

Divine Strength Displayed in Human Weakness

Introduction to 2 Corinthians

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Introduction

Well, just before we took our break from GraceLife for Sundays in July, we concluded our exposition of Paul's letter to the Philippians. That means that I have the great joy and immense privilege of beginning a new sermon series with you this morning. And so would you open your Bibles and turn with me to Second Corinthians—Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. And though many of you have asked, I have been intentionally hesitant to definitively reveal which book I would go to after completing Philippians. And that's mostly because I haven't been sure! Especially with the extra time off, I had a lot of time to think about what I would preach next, but that didn't help my decisiveness any! I must have decided to preach five different books over the last few months.

And that process of deciding what to preach next involves a number of things for me. First, I considered where the Lord was inclining my own affections: what were the particular books I wanted to preach? And, even more importantly, I spent time in prayer considering what message from Scripture that GraceLife needed to hear at this point: was there a particular book whose main point would be especially helpful to us at this time?

But one of the things that I did as a part of that decision-making process—after I narrowed it down to a few finalists—was to go to the Grace Church website, and see how many sermons have been preached on those books throughout the various ministries of our church. And I was entirely intrigued by what I learned on that website. Not counting Pastor John's sermons—we put him in a category all his own—not counting Pastor John's sermons, there are 338 recorded sermons on the book of Ephesians! There are 243 sermons on the five chapters of 1 Peter. There are 187 sermons on the four short chapters of Colossians. There are 182 on James, 141 on 1 John, 83 on Galatians, 74 on Titus, and 70 on 1 Timothy. On 2 Corinthians, made up of 13 long chapters and almost 4500 Greek words, there are a mere 60 sermons. And even among those 60, many of them are from different men preaching the same passage—like the thorn in the flesh of chapter 12 or the glory of God shining in the face of Christ in chapter 4.

And unfortunately, that neglect of 2 Corinthians is not limited to any one church. In his classic commentary on this great letter, longtime Westminster Seminary Professor, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, wrote, "Among the major epistles of the New Testament, this particular one has

suffered a totally unmerited measure of neglect” (xv). In his commentary, Pastor John writes that 2 Corinthians “is perhaps the least familiar of all [Paul’s] inspired writings, often overlooked both by individual believers and preachers alike” (1).

And the reasons for this neglect are various: First, 2 Corinthians is a fairly long book, and when coupled with the shortening attention spans that are characterizing many professing believers today, it can scare some preachers off. Second, some have suggested that it has suffered from “second letter syndrome;” that is to say, preachers often feel like before they preach 2 Corinthians, they’d have to preach 1 Corinthians. And not only are both fairly lengthy books, but 1 Corinthians is Paul’s letter to the problem church; and unless they have to, pastors aren’t quick to insinuate that they consider their church to be a problem church.

Another reason preachers can shy away from 2 Corinthians is its content. We’ll talk more about the historical context of the letter in a moment, but it’s written in the context of intense personal trials for the Apostle Paul and his ministry. His legitimacy as an apostle is being called into question by his own spiritual children, who are being led astray by false teachers from outside the church. And so as a result, 2 Corinthians contains some of the most exalted pastoral theology in Scripture. Paul bares his heart and soul in what many have called the most personal and most emotional letter he’s ever written. And so many have suggested that pastors should wait to preach this book until they’ve experienced some of the pastoral heartache that Paul is facing as he writes.

And so maybe I’ll have to preach 2 Corinthians again later on in my ministry after I’ve suffered a little while, but for now I simply can’t resist—because it is just so rich. As I just briefly mentioned, 2 Corinthians does give us the most incisive look into the very soul of the great Apostle Paul, who, as the pastor par-excellence, lays his heart wide open for the sake of his dear spiritual children at Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 4:15). He says as much in chapter 6 verse 11. He says, “Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide!” And then in verse 13 he entreats them, “Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also!” In chapter 7 verse 2: “Make room for us in your hearts!” The letter is full of these kinds of statements, as the emotional life of the Apostle Paul is on display in high definition. And GraceLife, it’s my prayer that as we study this great epistle together, you will imbibe something of the heart and the affection of the great Apostle—that you would develop a deep, pastoral love and concern for your brothers and sisters in Christ, in the same way that Paul did.

