:8 to any specific event narrated in Acts, the event to which he referred was an extreme, life-threatening ordeal. Was it sickness? Beating and imprisonment? A terrible accident? Whatever the case, Paul communicated its severity by using such phrases as "completely overwhelmed, beyond our strength," and "despaired of life." We might paraphrase him as follows: "It was so terrible I thought I was a goner."

**Verse 9:** *However, we personally had a death sentence within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.*

Paul considered this ordeal as grim as if a death sentence had been pronounced on him by a judge. Yet death of the body doesn't mean the end of life since there's a "God who raises the dead." The historical resurrection of Jesus means believers in Him may be confident about our own future resurrection from the dead (see the study of 1 Corinthians 15 in last week's lesson). Furthermore, when we as believers face a mortal situation, we can embrace it — as Paul did — as an occasion not to trust in ourselves. Faith in the God of resurrection is especially meaningful whenever physical death seems near at hand. As Christians, we do well to keep this truth in mind as we have opportunity to minister to those who are dying or to those who have recently lost a loved one. One of the repeated themes in 2 Corinthians is that God's ability is more than sufficient for human inability, because in such times His power can be displayed more clearly. Paul's best known statement of this truth is 2 Corinthians 12:9: "But He [the Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'"

**Verse 10:** *He has delivered us from such a terrible death, and He will deliver us; we have placed our hope in Him that He will deliver us again.*

Despite the gravity of Paul's personal situation, God had delivered him. God's plan was for him to continue ministering as an apostle. By the phrase, "He will deliver us," Paul expressed His abiding confidence in God. It's the same kind of confident certainty he later expressed when he wrote, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil work and will bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:18a). The phrase, "we have placed our hope in Him," shows Paul's confidence was no vague expectation but was directed toward God. It's the same kind of hope Paul expressed in verse 7 regarding the spiritual welfare of the Corinthians. He was confident their faith in Christ was genuine.

**Verse 11:** *And you can join in helping with prayer for us, so that thanks may be given by many on our behalf for the gift that came to us through the prayers of many.*

Paul desired the Corinthians' prayer support. He wanted them to petition God for him, specifically that even more people would hear about this deliverance and then give thanks to God. It wasn't that God delivered Paul because the apostle was so great. It was that God's deliverance came because God is a great God who delights in doing good to His people. The term "gift" refers to a gracious gift from God. Paul used this term to refer to the lifting of his death sentence. The Lord's rescue of Paul was what God did not from necessity but because of His grace.

Two kinds of prayer are thus mentioned in this verse. First are the petitions for Paul's rescue from physical death; second are the thanksgivings offered once he'd been delivered. The verse demonstrates two important truths about prayer. First, God responds to the prayer requests of His people; second, He's to receive the glory for being a prayer-answering God.

Verses 8-11 demonstrate that when Paul felt despair in terrible circumstances, he always looked to God for strength. He'd never been disappointed.

### **3. LIVE SO GOD APPROVES (2 CORINTHIANS 1:12; 2:14-17)**

**Verse 12:** *For our boast is this: the testimony of our conscience that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with God-given sincerity and purity, not by fleshly wisdom but by God's grace.*

Those in the Corinthian church who had stirred up opposition against Paul likely had done so by casting doubt on his motives. Perhaps they suggested he was a

hypocrite, that he was in ministry just for financial gain. Maybe they suggested he had hidden motives such as the lust for power or prestige. Paul countered this opposition by strongly affirming one thing of which he was sure: the testimony of his own conscience. His actions everywhere he went, but especially in the history of his dealings with the Corinthians, had been based on the purest of motives. We should note in passing that the human conscience is not infallible. It can be trained wrongly or be misguided. Scripture is the only perfect guide to right and wrong. On the other hand, believers are not to violate their consciences, even when those consciences are overly scrupulous (Romans 14:14; 1 Corinthians 8:7-11).

The terms Paul used to describe the character of his motives are strong. The noun translated sincerity carries with it the idea of single-hearted devotion. Purity translates a word meaning "integrity," "honesty," or "the absence of deceit."

Paul was careful to describe the divine source of his motives. He recognized that in sinful human nature such motives are rare. Fleshly wisdom doesn't counsel integrity; instead, it counsels flattery and concealed motives. Yet God supernaturally provides His children with right motives, as the terms God-given and by God's grace indicate.

**Verse 14:** *But thanks be to God, who always puts us on display in Christ, and spreads through us in every place the scent of knowing Him.*

In the first-century Roman world, victory parades honoring a general for his military triumph were important political and social occasions. War prisoners were marched in chains down the streets. The fragrance of sweet-smelling incense wafted over the crowds. Sometimes at the end of the parade, prisoners were executed. It's clear that Paul appealed to the Corinthians' knowledge of this kind of event as an illustration of his own ministry.

The expression "thanks be to God" marks the transition from Paul's personal anxiety — looked at from a merely human perspective — to his gratitude to the Lord — looked at from a heavenly perspective. No situation is so discouraging or evil that God has lost control. He will achieve His purposes, even when His ministers suffer distress (Romans 8:28).

Many Bible scholars understand the phrase "puts us on display" to refer to Paul and his coworkers — and by

extension, all other Christian ministers — as soldiers in the army of Christ, the victorious General who has already defeated Satan. A less likely interpretation is that Paul was thinking of himself as a war captive — conquered by Christ — who had endured much suffering.

In either case, Paul was more interested in developing the analogy of the scent wafting through the parade route. He identified this scent as knowing Him, that is Christ. Wherever Paul went, his message was simply Christ, whether persons embraced Him or rejected Him.

**Verse 15:** *For to God we are the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.*

The sweet burning incense of the Roman victory parade was offered in honor of the general, but was smelled by both the victors (“those who are being saved”) as well as the vanquished (“those who are perishing”). In Paul’s analogy, the aroma of Christ — the good news about Jesus — was being spread throughout the world.

**Verse 16:** *To some we are a scent of death leading to death, but to others, a scent of life leading to life. And who is competent for this?*

Paul’s sacrificial ministry on Christ’s behalf was a scent of death for those who rejected the message. Some would indeed choose to reject the “gospel perfume,” leading to their final spiritual death, eternal separation from God. The same sacrificial ministry would be recognized by others for what it truly was, a scent of life. They would receive the gift of life. Thus the same good news both then and now results in life or death, depending on the individual’s response.

When Paul thought about his own role as a minister and the eternal implications of his work, he was overwhelmed. He couldn’t help but ask, “Who is competent for this?” Of course the unstated answer is that no one is competent, except by the grace and power of God.

