

GOD WITH US

Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 9 – 2 Corinthians

A Heart Opened Wide

2Corinthians 1-7

Introduction

We learn more about the heart of Paul from 2Corinthians than any other letter. The difficulties of his relationship with this church caused him to express deep feelings and convictions as he pleaded with them to understand and accept his apostleship, and to grow to maturity as followers of Christ. It is often the most difficult relationships in our lives that cause us to dig deep and to reveal to the world the true treasure that we carry in these earthen vessels (2Cor.4:7). Paul *“opened wide his heart”* (6:11) and he invited them to open their hearts to him in return (6:13). History is silent as to how the Corinthian situation ultimately played out. But history has given to us this special letter, showing us the heart of Paul. After writing this letter, he made one final trip to Corinth before going to Jerusalem where he was arrested and, eventually, sent to Rome for trial.

Outline of 2Corinthians

Salutation: 1:1-2

Paul Explains His Ministry: Chs.1-7

Exhortations on Generous Giving: Chs.8-9

Paul’s Apostolic Authority: Chs.10-13

I. Paul Explains His Ministry: Chs.1-7

- God’s comfort in our suffering: 1:3-11

Paul endured many trials during his 3-year stay in Ephesus (1:8-11). At times, he even felt like he would die. Nevertheless, the Lord sustained him and, through the prayers of many, brought him through these trials. As an introduction to his recounting of his own suffering, Paul teaches us one of God’s *key purposes in allowing us to experience trials*:

“He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for

Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ” (1:4,5).

Often, it takes one who is experienced in suffering to be able to offer genuine support and comfort to another who is suffering. Thus, it is important for us to *suffer well* when God calls us to go through trials. As we lean into God and draw on the comfort of the Spirit, the Word, and community, we will later be able to minister that same comfort to others who are suffering.

What kind of trials have you been through? In what ways did you experience the comfort, provision and protection of the Lord? Have you considered that God might want to use you to comfort others? Look for opportunities to serve where your personal experiences (especially the difficult ones) might become the ministry of comfort and hope that you offer to others.

- Paul’s change in travel plans: 1:12-24

The Corinthians questioned the motives behind Paul’s change in travel plans. Why was he changing plans if he was an apostle being led by God? Was he making plans merely based on human thinking and wisdom? Was he a trustworthy person to follow?

“You may be asking why I changed my plan. Do you think I make my plans carelessly? Do you think I am like people of the world who say “Yes” when they really mean “No”?” (1:17).

Paul assured them that he was being led by the Spirit, not wavering as a person led only by human thinking. But in the same context Paul used the opportunity to teach and remind the Corinthians that,

“Jesus Christ, the Son of God, does not waver between ‘Yes’ and ‘No’... For all God’s promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding ‘Yes!’” (1:19,20).

Paul was truly skilled in being able to take the situation at hand, and find spiritual parallels to the situation. He was open to share his own reasons for why he did what he did, but quickly wanted to deflect the attention away from himself and back on to Christ.

“Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, and put His Spirit of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (1:21,22).

Paul used the opportunity to stress yet another important spiritual truth, the security of each believer. God has placed His own Spirit within our hearts as His very own. His Spirit gives us strength to stand firm, but also it is a deposit and guarantee of someday finishing His ultimate work of fulfilling His promise (in Christ), to take us to heaven.

The reason that God led Paul to change his plans was to spare them from one too many painful visits (1:23; 2:1)!

Often, people silently question our motives and then come to false conclusions about us. And, often we personally can do the same thing to someone else. A healthy approach is to clarify our assumptions by asking "I'm puzzled" questions. "I'm puzzled as to why you didn't call me earlier rather than just now?" This is honest and respectful, allowing the other person to clarify their motives, intentions and actions. Many conflicts can be avoided by asking questions instead of coming to our own silent conclusions and judging another person's motives. Is there someone you need to approach with this open type question? Or, is there anyone that you need to go to and admit that you have been making assumptions about them, by not asking a clarifying question concerning their motives, intentions or actions?

