

# Ministry of Paul

## 2 Corinthians 1-7

### **I. Introduction**

1 Events of deep distress to Paul form the immediate background to the second letter to the Corinthians. Corinth and Ephesus, centres to which important missionary labour had been devoted, had become focal points of profound personal difficulty for him. At Corinth he, their father in the faith, had been rebuffed and criticized. In Ephesus a city-wide riot had occurred over his ministry so that it was no longer safe to remain there. Unwelcome in the one and endangered in the other, he went to Macedonia where he began to write his letter.

### **II Paul's Defence of his doctrines, ministry and character**

#### **The problem**

2 The Corinthians were susceptible to an "over-realized eschatology" that spiritualized the future resurrection as already having taken place in their own experience (cf. 1 Cor 4:8; 15). By the time of 2 Corinthians, Paul's opponents from outside Corinth had capitalized on the Corinthians' over-realized eschatology, preaching a view of Christ and of the Spirit that the Corinthians were open to receiving (2 Cor 11:4). Paul's opponents promised the Corinthians a life in the Spirit that was characterized by deliverance from suffering and by a steady diet of miraculous experience. They supported their claims to be apostles with letters of recommendation from other churches (cf. 2 Cor 3:1), by their ethnic distinctive as Jews (2 Cor 3:4–18; 11:21–22), and by boasting in their spiritual attainments and supernatural signs, together with their rhetorical abilities (2 Cor 10:10, 12; 11:12, 18; 12:12).

3 Paul now finds himself in a polemical situation in which his own legitimacy as an apostle had been severely called into question at Corinth and is still being doubted by a significant minority within the church. The Corinthians had been ready to believe a whole range of criticisms against him—of being worldly and irresolute (1:17), of moral cowardice in writing instead of coming (1:23), of his lack of inner strength (4:16), of being demoralized and theologically deviant (4:2), of being an imposter (6:8), of being corrupt and exploitative (7:2), of not being a true minister of Christ (10:7), of being weak in speech when present and powerful only by letter, when absent (10:1, 10; 11:6, 21), of being a fool, even mad (11:1, 16, 23), of breaching convention or of craftiness in declining their financial support (11:7; 12:13–16), and of lacking mystical and miraculous credentials of ministry (12:1, 11–12).

#### **Paul's response**

4 Throughout this letter Paul is forced to defend his doctrines, his ministry and his character. His writing is both autobiographical and theological. He does not write as an academic theologian but as a practical missionary and evangelist. He writes nothing about God which he has not experienced first-hand in the realities of hardship and the crucible of suffering.

5 In his opening words, "Paul, an apostle ... by the will of God", Paul pointedly reminds the Corinthians, some of whom were questioning his authority, that he is not an apostle by self-appointment but by the will of God. As an interesting side note, Paul greeted his readers as the church of God and saints in Corinth, reflecting the fact that while they may not exceptionally devout and despite its flaws, churches are communities of quite ordinary people whom God graciously regards as special to him (ie his 'holy people')

6 Paul's defence is grounded throughout 2 Corinthians in his eschatology and Christology, both of which are developed within an OT framework and consistently applied to his own life as an apostle. 2 Corinthians 1:1–11 establishes the apologetic tone and central theme of what is to follow: rather than calling his apostleship into question, Paul's suffering is the very vehicle which God has ordained to validate his apostleship and to make known the knowledge of his own power and glory, now revealed in the gospel of Christ. Indeed both the cross and the resurrection power of God are being revealed through Paul's life of divinely ordained suffering.

7 In the paragraph formed by verses 3-7, the verbs and nouns for comfort (which presupposes suffering) occur ten times, for trouble three times and for suffer(ing) four times. Directly or indirectly, suffering is referred to seventeen times in five verses! But to which suffering is he referring? While Paul doubtless was as prone to money worries, health problems and relationship conflicts as other people, faithfulness to Christ and to the ministry were the chief source of his troubles. Although there is no call for all Christians to suffer in either 1 or 2 Corinthians, nor any sign of a martyrdom theology, Paul affirms that whenever God's people are brought into the same kinds of sufferings to which he was called as an apostle, they too will become vehicles for the manifestation of the power of God in the midst of their adversity (cf. 2 Cor 1:7). God has called Paul to suffer in order that through the merciful "comfort" of God's sustaining power and ultimate deliverance, which Paul experiences in his affliction, he will be able to make God's power and comfort known to others (2 Cor 1:6–7, 10).

