

2 Corinthians 1:1-2:11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians 1-2-11 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia, grace to you, and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation, and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia, for we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom, but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand, and I hope you will fully understand, just as you did partially understand us, that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you. Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace.

I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia, and have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say, yes, yes, and no, no, at the same time?

[2 : 20] As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not yes and no, but in him it is always yes. For all the promises of God find their yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us, and given us his spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. But I call God to witness against me. It was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith. For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you.

For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice. For I felt sure of all of you that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart, and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure, not to put it too severely, to all of you. For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him, for this is why I wrote, that I might test you, and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive.

Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Paul introduces the second epistle to the Corinthians in a manner typical of his letters. He identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. The letter is also from Timothy, who from verses such as verse 19 of this chapter is clearly not Paul's co-author, but more likely a fellow minister of Paul known to the Corinthian church.

[4 : 35] It is addressed to the Corinthian church in particular, but also to the wider body of Christians in the region. Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It also seems to have been the most significant church within that region. Paul had received much less of a response in Athens in Acts chapter 17 than he later did in Corinth in Acts chapter 18. Paul gives them his customary greeting and then moves into an expression of thanksgiving. This opening formula is common to many of Paul's letters. Paul's thanksgiving begins by focusing upon the theme of God's comfort.

God is the God who communicates comfort and communicates comfort in order that we might be able to share it with others in turn. God's gifts conscript their recipients into the task of giving in turn. When God gives to us, he gives us the capacity to give to others. For the sharing of comfort, there is a prior sharing in affliction. The people of God share in the afflictions of Christ himself.

Paul particularly has in view here what we suffer for the sake of Christ's name. Just as Christ was at odds with the world and its powers, so faithful Christians will be. The sufferings of the Messiah were the birth pangs through which the new age would dawn.

And in the story of the Gospels, the period running up to Christ's death is a time of testing and tribulation, followed by the great sufferings undergone by Christ in the crucifixion. This same pattern is one that plays itself out in the life of his people.

[6 : 01] However, while they participate in the sufferings and the tribulations of the Messiah by which the new age will dawn, they also participate in the comfort of the victory that Christ has already accomplished. Like Christ's sufferings for his people, the apostles' suffering has a vicarious character to it. They are suffering for the salvation and the comfort of the people to whom they have been sent. However, the Corinthians in their turn will share in the sufferings of the apostles, as the apostles share in the sufferings of the Messiah, so that they too might enjoy comfort with them. This vision of sharing in the sufferings of the Messiah and finding true comfort in the very place that might seem least promising is one that contrasts with the sort of super-spirituality that had been popular among the Corinthians. The close entanglement of comfort and affliction that Paul describes here also fits with his attention to the paradoxical character of life in Christ, where poverty and wealth, weakness and power, folly and wisdom are also radically reshaped by the way that Christ undermines the structures and the values of the world. Paul then proceeds to describe a particular trial that he and his fellow missionaries had undergone while in Asia. They had at this time despaired of life itself and been tested beyond their very limits, feeling that they were as good as condemned to death. However, through it they had depended upon God rather than upon their own strength, and as a result had discovered God's power in their situation, the very power by which he raises the dead. This deliverance had left them with greater confidence of future deliverance.

It was precisely in being brought to the utter end of their own resources that they discovered the sufficiency of God's strength in their situation. And this is a theme to which Paul will return later in the epistle, in chapter 12 verses 9 to 10 for instance.

But he said to me, Paul charges the Corinthians to help them in prayer, interceding for them in their trials and joining with them in thanks for their deliverance. Paul began this section by blessing and praising God for his comforting of them in their afflictions, and now he concludes it by calling the Corinthians to a companionship of intercession and thanksgiving in his ministry, so that God's goodness to them, Paul and his fellow missionaries, will lead to an outpouring of gratitude from many, glorifying God. The sufferings of Paul and his companions are an opportunity for other Christians to join them in knowing and giving thanks for the blessing of answered intercession when the Lord brings deliverance. Paul speaks of his boast in his gospel ministry.

This is not a boast that rests upon his own strength, superiority or self-sufficiency, but in the call and the empowerment of God that equips him and enables him to fulfil his commission. Paul can make a very bold claim about his integrity here. He has acted in consistency, purity and sincerity. This wasn't by some earthly wisdom of Paul's own, but by the grace of God that was at work through

him. Paul has written to the Corinthians with frankness and with clarity, not hiding anything from them or dissembling his motives. His hope is that they will come fully to understand, not just in the more immediate future, but on the final day, when Paul's desire is that the missionaries boast in the Corinthians will be reciprocated and answered by the Corinthians boast in them, as both praise God for each other. Paul's expression of his confidence before God in the integrity of his ministry and the dependability of his word needs to be understood in the light of what comes next. Paul has seemingly opened himself up to an accusation that this is not the case. He has expressed his desire previously to visit the

Corinthians, but as things transpired, he didn't visit them, but sent them a painful letter of rebuke instead. The original plan had involved two visits to Corinth, one on the way to Macedonia and another on the return journey, with the Corinthians sending him on his way to Judea. However, Paul hadn't done this.