Not only is the study of 2 Corinthians valuable for its lessons in Gospel-shaped affections, but it’s also home to some of our favorite passages of Scripture. Chapter 4 verse 16 comforts us with the words that “though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.” And then verse 17: Our “momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” One of the most familiar verses in Scripture is 2 Corinthians

5:8, where Paul says that “to be absent from the body” is “to be at home with the Lord.” And one of the first verses that we teach new believers comes in chapter 5 verse 17: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature.” And then in verse 21, we have that precious teaching on the doctrine of imputation—the great exchange—that “[The Father] made [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” And of course, that splendid passage concerning Paul’s thorn in the flesh, that brings us so much comfort in the midst of our affliction, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Christ says to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” And so Paul says he is well content with weaknesses and difficulties for Christ’s sake, “for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

And so one of the immense blessings of studying a letter with such precious gems—such choice delicacies—as these verses, is that we get to feast on them *in their proper context*. You see, the Bible is not just a collection of quaint sayings out of a fortune cookie or a Hallmark card. We don’t get the full blessing of those wonderful Scriptures by extracting them from their context and treating them like a series of divine one-liners. But just like the proper seasoning brings out the natural flavor of a choice cut of steak, understanding a favorite passage in its natural context and in the flow of the original author’s argument causes us to savor the truth of God’s Word all the more.

And besides (a) the wonderful look into the heart of the Apostle Paul, (b) and the opportunity to study these classic passages of Scripture in context, another reason to study 2 Corinthians is that it is richly theological. We’ll talk more about the details of the theology of the letter a bit later on, but for now suffice it to say that 2 Corinthians touches on a number of key theological themes: the nature of the New Covenant as it is fulfilled in Christ; the doctrine of the reconciliation between God and man; the most detailed teaching on Christian giving; the glory that awaits believers after this life; and even practical matters of separation from the world and discipline within the church.

But the most central theological theme of the book is the very message that I believe speaks most applicably to us—that meets us right where we all live. And that is the theme of **divine strength displayed in human weakness**—the theme of **joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction**. This entire letter is shot through with these beautiful juxtapositions of Paul’s sorrows and his rejoicing, of his trials and sufferings and his confidence, of Paul’s weaknesses and the strength of God’s divine power, of Paul’s afflictions, and the comfort that he receives through Christ.

In that opening benediction of praise to God in chapter 1 verses 3 through 7, Paul uses *three* different words *six* different times to describe his affliction and sufferings. But interspersed throughout those same five short verses, he mentions the divine *comfort* he receives *ten* times. He says in chapter 6 verse 10 that the true Christian minister is “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.”

In chapter 7 verse 4 he says he is filled with comfort and is overflowing with joy in the midst of all his affliction. And again in chapter 12, the Lord Jesus tells Paul that His divine power is perfected in human weakness, and so Paul concludes that when he is weak, then he is strong. He sums up his entire apostolic ministry in saying he is “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (4:10).

Paul can be joyful even in the midst of all of his sufferings because **it is by his suffering for Christ’s sake and for the Gospel’s sake that he can put the power of God on display.** His opponents look at him and see all of the suffering that he’s gone through, and they conclude that there’s no way that someone who has divine approval—who is an Apostle of Jesus Christ—there’s no way that they can experience as much affliction as Paul has. But 2 Corinthians is all about Paul saying, “So far from *discrediting* my genuineness as an Apostle, my suffering for Christ’s sake is a mark of my *authenticity*. Because it’s in my weakness that you see the Spirit’s power; it’s in my dishonor that you see God’s glory; and it’s in my suffering that you see the sufficiency of the cross of Christ.”

Now you might be saying, “Mike, what you just described—the way Paul demonstrated that his sufferings were a mark of his genuine apostleship—that’s awesome. But *I’m* not an apostle. I’m not even a pastor! How does the theme of joyful, enduring *ministry* in the midst of affliction intersect with my life if I’m not in full-time ministry?”