**Verse 17:** *For we are not like the many who make a trade in God’s message for profit, but as those with sincerity, we speak in Christ, as from God and before God.*

The wonder of ministry that grew out of Paul’s confidence in God contrasted with his knowledge of the many who looked at ministry as a source of profit. He may have particularly had in mind the false apostles who had caused so much difficulty at Corinth. They’d reduced the gospel to a way towards earning a living. Paul didn’t

prohibit Christian ministers from receiving a salary (1 Timothy 5:17). However, he did prohibit money from being the only motive or the main motive for ministry.

Once again Paul affirmed his sincerity of motives (see 2 Corinthians 1:12). Because the apostle understood the incredible gravity of ministry, he was always careful to live so that God approved him. He indicated this gravity with three phrases.

- (1) The phrase “in Christ,” a frequent expression Paul used, refers to his union with Christ. Christ is the *Identity* of true ministry. True ministry derives its character from fellowship with Him.
- (2) The expression “from God” is a reminder that God Himself is the one enabling frail, sinful humans to carry out a sincere ministry. God is the *Source* of true ministry.
- (3) Finally, the phrase “before God” can also be rendered “in God’s presence.” Paul joyfully acknowledged that God held him accountable for ministry that springs from the right motives. God is the *Evaluator* of true ministry.

Verses 14-17 show that Paul maintained a clear conscience about his ministry. He concluded this passage by affirming once again his sincerity.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 8

### 2 CORINTHIANS 3:1–5:10

#### THE BACKGROUND

Chapters 3–5 of 2 Corinthians continue Paul’s reflection on and gratefulness to the Lord for his own ministry. Some of his reflections reveal striking ways in which he’d meditated on certain Old Testament passages and themes. For example, in chapter 3 he contrasted his own new covenant ministry to the old covenant ministry of Moses. Paul’s confidence in the surpassing value of new covenant ministry overshadowed the concerns he had about the Corinthians. Then, in chapter 4 he developed wonderful word pictures, such as the gospel coming as a shining light or the gospel being like extravagant treasure stuffed in a clay jar. The apostle was determined that he wouldn’t give up this awesome ministry; he wouldn’t succumb to depression over the afflictions he faced. Finally, in chapter 5 Paul pondered what he faced after the death of his body, a reflection probably prompted by his recent life-threatening experience. He demonstrated what it meant to be looking upward to his heavenly reward instead of looking downward in despair over thoughts of how difficult life had been.

#### 1. RELY ON GOD (2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-6)

**Verse 1:** *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or like some, do we need letters of recommendation to you or from you?*

Paul expected negative responses to the two questions he asked in this verse. “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?” Some of the false teachers who were disturbing the Corinthian congregation had evidently accused Paul of being a fake and of shameless self-promotion.

“Or like some, do we need letters of recommendation to you or from you?” Apparently some of the false teachers had presented favorable letters of recommendation to the Corinthians that those teachers didn’t deserve or which may have even been forged. In turn, these teachers had apparently asked the Corinthians to write such reference letters. Paul had obviously never felt the need for any such letter of recommendation.

**Verse 2:** *You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, recognized and read by everyone,*

The Corinthian believers were, in their own persons, Paul’s letter of recommendation to anyone seeking such a credential. He carried this letter everywhere he went because it was written within him. The phrase “on our hearts” refers to the genuine concern he had for these people. He readily testified to the life change that had happened to the Corinthians because of his ministry. People in other cities heard about this transformation in the Corinthians’ lives, so in this sense those people were “reading” Paul’s letter of commendation.

**Verse 3:** *since it is plain that you are Christ’s letter, produced by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not on stone tablets but on tablets that are hearts of flesh.*

The expression “you are Christ’s letter” is a wonderful figure of speech. Paul expanded on this concept.

The Author was Christ Himself. His power changed the Corinthians. The secretary was Paul and his ministry associates. He was the agent God had used to preach the good news to the Corinthians. The ink was the Spirit of the living God. Literal ink can fade or be marked out; God’s Spirit is eternal. Further, *living God* contrasts with the dead gods previously served by the Corinthians.

The paper was “tablets that are hearts of flesh.” On one hand, this phrase echoes the thought “written on our hearts” of verse 2. On the other hand, Paul’s bold contrast of fleshly hearts with the stone tablets such as those on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed likely means he alluded to the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s ancient prophecy concerning the new covenant: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will place my Spirit within you” (Ezekiel 36:26-27a).

**Verse 4:** *We have this kind of confidence toward God through Christ:*

The term Paul used for confidence implies trusting in someone or something to the point of complete reliance. Paul didn’t lean on himself or any human resource. He fully depended on God through Christ.

**Verse 5:** *not that we are competent in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our competence is from God.*

Paul’s confidence wasn’t an arrogant self-sufficiency. God had demolished his confidence in his own abilities, as Philippians 3:3-7 reveals. Thus, the apostle explained

that the ministry team wasn’t adequate in themselves. Paul’s success in ministry was beyond any natural ability within himself.

**Verse 6:** *He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit produces life.*

First, observe that Paul designated himself and others as ministers, that is, servants; the same word is translated “deacons” in other passages. Second, by *new covenant* the apostle was referring to the prophecy of Jeremiah fulfilled in Jesus’ death for our sins (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22:20).

The old covenant was the solemn agreement God made with the Israelites through Moses. It emphasized external compliance with the commands of God. In this sense, “the letter kills,” that is, the law reveals sin but doesn’t provide the ability to obey its commands (Romans 3:20). As the writer of Hebrews explained, the old covenant is now obsolete because of Christ’s coming (see Hebrews 8:7–9:22, especially 8:13).

The new covenant is the solemn agreement God has made with those joined to Christ through faith. It emphasizes internal change brought about by the Spirit who indwells all who are in Christ. Paul, of course, had in mind the eternal life God gives to all who receive the gift of His Son.

#### 2. STAND BY THE GOSPEL (2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-5)

**Verse 1:** *Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not give up.*

This ministry refers to “the ministry of righteousness” (3:9) Paul emphasized in chapter 3. By God’s mercy, Paul had been converted to Christ and equipped for service. Furthermore, God was responsible for providing His servant the strength required for carrying out ministry. Paul wouldn’t give up, that is, become discouraged or tired to the point of quitting. As we’ve seen, Paul learned to rely on God’s strength.

**Verse 2:** *Instead, we have renounced shameful secret things, not walking in deceit or distorting God’s message, but in God’s sight we commend ourselves to every person’s conscience by an open display of the truth.*

One key to Paul’s determination was his identification and rejection of attitudes and behaviors unworthy of the gospel. He named the following:

“Shameful secret things.” To manipulate others or to use underhanded tactics is never appropriate for anyone,

much less Christians in ministry.

