

## 2 Corinthians 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     2 Corinthians chapter 6 Working together with him then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, In a favourable time I listen to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.

Behold, now is the favourable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry. But as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way, by great endurance in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger, by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, by truthful speech and the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left, through honour and dishonour, through slander and praise.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true, as unknown and yet well known, as dying and behold we live, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing everything.

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians. Our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return, I speak as to children. Widen your hearts also.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?

[ 1 : 3 4 ]     Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God said, In the previous chapter, Paul spoke of God working through himself and his companions.

In verse 20, Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. Now in chapter 6, he continues that point, appealing to the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain.

God's saving righteousness that restores and sets things to rights is at work in and through Paul, and Paul is concerned that the Corinthians received the grace of God in a way that proves fruitful.

He quotes a verse from a passage concerning salvation in Isaiah chapter 49, verses 7 to 13. Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers.

Kings shall see and rise, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you. Thus says the Lord, In a time of favour I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you.

[ 3 : 0 7 ]     I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, Come out, to those who are in darkness, appear.

They shall feed along the ways. On all bare heights shall be their pasture. They shall not hunger or thirst. Neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.

And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up. Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exalt O earth. Break forth, O mountains, into singing, for the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted. God's long-awaited righteousness has come near for the Corinthians too, and they ought to seize the day of salvation, not letting it pass them by.

The fullness of time has come. God has sent his Son, and people must respond. Entrusted with this ministry, Paul has been careful to present no obstacle or offence.

[ 4 : 14 ] He has, as he argues in 1 Corinthians, become all things to all men, to ensure that responding favourably to the message is as easy as it could possibly be. No hindrance or discouragement is presented by Paul in his speech or his conduct.

Paul follows this by presenting a list of hardships that he endures in his ministry. He has willingly taken these trials upon himself for the sake of his calling. Once again, he is presenting a portrait of the character of his ministry, a character that befits the message and the master that he serves.

The actual list of hardships is carefully structured. It begins with a list of situations and circumstances in which he has undertaken his service in verses 4 and 5. In verses 6 and 7, he describes the manner of his ministry in these situations and circumstances, and the virtues and the means that have distinguished it.

In verse 8, he begins to list the extremes of the responses through which he has remained steadfast. And from the end of verse 8 until the end of verse 10, the list explores the paradoxical character of Christian ministry, largely along the fault line of the inner self-outer self division that he has discussed earlier.

Paul presented another hardship list back in chapter 4 verses 7 to 12. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

[ 5 : 36 ] We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed. Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

In that passage, it was the countervailing power of the life of Christ against the death and suffering of the body that was foregrounded. Towards the end of the hardship list in chapter 6, it is the paradoxical forces that Paul and his fellow ministers carry within themselves that is most apparent.

Paul experiences the power of these immense and opposing forces, the fault line between two ages, within his very self. Death and life are not merely neatly divided between inner and outer selves, but are experienced within a single person.

Sorrow and joy, poverty and immense wealth, life and death, are simultaneous presences in the life of the faithful minister. This hardship list continues Paul's defence of his ministry that he has been developing through the letter to this point.

[ 6 : 53 ] It demonstrates that Paul's mettle as a minister has been tested. It also manifests once again the way that Paul's existence and self-understanding consistently draw from the horizon of the age to come.

Paul now addresses the Corinthians directly, as Corinthians for the first time. Paul is making explicit the intent of his argument at this point. Throughout the letter, Paul's desire is for the Corinthians to bring him joy.

His heart yearns for them, and the pain of the tensions that have clearly come between them weigh very heavily upon him. He expresses his affection to them as a father would to his children.

Indeed, as it was through Paul that they first received the gospel, it is appropriate for him to address them in such an intimate manner. He has unburdened his heart to them, and his heart is wide open to them, earnestly desiring to receive their love back in turn.

However, he fears that they have closed their hearts to him, or at least restricted their affections towards him. He beseeches them to open up their hearts to him again. The concluding verses of this chapter have provoked some debate among commentators.

[ 8 : 00 ] Several regard them as a non-Pauline insertion in the context. There is a seeming jolt between verse 13 and verse 14, and if we were to remove the verses from chapter 6 verse 14 to chapter 7 verse 1, the text would flow very smoothly between those two points.

Paul was just making a warm emotional appeal, an appeal to which he returns in chapter 7 verse 2, and then he moves into something more like a rebuke. Beyond the sudden transition are some features of this passage that suggest to some that it is non-Pauline.

There is some vocabulary that isn't found elsewhere in Paul. There is a chain of quotations, and whereas Paul will typically distinguish quotations within such a chain, here they are not so distinguished.