And the answer is: You *are* in full-time ministry, my friend. The entire Christian life is a life of *ministry*—of preaching the Gospel to the lost people around us, and of laying our lives down to *minister* to the needs of our brothers and sisters who are fellow partakers of that Gospel. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:5 that God has made us ministers of the New Covenant. And he’s not just talking about himself there. How do I know that? Because 1 Peter 2:9 says that the entire church is a royal priesthood. Every individual Christian is a priest of the Most High God, set apart to bless the world through the preaching of the Gospel—by *proclaiming*, as Peter says, “the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” This is what 2 Corinthians 5:18 calls “the ministry of reconciliation,” which has been entrusted to all believers, such that we are ambassadors for Christ who plead with sinners to be reconciled to God. So you see: we are all called to ministry, friends. The obedient Christian life—for all Christians—is a life of *ministry*. And 2 Corinthians teaches us much about joyful, God-glorifying ministry.

And we are all called to ministry in the midst of conflict and affliction. That shouldn’t be very hard to convince you of. We live in a fallen world—a broken world. By its very nature, this world system is hostile to mankind. And it is especially hostile to believers, who have been rescued out of this present evil age (Gal 1:4)—who have been transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (cf. Col 1:13). The Lord Jesus told us plainly in

John 16:33, “In the world you *will* have tribulation.” And Paul told us in 2 Timothy 3:12 that “*all* who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus *will* be persecuted.”

GraceLife, we have been commissioned by our Lord Jesus Christ to live our lives in such a way that we *will* experience opposition for our ministry for Christ. And we are to take heart in the *midst* of that opposition, and focus our lives on displaying the glory of God in the face of Christ in the way that we go through those sufferings for His sake. With a manifest, demonstrable, servant-hearted *weakness* in the eyes of the world, we are to showcase God’s strength. And there is no better place to learn how to do that than from 2 Corinthians. Through our study of this letter, it’s my prayer that we would all grow in our capacity for living a life of **joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction**.

So I trust that explains my desire for studying 2 Corinthians with you in the weeks and months to come. *That* is why I can’t resist. And I hope that it whets your appetite—that it excites you to learn more. But my goal for the rest of the morning is simply to introduce the book to you. And I want to do that in **two ways**. **First**, I want to consider the **historical context** in which 2 Corinthians was written—what was going on in the lives of the Apostle Paul and the Corinthians that brought about the writing of this letter. And then, **second**, I want to give a brief overview of the **content** of the letter—what are Paul’s major themes, how does he place them in the flow of an argument, and so on. And with the Lord’s help, getting our arms wrapped around the letter will equip us for a fruitful study of this marvelous portion of the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God.

I. The Historical Context

Well first, then, it’s important for us to get a handle on **the historical context** of Second Corinthians.

Now, this is the case no matter what section of Scripture we’re studying. I’ve mentioned this to you a couple of times before, but this is what we mean when we speak of *grammatical-historical interpretation*. “Grammatical” means that we pay very close attention to the grammatical forms and syntactical structure of the text itself. “Historical” means that we consider the historical and cultural context in which the relevant events took place while the text was being written. See, every one of the biblical authors wrote to a specific audience, in a real city, in response to particular events and answering particular needs. And so understanding the author’s intent is founded upon understanding the historical context in which they were writing. Rick Holland burned it into our brains in preaching class by saying it this way: We can never know what Scripture *means* until we first understand what it *meant*. And one step in understanding what it *meant* is to consider the historical context in which it was written.

And not only is that a necessary practice for faithful biblical interpretation in general, but it is especially the case for 2 Corinthians. Another one of the reasons that both preachers and believers in general shy away from 2 Corinthians is because it really is a piece of the personal conversation between Paul and the Corinthians. It is a very historically situated letter; much of the content only makes sense in light of the context of Paul's interaction with the Corinthians. Because of that, one commentator remarks that 2 Corinthians "is widely recognized as the most difficult to understand among Paul's letters" (Hafemann, 19). And so because that's the case, if we're going to be equipped to understand this letter rightly, it is especially necessary for us to take a patient look into the history of Paul's relationship with the believers at the church of Corinth. So journey with me to New Testament History class for a bit, and do your best to follow as we re-trace Paul's steps with the Corinthians.