“Walking in deceit.” The term translated *deceit* implies actions or speech designed to trick people. The witness of the gospel has often been damaged by tricksters.

“Distorting God’s message.” Paul didn’t water down or change God’s Word in order to give people the message they wanted to hear.

Some of the Corinthians may have accused Paul of just such sickening maneuvers. Perhaps Paul was subtly reversing matters, implying that the false teachers in Corinth were guilty of this very manipulation. In any case, Paul reaffirmed his integrity. He preached “an open display of the truth.”

**Verse 3:** *But if, in fact, our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.*

Thus the apostle refused the charge that his gospel message was somehow mystifying or impossible to grasp — which perhaps his opponents had suggested. The problem wasn’t with the message or the messenger but with the recipients. Thus, if some persons hadn’t responded to the gospel, it wasn’t because the message was obscure. Rather, it hadn’t yet penetrated the hearts of those who were perishing (see 2:15).

**Verse 4:** *Regarding them: the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

Here Paul stated that the condition of unbelievers was like being blinded so “they cannot see the light.” Like the account of the man born blind recorded in John 9, it takes a miracle of sight restoration — by Jesus who heals blind eyes — to enable the sightless minds of unbelievers to recognize and respond to the truth.

Observe the contrast between the wonder of Christ and the wickedness of Satan. The Lord Jesus is “the image of God from everlasting to everlasting.” Satan is merely “the god of this age.” The Lord Jesus gives the light of the gospel (see 1 John 1:5-8). In contrast Satan is an agent of blinding people. The Lord Jesus is filled with glory, the radiant splendor of truth. Satan’s way is shameful and secret, characterized by deceit and distortion (see 2 Corinthians 4:2).

**Verse 5:** *For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves because of Jesus.*

Paul returned to the thought of verse 2, in which he’d rejected certain attitudes and actions unworthy of the gospel. This time he rejected proclaiming himself. Instead

Paul preached Jesus Christ as the crucified, resurrected, and exalted Lord.

The title *Lord* means “master” or “sovereign.” And what master doesn’t have servants? Thus Paul thought of himself as a slave. The Greek word used here for *slave* designates a bondservant or one owned by another. The apostle’s service had been directed toward the Corinthians (“your slaves”), but he ministered under the authoritative command of the divine Slave-owner (“because of Jesus”). All the glory belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ (4:4); therefore, no other — the god of this age or false teachers or even the ministers of the Lord — is to receive the honor belonging only to Him.

### 3. CONCENTRATE ON THE ETERNAL (2 CORINTHIANS 4:15-18)

**Verse 15:** *For all this is because of you, so that grace, extended through more and more people, may cause thanksgiving to overflow to God’s glory.*

True ministry flows in two directions. First, it flows outward toward other people. Paul’s struggles were because of or for the benefit of the Corinthians. The ultimate purpose of his ministry was that the gospel might reach more and more people, like ripples created by a stone thrown into a pond.

Second, true ministry flows upward. Acknowledging God’s glory — His weighty majesty — was the end result of His grace being extended. Thus as people experienced the grace of the gospel and offered their thanksgiving to Him, His majesty would be further acknowledged.

Because we are bound by time, we find it challenging to maintain a perspective that takes eternity into account. However, Paul reminded the Corinthians of the importance of keeping eternity in view. After reminding them of all he’d endured for their sakes, the apostle declared he wasn’t focusing on his suffering but on eternal matters.

**Verse 16:** *Therefore we do not give up; even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day.*

Such determination might appear foolish to those who measure value only by externals. Paul was probably thinking especially of the extra wear and tear on his physical body because of the hardships and persecution he’d endured.

By contrast, his inner person was being renewed day by day. He knew the resurrection life of Christ was active within him. Paul knew that “the One who raised the Lord Jesus will

raise us (believers) also with Jesus” (2 Corinthians 4:14).

**Verse 17:** *For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory.*

Without an eternal perspective, the troubles of this life can be completely overwhelming. Yet with eternity in view, such hassles can be seen as a momentary light affliction. Paul was confident “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that’s going to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). The apostle knew our future glory to be weighty in contrast to our present lightweight afflictions.

**Verse 18:** *So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen; for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

Paul observed two sets of contrasts: (1) what’s seen — the present reality, including the declining physical body — versus what’s unseen — the future reality at Christ’s return, including the resurrection body and (2) temporary — everything transitory and lightweight that will disappear — versus eternal — everything permanent when the “weight of glory” comes, a state of blessing for the believer that’ll never end.

### 4. ANTICIPATE THE FUTURE (2 CORINTHIANS 5:9-10)

**Verse 9:** *Therefore, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to be pleasing to Him.*

All of life for a Christian, both now and in eternity, is to have one main goal — to be pleasing to the Lord Jesus. Obviously Paul understood that it’s possible for a Christian to walk in a way that displeases the Lord (see 2 Corinthians 5:11; Ephesians 4:30).

**Verse 10:** *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or bad.*

One incentive for living to please the Lord is to remember that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” This verse refers to the judgment of Christians. The term *judgment seat* (*bema* in the original language) designated the bench a Roman governor or other authority sat on to give an official court verdict. See Acts 18:12-17 where Paul was hauled before the Corinthian *bema*.

This judgment has nothing to do with whether believers are saved or justified. Paul was affirming that what we do with our earthly bodies really matters.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 15

### 2 CORINTHIANS 5:11–7:4

#### THE BACKGROUND

This week's lesson is based on passages that further demonstrate Paul's strong desire for reconciliation with the difficult Corinthians, no matter how fractured the relationship between the apostle and the church had become. As we consider important truths Paul wrote about conflict resolution, we'll see he had much to say about reconciliation between God and people. Yet these verses also reveal much about the reconciliation needed among the people. Paul longed to be completely at peace with each of the Corinthians. This passage shows how hard he worked to again experience warm relations with these exasperating people he cared so much about.

#### 1. BE OPEN TO RECONCILIATION (2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-13)

**Chapter 5. Verse 11:** *Knowing, then, the fear of the Lord, we persuade people. We are completely open before God, and I hope we are completely open to your consciences as well.*

The fear of the Lord is respect and reverence for Him, not an unhealthy dread. Paul's primary call at this particular moment was to persuade people that he — not the false teachers troubling the church—had an authentic, God-commissioned ministry. As far as Paul was concerned, his message and his motives were transparently evident before God. He'd examined his heart and he had a clear conscience in what he said and did. He longed for the Corinthians to accept his message and motives as completely open, despite the "hits" he'd taken from false teachers. He desired complete reconciliation with the Corinthian believers.