- A painful visit and painful letter: 2:1-4

Paul referred to a painful letter and a painful visit (see also 7:8-10). Most scholars do not think he was referring to the previous letter known as 1Corinthians, as the "painful letter." Thus, the theory that there was a shorter letter written after 1Corinthians, which was followed by the "painful visit" to Corinth. That painful visit was designed to confront and correct severe issues in the church, as the following section indicates.

"I wrote that letter in great anguish, with a troubled heart and many tears. I didn't want to grieve you, but I wanted to let you know how much love I have for you" (2:4).

Paul says here that his willingness to speak hard words was evidence of "how much love I have for you." Is there someone that you need to "speak the truth in love" to? Ask others to pray for you that you will have the Holy Spirit's clarity and courage to have the difficult conversation. Then, go in a spirit of love. Has someone spoken words of truth in love to you? How did you receive them?

- Restoring the brother who sinned: 2:5-11

We do not know the situation Paul was referring to here. It could be the moral problem referred to in 1Cor.5:1-8, or it could be another situation. In any case, Paul had to write a severe letter *and* make a painful visit to deal with the matter. However, he was happy to have received a report that the one who sinned had responded to the discipline imposed by the church *with a repentant heart*. Paul urged the congregation to restore this individual with forgiveness and reaffirm their love, so that he would not become overwhelmed by excessive sorrow, and Satan could not divide the church over the situation.

Restoration of a fallen brother or sister is one of the things that the body of Christ (the 'family' of God) is called to do. Jesus Himself gave instructions for this process (Matthew 18:15-20). This is one reason it is important to be involved "in community" at a large church like OPC. When we are involved deeply in the lives of others, we all benefit from the accountability of 'family life.' We can be sure that, if we stray, others will come to us in love and appeal for our return. Similarly, if another strays, we can be God's agent of loving restoration as we appeal to our brother or sister. One sign of emotional and spiritual maturity is the ability to be open to one another in a spirit of mutual accountability, forgiveness and love.

- A Triumphant Procession & an Aroma of Christ: 2:12-17

Paul explained that when he had arrived in Troas there was an open door to preach about Christ; but he had no peace of mind. He had expected to meet Titus there in Troas, but he never arrived. So, he said goodbye and left for Macedonia.

Here is an interesting principle regarding 'walking in step with the Spirit' (Galatians 5:25). Although there was an openness in Troas to preach about Christ, Paul was committed to not doing the ministry alone. He was in partnership with his disciple Titus, and he cared deeply about that, but also about what might have detained Titus. Paul had been under intense stress, and most likely knew his limitations, as well as being concerned for Titus not doing ministry alone either. That decision to not stay in Troas, but travel to Macedonia was not something Paul saw as "failure." Rather, God was still leading him (and other believers) in victory, spreading the fragrance of Christ through him.

Paul used two metaphors to describe his life and ministry. First: After war victories, a Roman general would lead his troops in a triumphal procession. (Think of how a sports team has a parade through their hometown after victory.) This triumphal march was the greatest honor a general could experience. Paul pictures Jesus, his general, leading him in such a triumphal procession.

Second: Paul compared his life and witness to perfume: a “*fragrance of Christ.*” To some this Christ-perfume was a fragrance of death, since they rejected the gospel of salvation. To others it was a sweet fragrance of life, since they were being saved by the gospel of grace. Paul’s conclusion: *And who is adequate for a task such as this*” (2:16)? The implied answer: No one!

It is only the grace of God and the empowering work of the Spirit that makes us capable of being useful instruments of God’s work in this world. It is a joy if someone receives Christ because of us. Yet, this passage encourages us to not take it personally if we initiate sharing the love and forgiveness of Christ with someone, and they don’t want to hear about it, or worse, reject us. Either way, none of us are adequate to be Christ’s witness, or can change one single heart.