### **Defence of integrity and change of plans**

8 Paul begins by defending his integrity in general. Paul's reply, when reduced to basics, is that he has interrogated his conscience (verse 12) in the light of the day of the Lord Jesus (verse 14), when, 'the Lord ... will expose the motives of men's hearts' (1 Cor 4:5). The testimony of his conscience is that, on that day, Paul will be shown to have behaved both in the world at large and towards the Corinthians with holiness and sincerity that are from God (verse 12). Paul had similarly emphasised in a later chapter that "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God" (2:17)

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#### *Boasting*

*The word boast, which is common in this letter, has an ugly and un-Christian ring to it. In using their style, but boasting rather of 'weakness', (12:9), of the 'Lord' (10:17), and, in this case, in God's grace (verse 12), Paul is actually inverting their practice and throwing it back in their teeth. So far from revealing arrogance, which indeed it does in his critics, Paul's boasting actually reflects his humility before the Lord. In particular the apostle is concerned to show that his motives, irreproachable as they are, do not arise from within himself, from worldly wisdom, but from God's grace. Barrett comments that 'out of the theology of the grace of God emerge, as gifts from God himself, the ethical virtues of simplicity and sincerity. This is the foundation of Paul's argument in this paragraph; and it ought to be recognized by the Corinthians themselves.'*

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9 Paul next defends his repeated changes of travel plans. In the first major section of Paul's letter, 2 Corinthians 1:12–2:13, Paul's purpose is to demonstrate that his actions have not been the result of "fleshly wisdom" (1:12) and the vacillations of one who makes his plans "according to

the flesh.” This may reflect an allegation, apparently made by his opponents, that Paul was guilty of an elaborate scheme to defraud the Corinthians in connection with the collection for Jerusalem and his own practice of preaching for free (2 Cor 1:17; cf. 2:17; 7:2; 8:20–21; 11:7–11; 12:13–18).

10 Paul begins the body of his letter with a detailed defence of why he had changed his mind more than once regarding his earlier plans to return to Corinth: (1) an initial plan to visit Macedonia first, then Corinth (1 Cor. 16:5); (2) a plan to visit Corinth first, then Macedonia (2 Cor. 1:15); (3) and finally, a decision not to make “another painful visit” to Corinth, so that he went, by way of Troas, to Macedonia first (1:23; 2:1).

11 Paul explains (1:15–22) that his initial decision not to come directly to Corinth as originally planned (see 1 Cor. 16:5) was actually determined by his desire to bring more blessing to them and thus to be like Christ, in whom God’s promises are fulfilled (2 Cor. 1:20). Far from being an expression of fleshly behavior, Paul’s changes in plans were thus an extension of God’s action in Christ

12 Paul makes clear that just as his first change of plans was a Christlike act in accordance with the promises of God, so too his second change of plans (2 Cor. 1:23–2:4) (ie not to come but instead send them a “tearful letter”) was an expression of God’s love to them in Christ. Just as Christ came first to save his people rather than to judge the world, so too Paul did not return immediately to Corinth, in order to spare them a taste of God’s wrath. Like Christ, Paul is willing to judge those in Corinth who will not repent (see 13:1–10); but before judgment comes mercy. The majority in Corinth had expressed their repentance by punishing the leader of the rebellion against Paul. Paul now calls them (2:5–11) to follow his own Christlike example toward them by extending mercy to the repentant offender who caused Paul so much pain. Just as Paul acted to extend mercy to the Corinthians, they too should extend mercy to They must welcome this one back, lest he be “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2:7).

### **III Ministers of the New Covenant**

13 What Paul has been saying up to this point in the letter could be taken as a rather depressing account of his ministry. He has spoken of hardships suffered in Asia, criticisms of his integrity, pain experienced in Corinth and his inability to settle to preaching in Troas. As if to balance this somewhat depressing account, Paul goes on to strike a positive note, describing how God always and in every place enabled him to carry on an effective ministry. Paul tells the Corinthians, in vivid language, how he sees his ministry in terms of its inner reality. Regardless of rejection in Corinth, expulsion from Ephesus, turmoil in Troas and anxiety in Macedonia, far from abject defeat, God was actually leading him in a victory procession. Despite the appearance of weakness, it was God who always and everywhere led Paul in triumphal procession (2:14).

14 To some, the gospel is just a message about a defeated, dead man which they reject in the same way a person would recoil from the odour of a decomposing corpse. These people are perishing, as dead in principle as they perceive Christ to be. To others, however, the message is about the risen Christ which they receive in the way a person welcomes the fragrance of a beautiful perfume. These people are being saved; they are as alive in

principle as they perceive Christ to be. Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit within their lives, although sinners they look forward to life beyond death.