**Verse 12:** *We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to be proud of us, so that you may have a reply for those who take pride in the outward appearance rather than in the heart.*

Earlier in 2 Corinthians, Paul made a forthright case both for himself and for his message (4:2b). There was therefore no new need for commending themselves to the Corinthians again. What the apostle was doing in this verse was offering the Corinthians another motive for reconciliation with him. He wanted to provide them an incentive to brag about him, just as he'd bragged about them

to the Macedonians (9:2).

Paul contrasted himself to those who'd been opposing him in Corinth. They must've taken pride in the outward appearance. They apparently had the external signs of ministry success. On the other hand Paul had few of the externals to commend him (see 1 Corinthians 2:1-5). He'd experienced a huge share of trouble and persecution. Yet Paul had the assurance that his heart was right. He was challenging the Corinthians on one hand to patch up the differences they had with him and on the other hand to offer a rebuttal and rejection to his opponents.

**Verse 13:** *For if we are out of our mind, it is for God; if we have a sound mind, it is for you.*

The words "we are out of our mind" reflect what some of Paul's opponents in Corinth were saying about him. These words stand as evidence of the need for reconciliation between Paul and the Corinthians. Whatever the apostle's words or deeds, he'd done so for God, that is, out of an awareness of and sense of accountability to Him (see 2 Corinthians 5:11). On the other hand, to the extent that Paul's message made good sense to his listeners he'd spoken and acted for the sake of the Corinthians, whom he cared about so much.

#### 2. RESPOND IN CHRIST'S LOVE (2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-16)

**Verse 14:** *For Christ's love compels us, since we have reached this conclusion: if One died for all, then all died.*

Sometimes openness to reconciliation isn't enough. Thus, a living example of reconciliation can become a powerful incentive. Just as Christ's love had motivated His earthly ministry, so this same kind of love guided the apostle's ministry. This love also prompted his desire to be reconciled with the Corinthians.

Christ's love is what sent Him to the cross. Because Paul — once Christ's enemy — had received this love, it compelled him to speak and act as one who'd received this transforming love. The statement "One died for all" requires careful reflection. Christ is the only Savior for humanity. Yet Paul wasn't teaching universalism — that every person will be saved. Paul and the rest of Scripture teach clearly that only those who place their faith in Christ will be saved (John 3:18).

"All died" is also a challenging statement to interpret. Paul perhaps meant that every human being is somehow impacted by the death of Christ. For those who by faith

are united to Him, His death has become the means by which believers die to self and sin and live for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15). Sadly, for those who refuse Him, His death points to their future physical and spiritual deaths, resulting in eternal separation from God.

**Verse 15:** *And He died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the One who died for them and was raised.*

The love of Christ has staggering implications for the way we as believers are to live. All those who by faith have embraced His death and resurrection have died to self. Sin's power over them has been broken. Their number one purpose is to please the One who died for them. Thus, we could say that Christ died for people in order that those people should live for Christ.

**Verse 16:** *From now on, then, we do not know anyone in a purely human way. Even if we have known Christ in a purely human way, yet now we no longer know Him like that.*

The phrase "in a purely human way" is an outstanding translation of the phrase in the original language, sometimes translated "according to the flesh." It refers to standards and values based on the idea that physical life and human reasoning are the only things that count. It's a way of living that doesn't recognize the supernaturally revealed reality of Christ's death as a sacrifice for sin and His glorious resurrection. But Paul's and the Corinthians' experiences of Christ's love had changed their past perspectives. With a newfound, supernatural perspective on how to relate to one other, from now on relationships were to proceed from a different basis. No longer could people live just for themselves.

#### 3. REMEMBER GOD'S WORK IN CHRIST

##### (2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21)

**Verse 17:** *Therefore if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come.*

To be in Christ is to be united to Him by faith, identifying with His death and resurrection (5:15). Death with Christ means a putting away of the former, sinful way of living. The old things have passed away. Paul developed this concept even more extensively in Romans 6:1-14. Yet in Romans 7:15-25 the apostle clarified that believers still struggle with sin and disobedience against God.

Paul understood that the new creation had already

begun in the lives of Christ's followers. New things have come because of the power of the risen Christ, beginning the work of transforming sinners into saints. Of course, Paul also looked forward to the final establishment of the new heaven and new earth.

**Verse 18:** *Now everything is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:*

Everything in this context refers to what God has accomplished in salvation, the changes the apostle had just described. No human can accomplish his or her salvation. God took the initiative to restore rebellious human beings to Himself through Christ. Although God has done all the work required to save sinners, He's also chosen to use those who've already been saved to spread this good news. Thus Paul recognized that he (and others) had received from God the ministry of reconciliation. Not only does this ministry (a service to others on God's behalf) involve *vertical* reconciliation between God and sinners, it includes *horizontal* reconciliation between estranged human beings. Horizontal reconciliation was probably uppermost in Paul's thinking as he dealt with fractured relationships with the Corinthian church.

**Verse 19:** *that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed the message of reconciliation to us.*

Through the death of Christ, the trespasses against sinners are no longer a barrier to a restoration of relationship with God. "While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Romans 5:10). The death of Jesus was no mere human death. In Christ, God Almighty was present and active.

This message was not restricted to only a few. No, God was reconciling the world to Himself when Christ died and paid the penalty for our sins. Observe, however, that the only reconciliation between God and humanity is that which was achieved *in Christ*. Apart from Him, there's no restoration of relationship between God and humanity.

Paul was probably thinking primarily of himself and his own Divine call in the words "He has committed the message of reconciliation to us." Yet all of us who've experienced reconciliation to God have a life-changing message that the world desperately needs to hear.

**Verse 20:** *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ; certain that God is appealing through us, we plead on*

*Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God."*

Verse 20 indicates the *urgency* of reconciliation. Paul and his fellow ministers were ambassadors for Christ. An ambassador then and now was appointed to communicate on behalf of a king or nation. Rather than speaking directly from heaven or through angelic intermediaries, God chose human instruments such as Paul.

Paul summarized his ministry with these significant words: "Be reconciled to God." Christ's saving death is sufficient to save every person, but it's effective only for those who respond to Him in faith. The verb *be reconciled* is an imperative or command in the original language. Those who hear the gospel are required to believe in Christ in order to experience reconciliation.

**Verse 21:** *He made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

The Father accounted Christ to be sin for us, taking our sins upon Himself, dying as an offering for our sins. The Father considered us to become the righteousness of God, because Jesus' righteousness is bestowed freely on sinners who believe. Jesus took the punishment we deserved; we received righteousness and reconciliation instead (see Isaiah 53:4-6).

