

God's Message to Us in Second Corinthians

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Introduction

As we work our way through an overview of every book of the Bible, we are now in the epistles (or letters) of the New Testament.

- They are arranged with the epistles of Paul first, then the epistles of others.
- So far, we have looked at the book of Romans and the book of First Corinthians.
 - Today, we are taking up the book of Second Corinthians.

Last week we saw that First Corinthians was quite different than Romans.

- Paul had never visited the churches in Rome, so in writing to them, he gave them the kind of teaching that he would have given them if he had visited.
 - They already had the basic understanding of the history of the life of Christ and His work such as we find in the Gospels and in Acts, but he supplied them with basic summary of the gospel with its benefits and how we receive the gospel.
 - It is a very helpful book for us for this reason.
- Paul's focus in his letters to the Corinthians was quite different.
 - He had spent a year and a half planting this church and had certainly grounded them in the basics of the faith.
 - Instead, he wrote to them because he had heard reports from some of their leaders in the congregations at Corinth that there were divisions, immorality, disorder, and doctrinal error among them.
 - First Corinthians was a hard letter, addressing these problems and seeking to correct them.
 - It has been a great help to Christians in every age.
 - For one thing, it reminds us that there will always be problems in the church, even in a church that was begun by an apostle who spent a year and half there.
 - It is also helpful because it confronts problems that have recurred over and over in church history and that can still be found today...
 - It shows the wrong and it shows us how to deal with it.
 - Second Corinthians, the book we are looking at today, was written to address the response that Paul received to his correctives of the church.
 - As might be expected, there were those in the church at Corinth that did not take kindly to Paul's efforts to correct them.
 - There is a lot of speculation about additional letters and follow-up visits that were made in the next few months,
 - but what is clear from Second Corinthians is that Paul wrote it after receiving word that most of the Corinthians had accepted his correction and repented.
 - He is expressing his delight in that, but is also addressing those who were still setting themselves against him and were promoting what we might call a prosperity gospel.

- This makes Second Corinthians to be extremely relevant to us in North America where you have so many churches promoting a prosperity gospel...
 - There are those like Joel Osteen and Kenneth Copeland that promote the prosperity gospel, and sadly, this teaching has spread into Africa and lots of other countries.
 - In short, it says, “Follow Christ and you will be healthy, wealthy, and successful in the eyes of the world.”
 - Second Corinthians provides us with a powerful antidote to that.

Let’s take a look.

- After a brief greeting in the opening three verses,

I. Paul shows that suffering is something good that God has planned for us.

- He does not start by addressing the false teachers—
 - rather he starts by showing that tribulation is to be not only expected, but also appreciated.

A. He praises God as the God who comforts us in our troubles.

1. The overall idea is that the more suffering we have in Christ, the more we are comforted by God.

- Look at verses 3-5: **Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.**
- Note well... he does not praise God for preventing us from suffering or for taking away our suffering, but for comforting us in it.
 - He actually finds suffering to be a good thing because it enables you to receive the ministry of comfort from God!
 - If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you know that the times of suffering have been the best times for you as far as growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ!

2. And not only that, but Paul also says that suffering enables us to minister to others more effectively in their sufferings.

- You can see that in verse 4 where he says that God comforts us so that we will be able to comfort others with the comfort we have received from God.
- And he goes on to say in verses 6 & 7 that this is part of the reason for the suffering of him and his ministry companions...
 - so that having come to know the Lord through affliction, they will be able to help others know Him.

TRANS> So with these words, Paul refutes what the prosperity preachers were saying before he even mentions them.

B. But *how* does God comfort us?

1. For one thing, He does relieve us from suffering in this world.

- He does not give us more than we can bear so we will not despair.