- Living letters of recommendation: 3:1-3

Then, as today, people often needed letters of recommendation on a journey to a new city. Paul had such letters of recommendation, but they were not written with pen and paper:

“The only letter of recommendation we need is you yourselves. Your lives are a letter written in our hearts; everyone can read it and recognize our good work among you. Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you. This “letter” is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts” (3:2-3).

Whose life has been changed because of you? That person’s life is now a letter written from Christ upon your heart! He has used you to do His handiwork in that person’s life. Ask God to clearly define your ministry field for you, regardless of your occupation. Then, as you are faithful to be a fragrance of Christ in people’s lives, you will be seeing living letters written by the Spirit of God, as other’s lives are changed.

- New covenant vs. Old covenant: 3:4-18

Paul contrasts the old covenant that God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35), with the new covenant that was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper. The old covenant was based on laws written on stone, with humans trying to conform to those laws. The new covenant is based on the Holy Spirit's work inside of us. God writes His laws on our hearts, through the indwelling of the Spirit, and then He gives us the power of the Spirit to help us to be transformed from the inside-out, in conformity to His laws. Paul summarizes what the Spirit is doing in us:

“For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like Him as we are changed into His glorious image” (3:17,18).

Moses had to cover his face with a veil that shone gloriously whenever he had spent time with God and His glory. In time that glory faded so he no longer had to wear a veil. Paul explained that in Christ, with the new covenant which began at His death, it was reversed. We have a veil over our minds until we believe, then the veil is removed. The longer we walk with Christ, the more glorious our faces and lives become! The Spirit of God is working within us to make us look more and more like Jesus, *“as we are changed into His glorious image.”*

*For those of us who have seen the famous statue in Detroit, we will realize that the Bible verse engraved on the wall behind 'The Spirit of Detroit', is the verse above; **“For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (3:17)**. Yes indeed, the Spirit of the LORD sets us free at salvation, but then continues to practically set us free as we invite Him to work within our inner selves. When we understand what God is really doing in our lives – making us more like Jesus – then we can better understand the mysterious things that He allows, especially the trials, heartaches and suffering. Much of God's transforming, freeing work in us comes through what Peter called the “fire of testing” that refines our faith. Think about this in terms of your own life. Could it be that some of the difficult things you are currently facing are God's tool that makes you reflect the glory of Jesus, as you are being transformed into His likeness?*

- Heavenly treasure in jars of clay: 4:1-18

Paul reveals the great mystery of how God works, using broken human beings as His “lights” in the world.

“For God, who said, ‘Let there be light in the darkness,’ has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves” (4:6-7).

Fragile jars of clay – that is what *we are!* So, God will use our weaknesses, our failures, our stories as the very places through which He shines the light of the gospel to a watching world. People will see Jesus most not through our strengths and abilities, but through our weaknesses and inabilities, as God displays His power in those places of our lives. Such clear thinking allowed Paul to persevere through the most challenging of times. His eternal perspective carried him through:

“That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever” (4:16-18).

This idea of unseen things that will last forever caused Paul to describe the glorious new bodies that await us in heaven.

- Earthly tents replaced by Eternal dwellings: 5:1-10

“For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. We grow weary in our present bodies, and we long to put on our heavenly bodies like new clothing. For we will put on heavenly bodies; we will not be spirits without bodies” (5:1-3).

To be “absent from the body” means we will be “present with the Lord” (5:8). Paul always made it his life-goal “to be pleasing to the Lord” (5:9).

*Ponder 5:9 for a moment. Is it your goal to please Jesus by your life, your attitudes and your actions? Paul lived for an audience of One – for the approval of Jesus his Savior and Lord. Really, we do not need any other higher motive or goal. If it is our desire to be found “pleasing to Him,” this will pretty much solve a lot of the questions and decisions in life. We will evaluate everything through that one question: “Is this pleasing to Him?” How does that one question, that one desire, impact you right now? Note: Even the Lord Jesus during His time on earth declared that HE sought to please His Father; **“And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him” (John 8:29).***

- Ambassadors for Christ here on earth: 5:11-21

The love of Christ for all of humanity caused Him to die for sin, the penalty required to be brought back (reconciled) to God. This ultimate sacrifice of love controlled and compelled Paul’s life (5:14,15). In particular, it compelled Paul to fulfill his role as an ambassador for Christ in this world, pleading with people to individually accept God’s love and be reconciled to God (5:18-21). Paul’s gospel message in a nutshell was the great substitute that Christ became for us, in exchange for our penalty for sin- eternal death. This is the classic expression of the doctrine of “substitutionary atonement.”