15 Paul was keenly aware of the close relationship between the message and the messenger who brought it. On the one hand he states that we speak ... like men sent from God (2:17), and on the other he writes that we are to God the aroma of Christ (2:15). It is through us, he says, that God spreads ... the fragrance of the knowledge of God (2: 14). The sacrificial lifestyle of the messenger is an extension of the ministry and death of Jesus himself. It is not too much to say that the message about Christ is encountered and received (or rejected) in the person of the messenger. The message incarnated in the messenger is a fragrance of life to those who obey it, but to others it has the odour of death. Barrett comments that 'the apostles are the smoke that arises from the sacrifice of Christ to God'.

### **The New Covenant as a Ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:1–18)**

16 In 1:3–2:17, Paul defended his legitimacy as an apostle on the basis of his suffering as the means by which Christians are comforted (1:3–11) and God is made known in the world (2:14–17). Now he does so based on the reality of the life-transforming Spirit being mediated through his apostolic ministry of the new covenant.

17 Paul lacked external accreditation while the newcomers had letters of recommendation (3:1); Paul however says he had no need of them. What, then, will he say? To what will he point to justify his ministry? He was not one of the original disciples of Jesus. Paul's reiteration of his call and sacrificial lifestyle as legitimizing that call could easily be made to appear that he was 'commending himself'. Paul's dilemma is expressed well by Goudge, 'Self-defence is almost impossible without self-commendation. St. Paul's opponents made the former necessary, and then blamed him for the latter.'

18 Paul's response was "if you need evidence that I am a true apostle, look at yourselves: You yourselves are our letter (3:2)". He will not point to a great person or persons whom he represents or in whose name he comes. Rather, he will stake his claim to legitimate ministry on the existence of the Corinthian church. Prior to Paul's coming, there was no Christian community in Corinth. Through his labours there was now a congregation in that large and prosperous city, some of whose members had been criminals and immoral people.

19 In fulfilment of Ezek. 11:19 and 36:26, Paul contrasts the old covenant, in which God wrote on tablets of stone (see Ex. 24:12; 31:18; 32:15; 34:1; Deut. 9:10), with the apostolic ministry of writing on tablets of human hearts (3:3). Paul "writes" on hearts not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. The Spirit's work of changing the Corinthians' hearts as a result of Paul's ministry confirms that the new covenant is being established through his ministry. Paul's credentials', comments C. F. D. Moule, 'are not on paper but in persons.'

20 Paul knew that all these have nothing to do with his own personal competence. His confidence, is directed towards God (3:4). The three occurrences of competence or competent (3:5–6) refer back to his question: 'Who is equal to such a task? (2:16). His opponent's claim, apparently, was to powerful self-sufficiency. They regarded Paul as weak and lacking the resources of a true minister. In agreeing with them Paul indicates that what he is engaged in is not his own project but God's. Can anyone have the power, the resources or the competence, to do these things? The answer must be no; only God himself can be the source of such things. Of and from himself he has no competence, no

'sufficiency'. This does not reflect an exaggerated humility, but rather a sober recognition of the fact that spiritual work can be accomplished only by the power which God supplies through his Spirit. Paul's competence, like his commission, is from God.

21 Paul proceeds in 2 Corinthians 3:7–18 to compare his role as an apostle of the “new covenant” established by Christ to that of Moses' role as mediator of the “old covenant” established at Sinai. Paul was made ... sufficient to be a minister of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) as a result of his call on the road to Damascus, just as Moses was called to be a minister of the old covenant at the burning bush . The new covenant and its ministry consists not of the letter but of the Spirit, because the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. The letter kills since it announces God's will without granting the power to keep it, thereby bringing people under God's judgment as covenant breakers. The Spirit alone gives life because only the Spirit can change the heart, thereby enabling God's people to keep his commands.

22 The “letter” (gramma) of 2 Corinthians 3:6 is therefore the Law apart from the power of the Spirit, which by itself can only declare God's will and pronounce judgment for not doing it, but cannot empower one to keep it. Only God's Spirit, which is now being poured out in the new covenant as a result of the work of Christ, can “make one alive” (3:6) and bring about this righteousness (3:8–9). Hence, believers may now encounter in the Spirit the same glory of God that Moses encountered “with unveiled faces” (3:16–17). As a result, rather than being judged and destroyed by the presence of God, they are transformed by it into the very image of God himself (2 Cor 3:18). Whereas Moses had to veil himself (3:12–13), as an apostle of the new covenant Paul can be bold in his declaration of the gospel because he is confident that he has been called to a ministry of the Spirit (3:8). Inasmuch as Paul's ministry thus mediates the glory of God to those whose hearts have been changed and thus need not fear their destruction, his ministry “outshines” that of the old covenant (3:10–11).