That history begins in Acts chapter 18, in approximately the fall of A.D. 50, when on his second missionary journey the Apostle Paul left Athens and founded the church in Corinth. After about a year and half of ministry in Corinth, Paul left to minister in Ephesus and the surrounding regions. Acts 20:31 tells us that he was there for at least three years, which would cover A.D. 52 to 55.

Sometime during that three-year period, Paul sent the Corinthians a letter that history has not preserved for us. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 5. It's in this chapter that Paul addresses the issue of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church. He rebukes them for not disciplining the man who is pursuing a sexual relationship with his step-mother. And in 1 Corinthians 5 verse 9, he makes reference to a letter that he had written to them *before* 1 Corinthians. Look at verse 9. He says, "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people." "I didn't mean the immoral people in the world, otherwise you'd have to leave the world!" Verse 11: "But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called *brother* if he's an immoral person...." So it's clear from this passage that 1 Corinthians is at least the *second* letter that Paul had written to the Corinthians, because he's referring to a letter he had written to them previously, in which he was giving them instructions about how to deal with immorality in the church.

Well, after writing this previous letter, believers from the household of a woman named Chloe came from Corinth to visit Paul in Ephesus, and they brought some disturbing news. Turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, and verse 11. Paul says, "I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you." There's factionalism going on! The Corinthian Christians are splitting into groups and fighting with each other! One group is saying, "We follow Paul! We love his missionary zeal and his bold fearlessness!" Another group is saying, "Well we follow Apollos! He is such a dynamic preacher; so eloquent! His preaching is such a joy to listen to!" And another group is saying, "No, we follow Peter! The rock of the Church—the leader of the brethren since the Church was born at Pentecost!" And still another group, who were the super-pious snobs, were above it all and said, "Well we follow Christ!" And

so Paul gets this report of factionalism in the Corinthian church from the people of Chloe's household.

Then, just shortly after that, another delegation from the church of Corinth came to Paul. Paul names them in 1 Corinthians 16:17 as Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus. And they bring with them a letter from the Corinthians to Paul, in which the Corinthians ask Paul a number of questions related to their ongoing ministry and life in the church. And we see this in 1 Corinthians chapter 7; turn there with me. 1 Corinthians 7, verse 1, Paul writes, "Now concerning the things about which you wrote...." So we know that the Corinthians wrote to Paul as well. And then, *with* that letter, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus also brought more bad news. There was the case of sexual immorality—of the professing Christian who was sleeping with his step-mother. Professing believers were suing one another. And a sort of proto-gnostic antinomianism—a popular philosophy in the Hellenistic world in Paul's day—was gaining steam within the church.

And so in response to all of that, Paul writes the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. In the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, he responds to the factionalism that Chloe's people reported. In chapters 5 and 6, he responds to the immorality, the lawsuits, and the antinomianism that the three men reported. And in chapters 7 through 16, he responds to the questions the Corinthians included in their letter, touching on matters such as marriage and divorce (7:1–40), food sacrificed to idols (8–10), and spiritual gifts (12–14). 1 Corinthians 4:17 says that Paul is sending Timothy to Corinth, and it's likely Timothy that delivers the letter to the church.

Now, in 1 Corinthians 16, verses 5 through 9, Paul explains that he had been hoping to visit the Corinthians soon as he was going from Ephesus to Macedonia. He figured he could stop in Corinth on his way to Judea and pick up the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. But when Timothy arrived in Corinth with the letter of 1 Corinthians, he found the situation there had worsened. False teachers, claiming to be apostles sent from the church in Jerusalem, infiltrated the church at Corinth and began sowing seeds of doubt about Paul and his ministry. These men were Judaizers (11:22; cf. 11:4), and they knew that if they were going to get the Corinthians to believe *their* false gospel, they were going to have to discredit *Paul's* Gospel. But because you can't discredit the truth, the next best thing is to aim to discredit the messenger. And so they took aim at Paul himself.