- a. In 1:8-14, Paul explains how God had recently delivered him and his ministry companions when they had despaired of life.
 - b. In 1:15-2:2, he explains how God prevented him from coming to visit the Corinthians as he had planned in part to spare them from excessive sorrow.
 - 2:1-2 says: **But I determined this within myself, that I would not come again to you in sorrow. ² For if I make you sorrowful, then who is he who makes me glad but the one who is made sorrowful by me?**
 - c. In 2:3-11, he urges them to forgive a man who had repented (possibly the immoral man he instructed them to discipline in 1 Cor 5),
 - **“lest he be swallowed up with too much sorrow.”** (v. 7).
 - God does not give us more than we can bear in this world.
2. But even more importantly, He is the One who gives us strength to go on in our service to Him.
- a. Paul illustrates that though he is often rejected by those he ministers the gospel to, he knows that he is always victorious.
 - 1) He is not victorious because everybody he speaks to is converted.
 - But he is always victorious in making Christ known to them, whether they hate the gospel or love the gospel.
 - Look at 2 Cor 2:14-16: **Now thanks *be* to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. ¹⁵ For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. ¹⁶ To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life.**
 - This assurance that he was bringing glory to Christ by his preaching enabled him to keep going under intense opposition.
 - 2) This comfort also kept him from twisting the gospel in order to get more responses—the way false teachers do.
 - In 2:17, he says: **“For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.”**
 - 3) The result was that he had true fruit in his ministry—
 - Chapter 3 opens with him saying that those who believe at Corinth are the proof of his ministry... better than a letter of commendation... they are the proof that he was doing real ministry.
- But what was the source of his strength?
- b. He tells us that it was Christ that made him an effective minister.
 - Christ made them able ministers of the New Covenant that they might bring life to those that believe...
 - In 3:4-6, he says: **And we have such trust through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency *is* from God, ⁶ who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**

- But just how does Christ give them the heart to keep on going through suffering?
 - So far, Paul has mainly told us that the Lord *does* comfort us, that He relieves us, that He makes us able to keep going...
 - but what is at the root of our encouragement?
- 3. The answer is given in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.
 - a. This verse tells us that our comfort comes from the promise of future glory.
 - Look at what it says... 2 Cor 4:16-18: **Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward *man* is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, ¹⁸ while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.**
 - I am so glad that I memorised this when I was a new Christian.
 - It has been a constant source of encouragement for me in my Christian life.
 - b. The point here is that we do not look for prosperity in this world
 - Like Romans 8 says, we groan until we are glorified.
 - Like it says in Ecclesiastes, we are dying—we are just a vapour.
 - Like Jesus said, in this world you will have tribulation.
 - As Paul puts it here, our outward man is perishing...
 - but!!! our inward man is being renewed day by day.
 - We must learn, in other words, not to live for what we see and for what we can get in this world, but for what God has promised to give us.
 - We look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen.
 - We have an eternal perspective—we are not investing in what we can only have for maybe 70 years, but in our walk with God that we will still have in a million years and in ten million years.
 - This does not mean that there are no good things to enjoy in this world—and to give thanks for.
 - God often blesses societies with present wealth when they follow Him, but we go astray when we turn our eyes to these temporal blessings and forget Him... something He warns about all through the Bible—the book of Deuteronomy has some powerful material about that and Jesus quotes Deuteronomy all the time.
 - He told us things like to lay up treasure in heaven where moth and rust cannot destroy it.
 - c. Paul says that God is actually using affliction to renew our inward man—
 - Affliction (when mixed with God's grace) helps us to die to self and to die to sin and to live more and more to God.

- Paul says the affliction itself is producing glory for us—a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.
- When we suffer in this world, it is good because it forces us to find comfort in the Lord and the coming glory...
 - to rejoice that Christ is coming and that we will see Him and be with Him forever in glory if indeed we are found in Him, trusting in Him as our Lord and Saviour.

II. It is this eternal perspective that makes Paul so zealous in his ministry!

A. He explains this in chapter 5...

1. There are eternal consequences!

- In verse 1, he says that our earthly house will be destroyed—our bodies in which we now groan because they are dying.
- But it is not that we will be forever naked (without bodies) like those taught who denied the resurrection...
 - Remember what we saw last week? Our bodies will be raised up. We will not lose our identity. What we do now totally matters.
- Look at what he says in verse 2 Cor 5:9-11: **Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. ¹¹ Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences.**
 - Paul is not messing around—people are going to hell without Christ and going to glory with Him, and deepening that glory as they follow Him.
 - It totally matters that people live for eternity now.