#### **The New Covenant - Dawning of the New Creation (2 Cor. 4:1–6)**

23 In 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 Paul draws the necessary conclusion from his preceding argument. Because he was entrusted with such a great ministry, Paul says, we do not lose heart. On the one hand Paul's apostleship is legitimate in that it functions, both through his preaching and his way of life, to make known the “light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4). This was the purpose of Paul's own call: The basis of Paul's ministry is the privilege of having seen for himself the glory of God in the face of Christ (initially on the Damascus road) (4:6). We can only preach to others the Christ we have met for ourselves. On the other hand, this can only mean that those who reject Paul and his message do so because their own minds have been hardened by Satan, the “god of this age” (4:3–4).

#### **The New Covenant - Power of the Resurrection (2 Cor. 4:7–18)**

24 Paul now touches on a harsh reality of human existence—suffering and physical decay. Paul contrasts a priceless jewel with its receptacle, an everyday earthen jar, inexpensive and easily broken. The jewel, or treasure, is ‘the knowledge ... of God in the face of Christ’ which God has ‘made ... shine in our hearts’ (verse 6). The earthen jar in which this treasure is contained, the human body, is subject to decay and vulnerable to disease and injury. It is, in ultimate terms, powerless.

25 This serves to show that the power released through the preaching of the gospel is from God and not from us (4:7). This principle is illustrated by a series of statements (hard

pressed on every side, but not crushed ... 4: 8–12). Paul does not cover up his difficulties, but, as one conscious of being a 'jar of clay', reveals something of his sufferings and hardships. In speaking of being hard pressed he is referring to those pressures' which impinge on him because he is a Christian. Being perplexed means a feeling of being 'cornered'. He says he is persecuted or 'hounded', doubtless on account of his ministry. Finally, he confesses to being struck down, which probably means, in our language, 'depressed'. The power of God not only sustains Paul but works through him to bring life to others (death is at work in us, but life is at work in you). Earlier (1:8), he wrote of being 'under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure'. Now, in exact answer, he writes of God's power which surpasses the weakness of the human body. Paul is 'speaking the language of experience ...—the experience simultaneously of his own incapacity and of God's transcending power which transforms every situation'.

26 Hughes comments that 'the immense discrepancy between the treasure and the vessel serves simply to attest that human weakness presents no barrier to the purposes of God. This teaching about power in weakness, is, along with the teaching on transformation (3:18) and illumination (4:6), true for all believers. That the Christian does not succumb to his problems and difficulties is evidence that the life of Jesus is revealed within him, through the transcendent, sovereign power of God. Paul, however, is also speaking of the future when God's resurrection power will finally deliver us from death (4:14). Then, too, the life of Jesus will be manifested within us, but permanently.

27 The power of God impinging on man in his real weakness is the chief theme, which binds together the whole letter and gives it its unity. It was stated near the beginning (1:8), is restated here (4: 7) and will reappear near the end in the memorable words of Jesus to Paul: 'My power is made perfect in weakness' (12:9).

28 Paul now proceeds to state two reasons or motives for his sacrificial lifestyle —the eschatological (God will raise us) and the doxological (thanksgiving, to the glory of God). The first is that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us (4:14). So far from having lost heart (4:1,16), as his critics claim, the recent experience of deliverance from death has strengthened Paul's resurrection faith, and because of this he writes, "we ... speak (the Greek implies 'continue to speak') the word of God. The second reason for his missionary zeal was his passion for the glory of God" (4:15). Paul laboured in the ministry of the new covenant so that more and more people would come to understand the grace of God and cause thanksgiving to overflow to him. Paul longed that men and women who 'neither glorified (God) as God nor gave thanks to him' would, in increasing number, be converted through the gospel and express thankfulness to God, and so glorify him.

29 We do not lose heart, he declares (verse 16), repeating the exclamation of verse 1. In the former reference it was the knowledge of what God was doing through him that kept Paul at his task, despite opposition and discouragement. By means of 'this ministry' he was imparting life to the dying and sight to the blind (3:6; 4:6). Yet the cost to him in the pursuit of the 'ministry' of the new covenant was, apparently, the acceleration of his own death process (4:12). Now, in verse 16, his perseverance as an apostle flows out of this understanding of what God is doing in him.