"Could Paul *really* be an Apostle of Christ when he suffered *so* much? I mean, how could someone who goes through trial after trial, beating after beating, imprisonment after imprisonment—how could someone like that be approved of God?" "Was he *really* an accredited Apostle? I mean, he wasn't part of the original twelve.... He was a Johnny-come-lately! He never saw the Risen Christ in the flesh! He didn't come from Jerusalem! But *we* have letters of commendation from the original church in Jerusalem!" "And he's such a poor preacher! It's

plain that he hasn't been educated in the arts of rhetoric and oratory. His speech his contemptible!" "And look at how few people are believing his message! If he were really a preacher sent in the power of Christ, he'd have a bigger following! But his message is so *obscure*! He's fussing over whether good works are the *ground* or the *evidence* of saving faith! He's such a nitpicker on these obscure points of doctrine!"

So with that kind of rebellion on his hands, Paul decided to change his original travel plans and visit Corinth immediately. He likely assumed that if he could just be there with the Corinthians, answer his accusers directly, conduct himself with the holiness and godly sincerity (cf. 2 Cor 1:12) that the Corinthians were accustomed to observing in him, he could clear up any misunderstandings, vindicate his character, and thus vindicate his Gospel. Unfortunately, that's not how things worked out. When Paul arrived in Corinth, the church was entirely suspicious of the validity of Paul's apostleship. Things had even gotten so bad that one of the members of the church openly defied Paul and publicly insulted him before the church. (We know this because in 2 Corinthians 2, and again in chapter 7, he speaks of a repentant "offender," and of himself as the "offended" party who has forgiven the offender.) And perhaps even worse than this open insult, the Corinthian church—confused by the false teachers—didn't take disciplinary action against the offender, but sided with him in their suspicion of Paul.

This whole painful episode led Paul to refer to his second visit to the Corinthians as "the sorrowful visit" (NASB), or "the painful visit" (ESV). And though he had originally planned to visit again quickly, he says in 2 Corinthians 2:1, "But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again." Instead of another painful visit, he wrote them another letter sharply reproving them for not disciplining the offender and for being taken in by the false gospel of the false apostles. He says in 2 Corinthians 2 verse 4: "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears." It was such a severe letter that in chapter 7 Paul himself even wondered if he had been excessively harsh with them (7:8–9).

He sent the letter by Titus, and gave him instructions that if the letter was well-received he was to prepare for the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, and then meet Paul in Troas. Well, Paul set out for Troas, and apparently there was a great door opened by the Lord for effective ministry there. But when Titus didn't arrive immediately, and with the grave concern for the Corinthian church weighing on his heart, he says in chapter 2 verse 13, "I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia." And then in chapter 7 verse 5, he says, "For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within."

But finally, Titus arrived in Macedonia, and with a mix of wonderful and sorrowful news. First, Titus assured Paul that the Lord had worked in the hearts of the majority of the Corinthians, and that He used Paul's "severe letter" to bring the majority of the church to repentance! They had

punished the offender who had openly insulted Paul (2 Corinthians 2:6 speaks of the punishment that was inflicted upon the offender by the majority), and the offender himself repented! They themselves had mourned over the way that they had doubted Paul—how they had broken his heart by questioning his genuineness, he who was their dear spiritual father in the faith. In 2 Corinthians 7:7 Paul says Titus “reported to me your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me.” They were made sorrowful according to the will of God, and that godly sorrow brought about repentance, and their love and affection for Paul was once again made manifest (7:9–12). And Paul was overjoyed.