#### **4. A DECISION, NOT A FEELING (2 CORINTHIANS 6:1; 7:2-4)**

**Chapter 6. Verse 1:** *Working together with Him, we also appeal to you: "Don't receive God's grace in vain."*

Paul urged the Corinthians, "Don't receive God's grace in vain." The expression *in vain* conveys the idea of "without result." The apostle wasn't implying that these Corinthians could lose their salvation. Rather, he was asking them to demonstrate that their initial response to the gospel was genuine. They would show its genuineness by no longer living for themselves but for Christ (5:15). One specific way to live for Christ would be to become reconciled to Paul, Christ's ambassador.

By emphasizing *grace*, Paul was reminding the believers that salvation is God's gift, undeserved by any who receive it. God's done everything necessary to save, yet those who receive the gift are expected to show their reception of this gift by not living *in vain*.

**Chapter 7. Verse 2:** *Take us into your hearts. We have wronged no one, corrupted no one, defrauded no one.*

The phrase translated take us into your hearts is more

literally "make room for us." Paul felt the Corinthians had shut him out of their lives. He noted that he'd done nothing to warrant this treatment. He then cited three behaviors that would've merited a break in their relationship. Even though he may have been accused of these things, he wasn't guilty. In his words and dealings with the Corinthians he'd never wronged anyone, never corrupted anyone, and never defrauded anyone. There was simply no reason for them to continue to reject his desire for reconciliation.

**Verse 3:** *I don't say this to condemn you, for I have already said that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together.*

Paul became even more personal, shifting from "we" to I. The denials he'd made in verse 2 weren't meant to result in condemnation of the Corinthians but in a restoration of their relationship with him. Like a good parent, he didn't want to cause them shame or crush them while he was in the process of correcting them. If a person is so committed to you that he or she wants to live with you and would die with you, you can be sure that person would never abuse you.

**Verse 4:** *I have great confidence in you; I have great pride in you. I am filled with encouragement; I am overcome with joy in all our afflictions.*

Paul made four statements about his earnest expectation for a bright future together with the Corinthians.

"I have great confidence in you." Paul boldly proclaimed that most of the Corinthians were genuine believers who would do the right thing.

"I have great pride in you." The apostle was like a proud father who had godly pride in his spiritual children's progress.

"I am filled with encouragement." The Greek term rendered *encouragement* also can be translated "comfort."

"I am overcome with joy in all our afflictions." On one hand, the apostle had experienced — and continued to endure — many troubles. On the other hand, his joy super-overflowed like a river at flood stage.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to live in light of the grace of God. He pleaded with them to be reconciled to him, while explaining that he'd always treated them right. He held them in high regard and recounted the positive aspects of their lives together.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 22

### 2 CORINTHIANS 7:5–9:15

#### THE BACKGROUND

Long distances feature prominently in understanding what Paul wrote in this section of his letter. Paul was personally situated in the province of Macedonia as he wrote. In 2 Corinthians 8:1, he referred to “the churches of Macedonia,” likely including believers in Philippi and Thessalonica. The apostle was writing to Christians some 200 miles away in Corinth, the capital of the province of Achaia. Finally, “the ministry to the saints” he mentioned in 9:1 was a love offering designated for believers living in Jerusalem, in the province of Judea, more than 1,000 miles to the southeast.

Our lesson continues into the apostle’s discussion of the offering. Chapters 8–9 provide important principles for Christian stewardship. Yet Paul’s purpose in receiving and delivering the offering wasn’t merely financial. He wanted the Jewish believers of Judea as well as believers in other churches to overflow with “many acts of thanksgiving to God” (9:12). As a result of the generosity among these predominantly Gentile churches, the church in Jerusalem would acknowledge God’s work among Gentiles. This acknowledgment in turn would lead to better relationships between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

#### 1. BE GENEROUS (2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-7)

Paul was confident the Corinthians had renewed their commitment to him and to his ministry. Thus he was ready to encourage them to move forward with collecting the contribution for the poor believers in Jerusalem.

**Chapter 8. Verse 1:** *We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God granted to the churches of Macedonia:*

Paul introduced the topic of stewardship by describing what the churches of Macedonia had recently done. In Acts 16–17, Luke recorded how Paul had planted congregations in the Macedonian cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea only shortly before the apostle had established the church in Corinth (Acts 18). Thus, the Corinthian believers would’ve always known about the Macedonian Christians. The apostle was bringing further information about a recent example of the Macedonians. God had provided these Macedonians both with financial

resources and with the desire to give them away.

**Verse 2:** *during a severe testing by affliction, their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed into the wealth of their generosity.*

Paul didn’t identify the exact nature of the severe testing by affliction the Macedonian Christians had suffered. Scripture identifies certain persecutions the Thessalonians endured (Acts 17:1-9; 2 Thessalonians 1:4). On one hand, the Macedonian believers were spiritually rich. They benefited from abundance of joy because their lives had been transformed by the gospel. On the other hand they were economically poor. The reason for their deep poverty is unknown. In any case, their spiritual status was more important than their financial status. Their overflow of gospel joy prompted the wealth of their generosity.

**Verse 3:** *I testify that, on their own, according to their ability and beyond their ability,*

Paul’s solemn language here — “I testify” — emphasized that he’d personally witnessed the sacrificial generosity of the Macedonians. Once they found out about this opportunity to give, they gave on their own, without any prodding or strong exhortation from Paul. Their starting point had been giving according to what they could afford. Then they gave far beyond what they could reasonably give. Paul didn’t specify the amount — he was more concerned with the spirit with which the Macedonians contributed.

**Verse 4:** *they begged us insistently for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints,*

The term translated privilege is often translated “grace” in the New Testament. The Macedonians considered Paul was doing them a favor by including them in the opportunity to participate. It gave them a partnership with those saints who would receive the much-needed funds.

**Verse 5:** *and not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves especially to the Lord, then to us by God’s will.*

The Macedonians had gone far beyond what Paul had hoped for in their giving. Paul explained that the foundation for their giving was their understanding that it isn’t merely a matter of finances. When the Macedonians learned about this opportunity to participate in the offering, they recommitted themselves to the Lord before they considered how much money to give. Next, they affirmed they wanted to help Paul in any way they could. In other words, they understood that stewardship is much broader than just giving financially. The generosity of the

Macedonians exemplified God’s will to do God’s work accomplished by God’s grace.