30 In a brilliant and paradoxical statement Paul contrasts the light and momentary troubles of this existence with the eternal glory of the new creation, which far outweighs them all (4:17). Seen in true perspective, the troubles of our outer nature are 'light' in weight and of momentary duration, while the glory of our inner nature is of heavy 'weight' and

eternal duration. 'This comparison', Calvin observed, 'makes that light which previously seemed heavy, and makes that brief and momentary which seemed of boundless duration.' He continued, 'When we have once raised our minds heavenwards a thousand years begin to look to us to be like a moment.'

31 According to Paul, our troubles are achieving for us the glory of which he writes. It is not that he viewed sufferings as 'good works' or as virtuous in themselves. They do not automatically or mechanically intensify the 'glory'. Rather, it is that troubles cause us to fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen (verse 18). Troubles help us to understand that there is no future for us here in this tawdry, fading existence. Therefore we focus, increasingly, on the unseen, resurrected and glorified Christ (4:4–6, 14). Bodily needs are important, certainly; and so are the needs of others. Yet what we are to long for is not the pleasures and possessions put before us by the advertising agencies in the media, but the promises of the gospel in the Bible

### **The New Covenant: Motivation for the Life of Faith (2 Cor. 5:1–10)**

32 God graciously prepares for our future in a twofold way. Using our troubles, he prepares for us (4: 17) an eternal glory, 'an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands'—the new habitation which will be ours at death (5:1–2). Secondly, in case we may not be spiritually or emotionally ready, God prepares us for the new existence so that we are able to receive it (5:5). God's preparation for our future is complete, being both objective and subjective: he prepares it for us and us for it. It is by faith, not sight (5:7), however, that we understand that inwardly we are being renewed day by day'. The renewal of which he speaks is not something we see, feel or experience; it is apprehended by faith and hope.

33 To our minds this present existence is solid and real, whereas our coming existence seems shadowy and insubstantial. Paul teaches us that the reverse is true. The life which is to come is strong, permanent and real; the present life is lived among the shadows. Paul's confidence in his future vindication, when he will be "at home with the Lord" (5:8), is based on the guarantee of his present possession of the Holy Spirit (5:5). This confidence causes him not only to long with courage for its reality (5:2–4), but also to endeavour to be pleasing to God, knowing that all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ to be recompensed for their deeds (5:9–10). Certainty about the future enables believers to be courageous in the present in the face of conflict and pain. In the coming age, Christ will judge as God the Father's representative so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done ... whether good or evil. This underscores the principle that present-day actions have eternal consequences. Hope for the future should not encourage dreamy impracticality in the present, but courage and purpose

34 Paul is confident that genuine believers will pass Christ's judgment, since the new covenant ministry of reconciliation has brought them under the life-transforming power of the Spirit—based on the forgiveness of their sins through faith in Christ alone, all of which is the result of God's grace alone (see 2 Cor. 1:12, 22; 3:6, 8–9, 18; 4:4–6, 15; 5:5, 14–15, 16–21; 8:19; 9:8, 14; etc.).

## **The New Covenant Ministry of Reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:11–6:2)**

35 In this central section of the letter Paul appeals to the Corinthians to be reconciled to God and to open their hearts to him, their apostle. He clears the ground for these appeals by first responding to criticisms of the style of his ministry (5:11–15) and then by stating the theological basis upon which reconciliation rests (5:16–21). He then makes his appeals (6:1–13; 7:2–4) and intersperses between them a call for holy living (6:14–7:1).

36 Paul argues he could not do otherwise than serve Christ, striving to do so with the utmost integrity, for the very love of Christ compels him. He is convinced that Christ died in his stead, and now he wants to live for him. We see here two aspects of Paul's motivation for ministry. On the one hand, Paul is aware of accountability and so has a healthy fear (5:11), and on the other, he knows of the great love of Christ and so could not do otherwise than live for the one who died and rose for him (5:14–15). One has died for all, therefore all have died. By Christ's death, the death penalty for sin (see Gen. 2:17) has been paid for all those who trust in him (see Rom. 3:21–26; 5:6–8; 1 Cor. 15:3; Gal. 3:13), and God counts their old life as ended, thus freeing them from any future penal claims. He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him. As a consequence of Christ's death, the power of sin in one's life (see Gen. 3:1–7) has also been broken for all those who trust in Christ (cf. Rom. 6:1–14). Christ's cross therefore frees the believer for a new way of life, exemplified by Paul himself as one that the love of Christ controls (see Titus 2:11–14).