But the false apostles had a field day with the severe letter. “Look at how harsh he is with you! This is the little man who, when he was here face to face with you, was timid and mousy and weepy. But now let him put the Aegean Sea between us and he’s a tough guy!” Paul even records in 2 Corinthians 10:10 that one of the accusations his opponents made against him was, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive.” “That Paul, he talks a big game, but he’s all bark and no bite!” “And what’s with this letter? Didn’t he say he was going to come back *in person*? First he changed his plans to visit immediately, now he changes his plans again. How can someone who claims to be receiving divine guidance from Christ Himself be so fickle?! Are you *sure* he’s an apostle?” “And after the way he’s talking to you, he still has the nerve to ask for money?! How do you know that money is going to the poor saints in Jerusalem, and not right into Paul’s pocket? No wonder he doesn’t charge you for his ministry (like we do)! He pretends to take no money, but then he steals from the collection!”

And though the majority of the church saw these charlatans for what they were and reaffirmed their loyalty to Paul, there was still a significant minority who were deceived by the baseless slander and adulterated gospel of the false apostles. The opposition against Paul, though now in the minority, was nevertheless continuing to intensify. And so he purposes to make a third visit to the Corinthians (12:14; 13:1). But before he does, he decides to put pen to paper once more, and while in Philippi, in A.D. 56—just six years after his founding visit, and less than a year after he’d written 1 Corinthians—he writes this marvelous epistle that we have before us.

And his purpose in doing so is to prepare the Corinthians for his third visit. In the first place, he writes to reaffirm his love and affection for the repentant majority, as well as to strengthen and encourage them about the truth of his apostleship and his Gospel in order to withstand the attacks of the false teachers. And secondly, he writes to decisively refute the accusations of the false apostles, to fully vindicate his apostolic authority, and to win back the resistant minority among the Corinthians from the deception of the false teachers, back to the truth of the true Gospel of Christ.

II. The Biblical Content

Well, having now understood the great history of relationships that form the historical context of this letter, we're now equipped to take a few brief moments to survey **the biblical content** of 2 Corinthians.

And the way we we'll accomplish this is by taking a 30,000-foot overview of the book, outlining the flow of Paul's thought. And as we mentioned before, though the letter is profoundly personal—historically situated, and an intensely intimate look into Paul's own heart and soul—it also contains some of the richest theology and some of the most extensive doctrinal instruction that we receive in all of Scripture. And so as we walk through the content of the letter and note its structure and Paul's flow of thought, I'll pause at each step along the way to bring out some of those rich theological themes that the study of 2 Corinthians has in store for us.

The letter begins with Paul's customary greetings of grace and peace, and is followed by a prologue in verses 3 to 11, which is essentially a prayer of praise to God for His sovereign comfort in the midst of Paul's great afflictions. And so immediately, right out of the gate, we are confronted with some of the sweetest instruction on Christian suffering, and on God's sovereignty over the believer's suffering. Particularly, we learn in chapter 1 verse 9 that God will sometimes lead the believer into the kind of affliction that is too great for us to bear on our own precisely because He means to empty us of our confidence in ourselves and to drive us to trust fully in Him.

After the prologue, the body of the letter begins in chapter 1 verse 12, and goes all the way to chapter 13 verse 10. And the body of the letter can be broken up into three main sections: (1) Chapters 1 to 7 contain Paul's **defense** of his conduct and his ministry; (2) Chapters 8 and 9 contain his instructions for the **offering** that was to be taken up to assist the poor saints in Jerusalem; (3) and Chapters 10 to 13 contain his vigorous **refutation** of the false apostles and his fierce **vindication** of his own apostleship. So, you have (1) the *defense* of his conduct and ministry in chapters 1 to 7; (2) the instructions for the *offering* in chapters 8 and 9; and (3) the *refutation* and *vindication* in chapters 10 to 13.