**Verse 6:** *So we urged Titus that, just as he had begun, so he should also complete this grace to you.*

Paul went on to explain a further responsibility he’d urged Titus to accept. Titus would once again become Paul’s representative to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 8:17). He was to serve as the postman for the present letter and then complete the grace of the offering. No doubt the collection — begun when the Corinthians had received the first epistle (1 Corinthians 16:1-4) — had slowed or even stalled because of the recent troubles in the church. Titus, who’d proven to be effective in ministry in Corinth, was just the one to coordinate the rest of this delicate project.

**Verse 7:** *Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—excel also in this grace.*

Paul offered sincere compliments to the Corinthians on a number of strengths he’d observed among them. He identified five traits.

- 1. Faith is trusting or believing God’s words.** Saving faith is the one virtue that all Christians have in common. On the other hand the term *faith* also can designate the spiritual gift of wonderworking faith (1 Corinthians 13:2).
- 2. Speech is literally “word” or “message.”** There was no lack of speaking the word among these believers (1 Corinthians 1:5). Paul had referred to the spiritual gifts of the “message of wisdom” and the “message of knowledge” in 1 Corinthians 12:8.
- 3. Knowledge without love can be deadly (1 Cor. 8:1).** Yet truth is an essential element of genuine Christianity that the Corinthians enjoyed (1 Corinthians 1:5).
- 4. Diligence means earnestness or the desire to do the right thing in a particular situation.** The term can also be rendered “zeal.”
- 5. Love for us can be compared with Paul’s earlier affirmation of his love for them (2 Corinthians 2:4) and his teaching about Christ’s love (5:14).** Their positive response to Paul’s letter and Titus’s visit reassured the apostle of the Corinthians’ love for him.

## 2. BE LOVING (2 CORINTHIANS 8:8-9)

**Verse 8:** *I am not saying this as a command. Rather, by means of the diligence of others, I am testing the genuineness of your love.*

Although the Macedonians were an example of generosity, there was an even better illustration. Jesus is the ultimate illustration. Had the love of Christ for the Corinthians so engulfed them they would love others generously as well?

One way to discover if this love was present would be for Paul to remove financial giving entirely out of the realm of command or duty. Giving done in response to orders or threats is no expression of grace (8:7). At the same time, Paul understood that the Corinthians' response to this opportunity was a spiritual test. If they passed the test — encouraged by the diligence of the Macedonians — by giving generously, the genuineness of their love would become apparent. Bible scholars have debated whether Paul was speaking of the Corinthians' love for him or their love for Christ, but the ultimate result is the same. We express love for Christ by showing love to other Christians. Paul knew that words expressing love are easy; deeds expressing love are more costly.

**Verse 9:** *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: although He was rich, for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich.*

The grace of our Lord includes everything God did in Christ to reach out to sinful, undeserving humans. As believers, when we understand His lavish goodness, how can we not be generous to brothers or sisters in need?

Jesus was rich with all the treasures of the glorious Godhead. He willingly exchanged this wealth for the poverty of the incarnation and the crucifixion. He made this exchange gladly so that by His poverty we could experience His spiritual wealth. Paul perhaps chose the language of wealth and poverty to express this great exchange because he had in mind the literal exchange of money entailed in the offering for Jerusalem. God hasn't promised believers material wealth in this lifetime. He has given the greater promise of an everlasting spiritual inheritance (Eph. 1:3).

## 3. BE EAGER (2 CORINTHIANS 9:1-2,7-8)

In addition to the actions involved in ministering to others at a distance, the principles that undergird such

ministry are also important. Paul recognized these principles include matters such as expressing eagerness to minister and looking forward to the positive benefits that come from such ministry. Both of these matters are in view in 2 Corinthians 9.

**Chapter 9. Verse 1:** *Now concerning the ministry to the saints, it is unnecessary for me to write to you.*

The apostle continued discussing the offering for the believers in Jerusalem, or the ministry to the saints, as he called it here (see also 8:4). By calling them saints, Paul didn't mean they were any more pious than other followers of Jesus. All Christians have been set apart for God's purposes, and the term saints was a favorite designation of the apostle. Because Paul had already written about the offering (1 Cor. 16:1-4) and because of the ministry of Titus, it was really unnecessary . . . to write. Alternatively, Paul may have been writing the way we do when we say discreetly, "I'm sure I don't need to remind you, but . . ."

**Verse 2:** *For I know your eagerness, and I brag about you to the Macedonians: "Achaia has been prepared since last year," and your zeal has stirred up most of them.*

Here Paul complimented the eagerness of the Corinthians. He had earlier used the Macedonians as a good example of the act of giving. Here he held up the Corinthians as a great example to the Macedonians. The Corinthians exemplified the importance of enthusiasm when believers minister to others. Achaia was the name of the province in southern Greece of which Corinth was the capital. With the phrase "last year," Paul referred to the Corinthians' response to his earlier appeal for the offering (1 Cor. 16:1-4).

The Corinthians had indeed promised to give to this offering. Thus, in 9:3-5 Paul wrote further about the team he was dispatching to Corinth to coordinate the offering. He also quoted what Bible scholars believe was a well-known agricultural proverb, that sowing seeds sparingly results in a poor harvest but that sowing generously results in a rich harvest (9:6). Obviously this principle applies to various areas of life.

**Verse 7:** *Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not out of regret or out of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

The right motive for giving is a principle that applies to all other Christian ministry. Service to others is best done when it comes from inward conviction — "as he

has decided in his heart" — rather than from a sense of reluctance or obligation.

The apostle then cited another proverb: "God loves a cheerful giver" (see Prov. 22:9). The term translated *loves* in this context conveys the sense of "approves," for God certainly loves all persons, including those who never give. The word *cheerful* suggests delight or joy, thus, "God approves of those who give joyfully." The reason this fact is so is that God Himself is a cheerful Giver.

**Verse 8:** *And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work.*

A further reason for being eager to minister and to give is God's lavish ability to provide us as believers with everything we need to fulfill His purposes for our lives. Observe that this verse overflows with "everys" and "alls."

(1) "Every grace." God's undeserved favor includes first His spiritual provisions for our salvation and growth toward Christlikeness. It also includes the material blessings we need for our journey through this life. Paul understood the lavishness of this grace as it has overflowed toward believers.

(2) "Every way." Literally, this phrase means "everything." God hasn't promised to make believers materially wealthy in this lifetime. However, He blesses His children richly in a multitude of ways.

(3) "Always." This word can also be rendered, "at all times." Every situation is within God's ability to bless. No time is beyond God's providential reach. With Him there's no such time as "too late."

(4) "Everything you need." Literally, this phrase is "every sufficiency" or "every contentment." This provision is, to be sure, different from "everything you want." God will supply our needs, not our greeds.