Reconciliation is the Pauline concept in which enmity between God and humanity, or between human groups, is overcome and peaceful relations restored on the basis of the work of Christ. This concept refers to an objective state of peace, not simply a feeling of peacefulness. The Greek terms for reconciliation

37 One result of Christ's death and resurrection is that Paul has a new outlook: From now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view (5:16–17). Something of Christ's great significance is seen in the fact that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, so that it may be said, the old has gone, the new has come! To be in Christ is to be participating already in the new creation. Of this new creation in which believers already participate, Paul says, all this is from God, because it was God who took the initiative in Christ to reconcile us to himself, not counting our sins against us. Having reconciled us, God committed to us the message of reconciliation, so that through us as his ambassadors he appeals to others to be reconciled to him (5:18–20)

38 Before continuing his appeal to the Corinthians, Paul makes a highly compressed but extremely profound statement about the work of Christ: God made him who had no sin to be sin for us (5:21). This verse is one of the most important in all of Scripture for understanding the meaning of the atonement and justification. Various interpretations of this have been suggested: that Christ was made a sinner; that he was made a sin-offering; that he was made to bear the consequences of our sins. The first suggestion is rightly rejected out of hand. The second can be supported by appeal to Paul's use of sacrificial terminology elsewhere (cf. Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 5:7). The third interpretation is supported by appeal to Gal. 3:13, where Paul speaks of the death of Christ in terms of his bearing the consequences of our sins: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree".'

39 In becoming sin “for our sake,” Christ became our substitute—that is, Christ took our sin upon himself and, as our substitute, thereby bore the wrath of God (the punishment that we deserve) in our place (“for our sake”). Thus the technical term for this foundational doctrine of the Christian faith is the substitutionary atonement—that Christ has provided the atoning sacrifice as “our” substitute, for the sins of all who believe (cf. Rom. 3:23–25). This then is the heart of the doctrine of justification: God regards (or counts) believers as forgiven and God declares and treats them as forgiven, because God the Father has imputed the believer’s sin to Christ and because God the Father likewise imputes Christ’s righteousness to the believer.

40 The grace of God comes about solely through the death of Christ (5:14–19). Those who turn back from Christ show that their initial, apparent reception of God’s grace was not real but in vain (6:1). By quoting Isa. 49:8 to summarize his own appeal to the Corinthians (6:2), Paul identifies his apostolic ministry with Isaiah’s prophetic role of calling Israel to repentance and perseverance in view of the coming day of redemption and judgment (salvation). Paul declares that this time of salvation has already arrived in Christ! Amazingly, God is already pouring out many of the blessings of the age to come.

### **The New Covenant: Support for the Legitimacy of Paul’s Ministry. (2 Cor. 6:3–13)**

41 The catalogue of suffering in 2 Corinthians 6:3–13 functions to demonstrate again that, rather than calling his legitimacy into question, his opponents should observe that Paul’s endurance in the midst of adversity commends him as an apostle. The section therefore ends with yet another appeal to those Corinthians still under the influence of Paul’s opponents to be reconciled to Paul (6:11–13).

*It is important for us to understand that the covenant God makes is not so much with individuals in a private religious sense, as with a people. If the ‘long digression’ begins with a reference to a ‘new covenant’ (3:6) it concludes with God’s appeal to ‘my people’ (6:16). Through the ministry of the word of God these Corinthians have become members of a new covenant of God’s people. Moreover, Paul does not speak of the new covenant as if quite different from the old. It is a new covenant, that is, a new phase of the one great covenant of God with his people which is the subject of the Bible’s story. Thus the Corinthian Christians, who were mostly Gentiles, were to regard the ancient Hebrews as their forefathers. Ministry of the gospel to the Gentiles has brought them into God’s covenant people.*

## **IV Church Discipline as an Expression of Repentance (2 Cor 6:14–7:1)**

42 This section brings Paul’s argument in 2:14–7:1 to its culmination by giving the second, concrete application of what it will mean for the Corinthians to “widen [their] hearts” toward Paul (6:13) amid the current controversy in Corinth.

43 In view of the fact that the Corinthian church now stands divided over the legitimacy of Paul’s apostleship and his understanding of Jesus and the Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 11:4), 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 addresses the question of the relationship between believers and unbelievers, the latter of which are now implicitly identified as those who will not repent and be reconciled to Paul as an apostle of the gospel of God.

44 Paul's admonition is straightforward. Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers (6:14). This command, which is Paul's main point in 6:14–7:1, will be restated in different words at the end of the section (7:1). To be "unequally yoked" is to be "hitched up" or even crossbred with another animal who is not the same. It is thus an image for being allied or identified wrongly with unbelievers. In context, it refers especially to those who are still rebelling against Paul within the church), but the principle has wider application to other situations where (as with animals yoked together) one person's conduct and direction of life strongly influences or controls the other's.