Chapters 1–7: Defense of His Conduct and Ministry

And we can break down each of those broad sections into smaller, more manageable chunks. In 1:12 to 2:11, Paul affirms his personal integrity in the midst of the accusations of his opponents. In 1:12 he states that his proud confidence is the testimony of his conscience—that he has conducted himself in holiness and godly sincerity in his dealings with the Corinthians; he is not what the false apostles accuse him of being. In 1:15 all the way down to chapter 2 verse 4, he explains that the changes in travel plans were not because he was a fickle and unstable man, devoid of the Spirit's guidance. Rather, it was out of love for the *Corinthians* that Paul determined that he would not pay them another sorrowful visit (1:23–2:3). And then in verses 5

to 11 he instructs them to forgive the repentant man who had sinned against him, just as he himself had forgiven him. And in these verses we learn that Matthew 18 isn't the only section of Scripture that teaches about church discipline! 2 Corinthians 2:5–11 provides us with some excellent practical instruction on how to faithfully—and mercifully!—carry out our responsibility to discipline and restore sinning church members.

And then, after a brief transition in verses 12 and 13, Paul launches into the most extensive discussion on the nature of true Christian ministry that we have anywhere in the New Testament. From chapter 2 verse 14 through the end of chapter 6, Paul expounds most gloriously on what it means to be a servant of Christ and a minister of the Gospel. In this section, we learn about the sovereignty of God in the midst of all of our Gospel preaching—that the *same* message preached by the *same* people will at the *same* time be an aroma of life to those who are being saved, and an aroma of death to those who are perishing (2:16)—that *God* is the *only* One who can open blind eyes to see and savor the glory of Jesus (4:4), that He alone shines in the hearts of His elect to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (4:6). In chapter 3, we also have the most extended discussion of the nature of the New Covenant ministry of the Gospel outside of the Book of Hebrews. There we learn that the Old Covenant—the administration of God's Law—was a ministry of condemnation, verse 9. The Law was never meant to bring salvation, but to bring condemnation—to show us our sin and convict us of it, and to show us our need for a Savior—a Substitute to bear the punishment of our sin and secure the provision of our righteousness. Indeed, “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,” verse 6. And so even though the Mosaic Covenant was unspeakably glorious, the glory of the New Covenant effected in Christ and administered by the Spirit so far exceeds the glory of the Old Covenant that it makes it look dull in comparison (3:7–11). Indeed, the Law only brought Israel to behold a veiled reflection of the glory of God in the face of Moses. But the New Covenant brings *all* believers to behold with *unveiled* face the glory of God in the face of *the Lord Jesus Christ!*

As Paul goes on discussing the nature of true Christian ministry, he introduces us to the glorious paradoxes of divine strength in the midst of human weakness (4:8–9), life in the midst of death (4:10–12), inner renewal in the midst of outer decay (4:16), and joy in the midst of sorrow (6:10). And as he discusses the weakness, and the pain, that are to characterize believers in this present life, he also raises our eyes to the horizon of eternity, and bids us behold the reward of glory that awaits us at the end of this short life. The glory of that day isn't worthy of being compared with the afflictions we endure now (4:17). We await a resurrection body (5:1–5), and the great prize of our salvation: forever being at home with the Lord Himself (5:8). In the second half of chapter 5, Paul discusses the very *heart* of the Gospel—the atoning death of Christ (5:14–15), the regeneration of the believer (5:17), the reconciliation of God to man (5:18), and the double imputation of our sin to Christ and Christ's righteousness to us (5:21). And Paul then entrusts the *proclamation* of this message of reconciliation to *us*, telling us that we are *ambassadors* for Christ (5:20). And after reiterating the great paradoxes of the Christian life

again in the opening verses of chapter 6, Paul pauses his discussion on the nature of Apostolic ministry and turns to address the necessity of maintaining a pure church—of punishing sin in the body and keeping a healthy degree of separation from unbelievers. In 6:14 to chapter 7 verse 1, we find the ground zero text for what *biblical* separation looks like. And then, wrapping up this first section in chapter 7 verses 5 to 16, he recounts the comfort and joy that he received from his reunion with Titus in Macedonia, where he first learned that the majority of the Corinthians had repented from their distrust of him, and had been clinging again to the true Gospel.