“For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ” (5:21).

Did you know that God calls all of us to be “ambassadors for Christ?” What does an ambassador do? He/she represents one country while living in a foreign country. Thus, we represent the interests of heaven (our home country) while we live here on this earth (our foreign land). Paul called us “citizens of heaven” in Philippians 3:20. How are you doing fulfilling your role as an ambassador for Christ? Are others drawn towards Christ because of you? Pray for God to impress on you 3 people who are in your life who don’t know Jesus and His great love for them personally. Pray that they will want to hear about Him, and that you will be a faithful ambassador for Christ in God’s timing.

- Paul's hardships as Christ's ambassador: 6:1-13

Paul detailed some of his many hardships he suffered as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He did this not to bring glory to himself, rather, to show the sincerity of his motives in doing ministry among people like the Corinthians (who were questioning his motives). Then, he explained why he wrote about his trials.

"We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange- I speak as to my children- open wide your hearts also" (6:11-13).

He was asking for a relationship of mutual sincerity, vulnerability and respect. We can discern, from reading other letters Paul wrote to other churches, that he *did* have more healthy relationships with other bodies of believers (eg. Thessalonica, Philippi, Ephesus). But his relationship with the Corinthians was always uneasy. They simply were not humble-minded followers of Jesus who loved and appreciated their God-given leader and spiritual father in the faith. They were proud-minded and constantly exercised *judgment over* Paul, causing him great pain.

- Do not team up with unbelievers: 6:14-7:1

Why were the Corinthians withholding their love from Paul? Because they had given their hearts over to false teachers, to so-called "super-apostles" who had deceived and enslaved them (see 11:3,4,;13-15).

- Paul encouraged by their response: 7:2-16

This passage is one of the few bright spots in an otherwise difficult letter. Titus had returned to Ephesus from Corinth with the good news that they had responded favorably to Paul's correction regarding some very difficult situation. From the context, it seems that the offense was against Paul directly, and it involved disloyalty to him. But they had responded with 'godly sorrow' that had led them to repentance and an eagerness to recognize their impact on Paul. They were eager to right their wrongs and reaffirm their love for Paul, as God's chosen servant, and they were ready to move forward in their relationship with him, under his leadership. All because they had experienced true "godly sorrow."

“For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There’s no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death” (7:10).

Yes, there is a difference between simple ‘regret’ (I wish I hadn’t done that) and ‘godly sorrow’ (I feel the weight of what I did, of my impact on others, and how I have displeased my Lord). Godly sorrow leads, naturally, to repentance, renewal and growth.

Note carefully 7:5-7. Paul was deeply discouraged; but then he was encouraged by the arrival of Titus. God uses other people to breathe courage into our souls in times of weariness. At OPC, we call these encouragers “2 a.m. friends.” So, when you’re down and out, needing to be encouraged, who are your 2 a.m. friends? Certainly, Paul would have pointed to Titus as one of his 2 a.m. friends. And Paul would have been one of Titus’ 2 a.m. friends.

Discussion Questions

1. There are many practical takeaways from this part of the letter. As you survey back over the many boxes in these notes, which practical lesson seems most relevant to your own life right now?
2. What have you learned from Paul about handling difficult relationships? What did he do (or not do) that stands out as a lesson to you?
3. It is clear from this letter that Paul truly lived out his earthly life *in light of eternity’s reward*. Why is it so difficult for us to do this today? What hinders us from living out 2Cor.4:17-18?

“For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.”