(5) "Every good work." Paul was thinking beyond financial stewardship to all acts of ministry in which Christians engage. When we believers are confident of God's *every grace* toward us, we're set free from worrying about daily needs and may concentrate on obeying God and becoming a blessing to others.

## 4. BE OPTIMISTIC (2 CORINTHIANS 9:12-15)

**Verse 12:** *For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many acts of thanksgiving to God.*

The first result Paul noted was “supplying the needs of the saints.” Believers have the wonderful privilege of being involved as God’s instruments to meet the physical needs of others. The apostle continued referring to the offering as a ministry (see 8:4; 9:1). He also called it a service, a term implying a religious act of worship.

The second positive result was that others would offer many acts of thanksgiving to God. When persons receive the ministry of faithful Christians, their proper response is to thank God for the generosity they’ve received. This response is an act of worship as well.

**Verse 13:** *Through the proof of this service, they will glorify God for your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with others.*

The third result Paul expected was that people would glorify God or praise Him for the lives of those who’d been His channels of blessing. On one hand, the Corinthians would have proof they’d passed the test. (See the discussion of 8:8.) On the other hand, the Jerusalem saints would have evidence they and the Corinthians shared a common confession of the gospel of Christ.

**Verse 14:** *And in their prayers for you they will have deep affection for you because of the surpassing grace of God on you.*

The fourth positive result Paul expected to come as a result of the Corinthians’ ministry was that others would gain a deep affection for them. This term implies an earnest longing. Strong emotional connections between groups of believers are a good thing. This relationship would develop as the prayers of the Jerusalem saints — thanking and praising God for the Corinthians — rose to God. In particular, the Christians in Jerusalem would be grateful for this wonderful evidence of God’s surpassing grace in the Corinthians.

Paul had observed in 9:8 that God was “able to make every grace overflow” to the Corinthians, enabling them to give generously. Here the apostle stated that other believers would confirm they saw evidence of God’s overflowing grace in the Corinthians’ lives. So, what’s a good way to have a lot of Christians praying for you? Be generous to them and minister to them even if you can only do so at a distance!

**Verse 15:** *Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.*

Paul was so overwhelmed by the connection between

generous giving and thanksgiving to God for His gift that he concluded with a brief reflection on the ultimate gift of God, salvation in Jesus Christ. The apostle had referred already to the indescribable gift that makes all other gifts possible (see 8:9b). Remembering Christ’s sacrifice with thanksgiving will motivate believers to be generous, to love, to be eager, and to be optimistic as they minister to others.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR AUGUST 29

### 2 CORINTHIANS 10:1–13:13

#### THE BACKGROUND

We've come to the conclusion of our three-month journey through Paul's great Letters to the Corinthians. We've been following the theme, "What's a New Testament Church Like?" A New Testament congregation is composed of people with an interesting combination of pluses and minuses. God's supernatural grace and salvation are present along with all-too-human traits such as wrong ideas, problems with morality, and relationship challenges.

This week's lesson is our final study of 2 Corinthians. Recall that Paul had already made two trips to Corinth. First was his church-planting visit, described in Acts 18. Sometime after this visit he wrote 1 Corinthians. Then after he learned that the congregation was in an uproar, he made a second visit — a "painful visit" (2 Corinthians 2:1). At last the situation in Corinth had improved, and the apostle was ready to announce his third visit to them (2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1). Yet Paul still had his opponents. Thus, in 2 Corinthians 10–13 the apostle responded to various criticisms of him circulating in Corinth.

It's fitting to quote here from the introduction to 1–2 Corinthians found on page 8 of the Summer 2010 *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary*: "Bible scholars have often noted the distinct change in Paul's tone between chapters 1–9 and 10–13. The first section is warm and friendly, but the last section is harsh and critical. The difference in tone between these parts of the letter may best be explained by viewing chapters 10–13 as addressed to the minority of Corinthian church members who'd not reconciled with Paul."

#### 1. APPROACH COURAGEOUSLY (2 CORINTHIANS 10:1-3)

**Verse 1:** *Now I, Paul, make a personal appeal to you by the gentleness and graciousness of Christ—I who am humble among you in person, but bold toward you when absent.*

One mark that a new section of the letter begins here is the occurrence of the name Paul, which is used only here and in the opening salutation. Evidently one of the criticisms leveled against the apostle was a lack of consistency. Some accused him of being humble among them when he was in Corinth but bold toward them only when he wrote or sent a representative. They apparently

considered his personality too weak and indecisive to be Christ's apostle. His opponents felt that only from a distance did he dare to be threatening, for example when he'd written about coming to them "with a rod" of discipline (1 Corinthians 4:21). Paul claimed that far from being a liability, his humble behavior was evidence of Christlikeness. He reminded the Corinthians that Jesus Himself behaved with gentleness and graciousness (see Matthew 11:29). Thus, Paul began this last major section of the letter with a personal appeal to be recognized as Christlike in his dealings with them.

**Verse 2:** *I beg you that when I am present I will not need to be bold with the confidence by which I plan to challenge certain people who think we are walking in a fleshly way.*

Paul longed to remain gentle on his next visit to Corinth. Yet if some of his critics continued to resist him, he wouldn't hesitate to challenge certain people. He would be as bold as necessary to confront those who continued to insist he was walking in a fleshly way. This phrase probably means some of the Corinthians suspected Paul of worldly motives which he'd already been at pains to deny (2 Corinthians 4:2). Earlier he'd also discussed things characteristic of frail humanity versus things that are evidence of God's power (4:8-9, 17-18; 6:8-10).

**Verse 3:** *For although we are walking in the flesh, we do not wage war in a fleshly way,*

Paul recognized, of course, that he and the Corinthians were still living an earthbound existence, subject to the limitations that life on this world imposes (walking in the flesh). On the other hand, he didn't carry out his ministry in a fleshly way. He avoided resources such as manipulation or deception, so often used by those who wield worldly power. Observe that he considered his ministry to be a kind of war, in which spiritual enemies were to be opposed and defeated.

#### 2. ENGAGE GOD'S WORK (2 CORINTHIANS 10:15-18)

**Verse 15:** *We are not bragging beyond measure about other people's labors. But we have the hope that as your faith increases, our area of ministry will be greatly enlarged,*

The apostle was confident that his bragging was legitimate. He'd been successful in the ministry area God had assigned to him (10:13), which included planting the church in Corinth. Thus, for him to boast about the positive result of his ministry in Corinth wasn't beyond measure. It wasn't

because of other people's labors, but rather because he'd fulfilled his God-given commission that the gospel came to Corinth. He was also convinced that he'd not yet reached the end of the area of ministry God had assigned to him. He longed to move on to this new field. Yet he wanted the Corinthians to join with him, perhaps in prayer support or even financial assistance. As their church situation stabilized and their faith grew, Paul would no longer have to be concerned with putting out fires there. Instead, he could pursue a greatly enlarged ministry.