Chapters 8–9: Implications for the Repentant

Now after discussing the nature of true, apostolic ministry in such great detail, then, in chapters 8 and 9, Paul draws out the *implications* of that ministry for those who had repented. And principal among those implications was the **offering**—the collection to be taken up for the saints in Jerusalem who were battling with crippling poverty. And I’ve got to say, this is one of those things about the Apostle Paul that just amazes me. Through all of his personal trials—through all of the pastoral heartache that he’s gone through because of the treachery of the Corinthians and the accusations of the false apostles—his mind is still on meeting the physical needs of those in the church that cannot provide for themselves. What a pastor! What a shepherd the Apostle Paul is!

And as a result of that shepherd’s heart, we have, in chapter 8 and 9, the most extended New Testament teaching on the subject of Christian giving. In these chapters we learn that true, biblical giving it is to be worked *in* the Christian by grace, that it is to be shaped and motivated by the Gospel, and that it has as its ultimate goal the display of the glory of God.

Chapters 10–13: Implications for the Rebellious

Now, for the repentant, the implications of Paul’s defense of his apostleship meant giving attention to the offering for Jerusalem. But there were also implications of Paul’s defense for the *unrepentant*—for the rebellious. And we see those implications unfolded in chapters 10 to 13, in this vehement denunciation of the false apostles, and the fierce vindication of his own ministry over and against their slander. The false apostles themselves are to cease and desist—to cease troubling the saints of Corinth and to peddle their heresy somewhere else. And the minority of the Corinthians who persisted in rebellion against Paul are warned that he is coming to visit Corinth for a third time (cf. 12:14; 13:1), and that he will deal severely with any who continue to trouble the church. He says in chapter 13 verse 2: I’m warning those who have sinned in the past, and all the rest: “if I come again I will not spare anyone”! One commentator calls this section Paul’s “impassioned outburst” (Guthrie, 453). Another calls it “the great *invective* of the Apostle against his enemies and their followers” (Hiebert, 136). And those are surely apt descriptions.

But even—and perhaps especially!—in the midst of Paul’s passion and vigor, chapters 10 to 13 display for us even more precious truths about the nature of true Christian ministry over and against the constant stream of counterfeits. This generation of the church is not without the spiritual great-grandchildren of these false apostles, as Satan continues to masquerade as an angel of light (cf. 11:14). False teachers of every stripe continue to plague the church today, and they do it in the name of Jesus Christ. And so it is necessary to heed Paul’s words in chapters 10 to 13, as we are tasked with discerning the true ministers of the Gospel from the false.

Conclusion

Oh, it’s no wonder Pastor John says in his commentary that “the neglect of this magnificent epistle is an immense loss to the church” (1). We want to recover that great loss, together, in GraceLife, as we dedicate our time in the coming months to mining out the treasures in this great letter—and chiefly, how we can follow Paul’s example in putting the all-powerful, all-glorious *strength* of God on display even in and through our own weakness and suffering—how we can magnify the supreme worth of Jesus in the midst of our own heartbreak, in the midst of our afflictions, in the midst of the brokenness and the hostility of a fallen world that we’re trying to serve and to save.

Yes, it’s true that Paul was an Apostle and all of us are not. But the apostolic message did not cease with Paul. Paul entrusted that Gospel to Timothy and to Titus, and instructed them to entrust that same apostolic doctrine to other faithful men, who would teach other faithful men—and who would pass the torch of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that the Apostles preached to every successive generation until the Lord returns (cf. Barnett, 50)! And you and I, GraceLife, stand in that long line of faithful believers who have stewarded the Gospel, and preserved it in its purity for the sake of the salvation of God’s people! And just like they were, we are *heirs* of this Gospel ministry!

And just like they were, we are heirs of a broken world, heirs of affliction, of suffering, of heartache, of betrayal; “for indeed in this house [that is our mortal body], we *groan*” (2 Cor 5:2). *All* of us are called to a life of **joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction**. And so we look to this great letter to be equipped for that ministry.

Pray with me, in the weeks and months to come, that God will deal with us through our study of this book. Pray that our sin would be exposed, our pride wounded, our understanding deepened, our hearts enflamed and encouraged, and our obedience strengthened. Pray that He will sanctify His people by His Word of Truth.