45 Based on his understanding of the church as the temple of God (6:16) and the biblical injunction for God's people to separate themselves from idolatry in order to be God's "sons and daughters" (2 Cor 6:17), Paul calls the faithful Corinthians to leave behind everything that contaminates and to concentrate on perfecting holiness out of reverence for God (7:1).

## **V Paul's Joy over the Repentant Corinthians (2 Cor. 7:2–16)**

46 Following the digression of 6:14–7:1, Paul renews his appeal for full reconciliation between himself and the Corinthians, urging them to "make room for us in your hearts" (7:2). In doing so he stresses that nothing in his own behaviour towards them constitutes an obstacle to such reconciliation: We have wronged no-one, we have corrupted no-one, we have exploited no-one. Further, to support the appeal for full reconciliation, he assures them that he has a large place in his heart for them, that he has great confidence and pride in them (3–4a), and that having heard good news from Titus concerning their response to his 'severe' letter his joy knows no bounds.

47 Here we see Paul practising in his relationship with the Corinthians the reconciliation he preached to others. Our credibility as messengers of reconciliation depends in part upon whether we are people of reconciliation in our relationships with others. Although Paul initially regretted having sent them such a severe reprimand, Paul is relieved by the fact that his letter of rebuke (7:5–8) brought about among the majority of Corinthian believers the kind of godly sorrow which leads to repentance rather than the "worldly grief" which merely brings death (7:9–13).

48 Paul's defence of his apostleship in 2 Corinthians 2:14–7:16 consequently ends with a great expression of joy, comfort and confidence in the Corinthians as a whole, since their positive response to Paul's previous warnings and to Titus's mission was a sure sign of the genuine nature of their faith and of the bond between Paul and his church (7:2–5, 11–16).

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## ADDITIONAL NOTES ON SUFFERING

The questions of the inevitability and purpose of suffering in the life of Christians in general, and in the life of Paul as an apostle in particular, are recurring themes of great significance throughout Paul's letters. In addition to the issues of death, his own imprisonment, and other specific instances of hardship and persecution, Paul speaks of affliction and suffering *per se* over sixty times. In doing so, Paul employs the word groups for "suffering" (*pathēma*, *paschō*, etc.) and "affliction" (*thlipsis*, *thlibō*) interchangeably (cf., e.g., the alternation in 2 Cor 1:4–8 and Col 1:24), together with the general category of "weakness" (*astheneia*), all three of which Paul can also use to describe the suffering and death of Christ (cf. Phil 3:10; Col 1:24; 2 Cor 13:4). Paul's most sustained treatment of the subject occurs in 2 Corinthians, where he defends his apostleship against those who maintained that his suffering called into question the legitimacy of his own apostleship (cf. esp. 2 Cor 1:3–11; 2:14–17; 4:7–12; 6:3–10; 10–13).

### 1. Paul's Suffering as an Apostle.

According to Acts 9:15–16, Paul's call was inextricably linked to the fact that he would suffer greatly "for the sake of (the Lord's) name." The reality of this is attested throughout the book of Acts and reflected in every one of Paul's letters. Indeed, following the common Jewish notion that all suffering was part of death, Paul could look at his life and exclaim, "I die every day!" (1 Cor 15:31). Moreover, of all Paul's afflictions, he counted the pressure of his daily anxiety on behalf of his churches to be the climax of what he had to endure as a result of his calling (2 Cor 11:28; cf. 2 Cor 2:4, 13). Hence, rather than questioning the legitimacy of his apostleship because of his suffering, Paul considered suffering to be a characteristic mark of his apostolic ministry (Gal 6:17; 1 Cor 2:1–5; 2 Cor 11:23–29; Phil 1:30; 2 Tim 1:11–12; 2:9; etc.), and an aspect of his own mortal life concerning which he was content, in which he rejoiced and about which he could appropriately "boast" (2 Cor 11:30; 12:10; Phil 1:19–26). Indeed, Paul willingly entered into suffering as a result of his decision to support himself financially when necessary (cf. 1 Cor 4:8–13, which Hock has shown reflects the descriptions of suffering typical of artisans such as Paul in the ancient world; 9:8–18; 2 Cor 2:17; 11:7–11; 12:14–16).