Furthermore, the introductory expression, as God said, is used here, an expression that Paul doesn't use elsewhere. Some have also claimed that there are tensions between the theological emphases of this passage and those in Paul more generally.

Others see it as an insertion in the context, but argue that it is from a lost Pauline text, perhaps the letter that he referred to in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 9 to 10.

[ 9 : 08 ] I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

As Paul deals with a number of elements of this passage in 1 Corinthians, where he refers to being unequally yoked in marriage to unbelievers in chapter 7 verses 12 to 15, avoiding all communion with idols in chapters 8 to 10, and separating from immoral persons at the end of chapter 5, he might be clarifying this supposedly earlier letter, at least according to some commentators.

What are we to make of all of this? First, I think the argument for a Pauline insertion presents good arguments against the claim that the theology is non-Pauline. These verses comport very well with Paul's message elsewhere.

One of the problems with the theory of an insertion is that it fails to give good explanations of how and why it came to be inserted at this particular point. The arguments from unusual terminology are also not as strong as they might initially appear.

There are plenty of passages of undisputed Pauline origin where rare or unique terminology, what scholars called hapax legomena, are used. Other arguments are weaker on closer examination too.

[ 10 : 25 ] Paul's manner of quotation is not uniform, but shows considerable variety. For instance, in Romans chapter 3 verses 10 to 18, he quotes a chain of Old Testament texts. He also uses expressions similar to, as God said, elsewhere.

Nor are seeming digressions unknown in Pauline epistles. David Garland argues that what we have here is a pattern of argumentation that we also find elsewhere in Paul.

In Romans chapter 3 verses 10 to 18, a catena of citations concludes a section of Paul's argument running from chapter 1 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 20.

Furthermore, he observes that the order of Paul's argument here can be loosely paralleled with the order of the argument in 1 Corinthians chapters 4 to 6. If this is not an insertion then, we must give an account of what it is doing here.

And I find Garland's suggestion here quite convincing. From chapter 2 to chapter 6, Paul has been defending his ministry and the manner of his addressing the Corinthians. The issues raised in these verses are issues that are clearly issues of great concern in Corinth, as we have already seen in 1 Corinthians.

[ 11 : 33 ] He has written a painful letter to them and there have been tensions between him and the Corinthians. Idle food and sexual immorality were manifestly problems in Corinth, but it seems that the practices hadn't been effectively rejected.

The weak among the Corinthians weren't a party that were presenting a case for themselves, so much as they were spiritually vulnerable persons in danger of being wounded by the liberties that the strong were taking.

Paul had dealt with these issues in his first letter, but it may well be that his arguments weren't heeded by some, perhaps leading to direct conflict with a leading member, the wrong that was done that he refers to, and the painful letter that Paul had to write.

Now, having laid out a defence of his apostleship and its ethos, opened his heart to the Corinthians, expressed his deep love and concern for them, and his greater confidence in their positive response, he expresses his fundamental case in a pithy and forceful manner once again.

The point of these verses, then, is to express the sharpest possible antithesis between the people of God and the world. The people of God must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

[ 12 : 41 ] Here, Paul seems to be referring to more than just marriage, although marriage would also be in view. It is likely that eating food sacrificed to idols at shared feasts might be the background here.

Deuteronomy chapter 22 verse 10 is the underlying text. You shall not plough with an ox and a donkey together. This is a symbolic commandment, talking about the need for a difference and division to be maintained between the people of God and those who are unbelievers.

Paul elaborates this antithesis in a series of oppositions expressed in strong rhetorical questions. The difference between righteousness and lawlessness, light and darkness, Christ and Belial, believers, unbelievers, the temple of God and idols.

And then he elaborates upon the fact that the people of God are the temple of God, the place where God dwells. And this is where he begins his series of quotations. Leviticus chapter 26 verses 11 to 12.

I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you, and I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. God has set his people apart, and they must live accordingly.

[ 13 : 52 ] Isaiah chapter 52 verse 11. Depart, depart, go out from there, touch no unclean thing, go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord.

Salvation has come near, and the people of God must separate themselves as God comes on the scene. Ezekiel chapter 20 verse 34. I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out.

God is going to deliver his people from the nations among which they have been scattered. And when he does that, he's going to deal with the unfaithful in their midst, so they must be careful. Ezekiel chapter 20 verse 38.

I will purge out the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against me. I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

He also quotes from the first part of 2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 14. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. He joins that with the teaching of Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 18 to 19.

[14:58] You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth. The Lord saw it and spurned them, because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. Paul is alluding to a wide selection of scripture here, all testifying to the same fundamental truth, the divide between the righteous and the wicked that must be established and maintained, especially in the face of the coming judgment of God.

However, it is important to recognise that it all ends on a strong note of promise, a point that Paul will underline in the first verse of chapter 7. A question to consider.

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