[10:16] Since writing 1 Corinthians, Paul had sent Timothy, his close fellow worker, to the Corinthians. Presumably, Paul had been informed by Timothy that the situation in Corinth had badly deteriorated and that it required his personal presence and attention. Paul had then paid a visit to the Corinthians, to which he refers in chapter 2 verse 1. This was a painful visit, and after this he had written another letter to them, a letter that was also described as painful. He had done this instead of visiting them in person, as he had originally intended, and this had all left Paul open to the accusation that he was unreliable, not a man of his word, inconsistent, someone who ran hot and cold.

This accusation, for Paul, is an incredibly serious one, and he is very concerned to answer it. A challenge to the reliability of his word and testimony cuts to the heart of his apostolic witness. Paul does not try to firewall the question of his integrity in communicating his travel plans from the gospel testimony that he bears, as if the latter really matters but the former can be brushed off as a realm where white lies and unreliability and wishy-washiness are legitimate, or at least matters of little consequence. Paul's message of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness is fundamental, and it is incredibly important that his behaviour comports with this. And Paul makes clear that he has been faithful in this respect. God doesn't speak within clarity or inconsistency in Christ.

Rather, God's word in Christ is a resounding yes to all of his promises, to which the bold Amen of the church must answer. It is this faithful and trustworthy God that established the Corinthians with Paul in Christ. He has anointed them for their ministry. He has placed a seal upon them.

Perhaps Paul has baptism in mind here, and has given them the guarantee of the Spirit, a down payment assuring them of the coming fullness of their redemption. Paul calls God as his witness to his integrity. Paul's decision not to visit Corinth, as he had originally intended, was not vacillation on Paul's part. It wasn't Paul running hot and cold in his relationship with the Corinthians. Rather, Paul decided against a visit precisely on account of his care and love for the Corinthians. Had he gone, his visit would have been difficult and painful for them. Paul was, as it were, the Corinthians' father in the gospel. He had sown the seed of the word by which they had first come to faith. However, as a good father, his desire was to avoid being overbearing and authoritarian with them. He did not want to lord it over the Corinthians' faith, as if he was the master of it. Rather, his desire is to play the part of a faithful father, whose wish is the joy and well-being of his children, and whose rebukes are kept as gentle as they can possibly be, without losing their effect. He wants to have the joy of seeing his children grow, and that requires not dominating over them. A painful letter was a softer and gentler correction than a painful visit. So out of love for the Corinthians, Paul spared them a harsher and potentially more authoritarian approach. Paul does not want to boss the Corinthians around and lord it over them, but to assist them in their growth. What he hopes for from the Corinthians is a sharing of joy.

However, had he visited in a way that brought them pain, he would be looking for gladness from the very people to whom he had brought grief. The appropriate relationship between the Corinthians and Paul was one of rich reciprocity. They should be comforted in Paul's comfort. Paul and the Corinthians should be praying for and giving thanks for God's deliverances of each other. They should be boasting in each other. Paul wrote to them out of a deep pain, yet communicating his love, precisely because this longed-for reciprocity and mutuality was broken. And he really did not want to visit them in a situation where this lack of mutual joy would be painfully and clearly absent, unless it were absolutely necessary. We don't know exactly what happened in Corinth, but we can get some hints of it. Chapter 7 verse 12 might give us some vague sense. So although I wrote to

you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. It seems as though one member of the church had wronged another person, and the fallout had been considerable for the congregation, with much grief caused to many. The wrong did not seem to be doctrinal, but personal. It's unlikely that the person in question was the man described in 1 Corinthians 5. Chapter 7 verse 11 suggests that the Corinthian congregation had proven themselves innocent of the wrong themselves. The wrongdoer had been subjected to church discipline, which now seems to have been proven successful. He too was now grieving for the wrong that he had done, and now the church is encouraged to restore him to fellowship. Exclusion from church fellowship and excommunication, which is likely what was involved here, is a very serious sanction. But the desired end is repentance and restoration, which Paul calls for here. Paul's desire was not punitive, but restorative. It seems most likely that Paul himself was the directly wronged party, the offence causing great pain between Paul and the Corinthians, perhaps leading some of the Corinthians to question whether, as a result of being hurt, [15 : 23] Paul must have abandoned his love for them when he didn't visit them again. Paul, however, speaks of the matter delicately. He doesn't want to open up the wound. He now charges the Corinthians to forgive and restore the offender. He forgives those that they forgive. He does not want to lord it over them, but affirms them in their decision in the matter. The Corinthians had reaffirmed their love to Paul, and Paul's desire was reconciliation of all parties. The alternative to forgiveness in such a situation was the triumph of Satan's designs. Satan's wish is to produce discord that festers into lasting bitterness, unforgiveness, and breaches between people. Ready forgiveness and joyful reconciliation is the way that the designs of Satan can be resisted in such matters.

A question to consider. What lessons can we learn from the way that Paul conceives of and exercises his apostolic authority in this chapter? How can we apply these lessons to the ways that we treat others who are under our authority?