Paul's reason for this evaluation of suffering, however, was not experiential but theological. Paul understood that as an essential part of his calling to be an apostle, God himself was continually leading him into situations of suffering, like one sentenced to death in the Roman arena or led to death in the Roman triumphal procession (cf. 1 Cor 4:9; 2 Cor 1:9; 2:14; 4:11; 2 Tim 1:11–12). God's purpose in doing so was to reveal his divine power and to demonstrate the reality of the cross and resurrection of Christ in and through Paul's life (1 Cor 2:1–5; 2 Cor 2:14; 4:11), while at the same time making it clear that the age to come had not yet arrived in all its fullness (1 Cor 4:8–13). Paul could thus interpret his suffering in terms of the cross of Christ, while his ability to endure it or God's action of deliverance from it, were an expression of the same divine power revealed in Christ's resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 4:8–13; 2 Cor 1:3–10; 4:7–12; 6:4–10; Phil 3:10–11; 2 Tim 3:10–11). The wisdom and power of God first made known through the cross and resurrection of Christ were therefore now being further manifest and revealed publicly through Paul's own suffering as an apostle. In Galatians 3:1 Paul is thus referring to his own suffering as an embodiment of the gospel and as the vehicle for displaying the truth of the cross when he reminds the Galatians that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified before their very eyes.

Paul completes what is "lacking" in Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24) on behalf of the church in the sense that his ministry extends the knowledge and reality of the cross of Christ

and the power of the Spirit to the Gentile world (Col 1:23; cf. Eph 3:13). Paul's suffering also functioned to make it clear, therefore, that the power and knowledge of the gospel was God's and not his own, so that those who encountered Paul would place their faith in the power of God and not in the person of the apostle (1 Cor 2:1–5; 2 Cor 4:7; 12:9–10). Whatever Paul's much debated (and still unclear) "thorn in the flesh" actually was, it too functioned in this way by keeping him from boasting in the abundance of the revelations that he had received (2 Cor. 12:7).

## 2. The Suffering of Believers.

The fact that others not only accepted Paul as a genuine apostle in spite of his suffering, but were also willing to imitate him by joyfully continuing in faith, hope and love in the midst of their own afflictions, became a sign for Paul of the legitimacy of their standing in Christ, even as it was a sign of his own legitimacy as an apostle (Gal 4:12–15; Phil 1:3–7; 4:14–15; 1 Thess 1:6; 3:1–5; 2 Tim 1:8). In addition, Paul's willingness to suffer on behalf of his churches also provided a model of Christian love, so that Paul could call his churches to follow his example of giving up their rights for others, even when this meant undue suffering and hardship (1 Cor 4:8–13; 6:7; 9:1–27; 12–14). Yet unlike the martyrdom theology of the later centuries, Paul stops short of teaching that all believers are called to suffer in the same way that he was as an apostle. Rather, Paul recognizes that all Christians simply will suffer as a result of identifying themselves with Christ (Rom 8:17; Phil 1:29–30; 2 Tim 3:12) and, to varying degrees, as a result of their distinct circumstances, since such suffering is inevitable in this evil age (cf. 1 Cor 7:28; 12:26; 1 Tim 5:23).

Nevertheless, for Paul, whenever Christians do suffer, they too must meet their suffering with joy, knowing that their affliction is not senseless, but becomes the divinely orchestrated means by which God strengthens their faithful endurance and hope by pouring out his own love and Spirit to sustain or deliver them in their distress (Rom 5:3–5; 8:12–39; 2 Cor 1:6). As a result, they too come to embody the cross and resurrection in their lives as a witness to others of the truth of Christ, especially as this is seen in their ability to love others even when they are experiencing affliction (2 Cor 8:1–2; 1 Thess 1:2–7; 2 Thess 1:3–5). Paul can therefore encourage his readers to be patient and to endure in the midst of adversity, which is the outworking of their faith (Rom 12:12; 2 Tim 4:5), since he knows that only those who suffer with Christ in the endurance of faith will also be glorified with Christ (Rom 8:17). Finally, then, because of the faith and love made real in their lives through suffering, all believers will join Paul in experiencing not only the power of God made known in the cross of Christ as God sustains them in the midst of their adversities, but also the resurrection power of God as he uses their suffering as the pathway to sharing in Christ's glory (Rom 8:35; 2 Cor 4:14; 2 Thess 1:7). It is this hope which keeps one persevering in faith (Rom 4:18–25; 8:18–25; 1 Cor 15:20–34, 58; 2 Cor 4:16–18). As for those who do not share Christ's suffering by identifying with him, but who persecute those who do, they will experience suffering on the day of judgment (2 Thess 1:6–10; Rom 2:9).

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