**Verse 16:** *so that we may preach the gospel to the regions beyond you, not boasting about what has already been done in someone else's area of ministry.*

Paul didn't identify the regions beyond where he wanted to preach and plant churches. Many Bible scholars believe he was thinking of Spain (Romans 15:24). This view is consistent with his understanding that God's primary assignment to him was to be a gospel pioneer: "My aim is to evangelize where Christ has not been named, in order that I will not be building on someone else's foundation" (Romans 15:20). Not everyone in Christian ministry can be a pioneer. Yet Paul may have been indirectly criticizing the false teachers in Corinth, referring to them as boasting about what's already been done in someone else's (namely, Paul's) area of ministry.

**Verse 17:** *So the one who boasts must boast in the Lord.*

For the second time in his letters to them, Paul referred to Jeremiah 9:23-24 (see 1 Corinthians 1:31). Earlier, he'd applied the Jeremiah passage to the Corinthians who were falsely boasting in their party alignment. Here he applied it to himself. Paul's genuine bragging rights were only in the Lord. Everything he'd accomplished had been done by the Lord's direction and with His strength.

**Verse 18:** *For it is not the one commending himself who is approved, but the one the Lord commends.*

Paul stated the obvious. Self-commendation and human praise can be fickle and false. Furthermore, all human abilities are gifts from God. Thus, the only person who's truly approved for ministry achievement is the one the Lord commends. Divine approval is the only one that really counts.

#### 3. DECLARE ANY CONCERNS (2 CORINTHIANS 12:14-18)

**Verse 14:** *Look! I am ready to come to you this third time. I will not burden you, for I am not seeking what is yours,*

but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.

Despite his severity in chapters 10–11, Paul didn't want the Corinthians to think of his coming visit as a financial burden. They were more important to him than their material support. To emphasize this truth, he introduced the illustration of parents providing financially for their children. Normally, there's no expectation of children working to support their fathers and mothers. The apostle wasn't here taking into account that sometimes adult children need to provide for aged parents (see 1 Timothy 5:4).

**Verse 15:** *I will most gladly spend and be spent for you. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?*

Paul was the Corinthians' spiritual father (1 Corinthians 4:15). Therefore, just as he'd always sacrificed time and money for them, he would continue to gladly spend his own resources. He would personally be spent — exhausting himself, as he'd described in chapter 11 — just as all loving parents do for their children. Why had he spent so much for the Corinthians? Because he loved them. His question at the end of this verse was certainly meant to touch them emotionally. He longed for his love to be reciprocated, although he apparently doubted the Corinthians' love for him would ever equal his love for them.

**Verse 16:** *Now granted, I have not burdened you; yet sly as I am, I took you in by deceit!*

Beyond dispute, Paul hadn't burdened the Corinthians while asking for financial support. Some of his opponents took this fact and twisted it. They were spreading the story that this behavior had all been just a sly ploy to soak the congregation eventually. This soaking would occur either when he returned to Corinth or by means of the Jerusalem love offering he'd asked to be collected. Perhaps the story went like this: "Paul's just been softening you up by pretending not to want any money. This money-for-Jerusalem story is a scam. He's deceiving you, because he'll just use the money for himself." In other words, Paul was quoting his opponents who were saying, "Sly as Paul is, he took you in by deceit! You've been had!"

**Verse 17:** *Did I take advantage of you by anyone I sent you?*

Paul asked for evidence to support such a ridiculous claim. Paul had sent Timothy as his messenger with 1 Corinthians. He'd sent Titus as another envoy. Had anyone Paul ever sent collected money to take back to Paul? The answer was a clear no. The money for the Jerusalem offering was to be

collected and would stay in Corinth until it was ready to be sent with all the third-party safeguards for financial integrity Paul had already noted (2 Corinthians 8:16-24). Thus, for anyone to charge that Paul would take advantage of him or her was patently false.

**Verse 18:** *I urged Titus to come, and I sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Didn't we walk in the same spirit and in the same footsteps?*

Titus was well-known to the Corinthians. He'd already made one successful visit to them (7:5-7). Titus was a man of integrity. The way Paul phrased the first question shows he expected "no" for an answer: Titus didn't take advantage of you, did he? Paul had already described how he'd soon be dispatching Titus and two unnamed brothers to Corinth (8:16-24). The wording in the original of verse 18 makes it uncertain whether the expression "I urged Titus to come, and I sent the brother with him" refers back to Titus's earlier visit or looks forward to his future visit. In either case, the point was that the motives of Paul and all his associates were beyond reproach, including money matters in particular.

The way Paul phrased the second question of the verse means he expected "yes" for an answer. How could the Corinthians suppose that Paul's motives were different than those of the representatives he'd sent? If they'd not been financial schemers, then neither was he. Both in attitude and in action, Paul and his coworkers were alike.

#### **4. SEEK TO STRENGTHEN (2 CORINTHIANS 12:19-21)**

**Verse 19:** *You have thought all along that we were defending ourselves to you. No, in the sight of God we are speaking in Christ, and everything, dear friends, is for building you up.*

Paul's main thrust in what he'd written wasn't to protect his own prestige or reputation (1 Corinthians 4:3-4). Yet he recognized this concern is what the Corinthians had thought. The fact is, he consciously lived in the sight of God more than in the sight of mere humans. All his speaking and writing and everything weren't for self-protection or self-promotion but for building ... up other believers, not tearing them down (see 2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10). He called the Corinthians dear friends.

**Verse 20:** *For I fear that perhaps when I come I will not find you to be what I want, and I may not be found by you to be what you want; there may be quarreling, jealousy,*

*outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder.*

Paul expressed the fear that when he arrived, some would still be unrepentant of their sins. The eight vices Paul listed were what he believed characterized his critics. The vices include sins of speech, attitude, and action. Obviously a congregation can't be built up if these vices are left unchecked.

**Verse 21:** *I fear that when I come my God will again humiliate me in your presence, and I will grieve for many who sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, sexual immorality, and promiscuity they practiced.*

The apostle also expressed fear for himself. His second visit to them had been painful (2 Corinthians 2:1). He didn't desire his third visit to humiliate him. If he had to deal with many who sinned ... and haven't repented, there'd be sorrow rather than joy. There was another category of sins that had long plagued the Corinthians, sexual misconduct (1 Corinthians 5–7). Paul's opponents may have added insult to injury by approving of sexual license. Paul would grieve deeply if he found immorality unchecked in the congregation.