2. This is what makes Paul so intense about getting people to Christ.

- I love what he says in verse 13: **For if we are beside ourselves, *it is* for God; or if we are of sound mind, *it is* for you.**
- And then he goes on to urge them to be reconciled to God, explaining that he and his ministry team are (v. 20) **“ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”**
 - Paul explains that this is all that matters to him.
 - He doesn’t know people by whether they are rich or poor or smart or attractive or in a high position or a low position—all that matters is that they are reconciled to God.

B. In chapter 6 he explains that his urgency is because the opportunity for salvation is only in this present life.

1. In 6:1-2, he quotes from the OT where it says “Now is the day of salvation.”

- Nobody can be saved when this life is over.
 - Paul feels that he must get them to Christ before it’s too late.
 - That is why he goes on like someone who is beside himself:

- Look at 6:4-10: **But in all *things* we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, ⁵ in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; ⁶ by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, ⁷ by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, ⁸ by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and *yet* true; ⁹ as unknown, and *yet* well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and *yet* not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and *yet* possessing all things.**
2. He urges the Corinthians, therefore, to be holy in 6:11 – 7:1.
 - He tells them not to be yoked together with those teachers among them who are not truly in Christ—who live only for this present world.
 - In 7:1, he adds: **Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.**
 3. And then, in the rest of chapter 7, he expresses his joy about those who repented in response to his former exhortations.
 - He and Titus were very happy about their response, for they showed themselves as those who had truly repented.
 - Their sorrow was a sorrow that brought real change before the Lord.
 - They were not just bummed out that Paul was rebuking them, but they dealt with their sin and zealously begin to live in conformity to the truth that Paul had spoken to them.
 - Anyone who has an eternal perspective knows how important this is.
- C. In chapter 8 & 9 Paul encourages the Corinthians to show their love by giving of their substance to the poor in Jerusalem.
1. It is a wonderful pair of chapters on giving generously to the needs of others.
 - And it comes off with all the more power when we see it in the context of what Paul has already written about in the first seven chapters.
 - Living with an eternal perspective would mean that you were glad to give up your stuff to glorify God.
 - Paul speaks about how the Macedonians had begged to participate in this ministry and he reminds the Corinthians that they had expressed a willingness to participate...
 - something Paul had used to inspire the Macedonians... and he basically tells the Corinthians not to make him a liar.
 2. He gets to the motive of giving...
 - That it is ultimately not to impoverish you, but to provide for those who have need so that they will praise and thank God.
 - It is a way of helping them to continue in the grace of God and not be swallowed up with despair, but full of thanksgiving.

- He explains that the Lord often gives us more than we need, and one of the reasons is so we can help those who do not have what they need...
 - Ultimately, it is a response to Christ who became poor for us that we might be rich.
 - We have so much reason to give cheerfully.

TRANS> And now we come to the final section of 2 Corinthians... chapter 10-13.

III. In Second Corinthians chapters 10-13 Paul blasts the prosperity preachers.

A. He explains that he has powerful weapons at his disposal.

1. He explains in 10:1-6 that while he likes to be gentle and is gentle with those who receive the truth,
 - if people are going to cling to false teachers, he will be very severe with them.
 - There is a war on because Christ's kingdom is invading the whole world—and again, it is of eternal importance.
2. The weapons of the false teachers are fleshly weapons, but Paul's weapons are spiritual.
 - Look at 10:3-6: **For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. ⁴ For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, ⁵ casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, ⁶ and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.**
 - What is the difference between spiritual and fleshly weapons?
 - It is what he wrote about in First Corinthians—that either we rely on the wisdom of this world or we rely on revelation from God!
 - Remember? The world by wisdom—with all their famous philosophers—did not come to know God.
 - We know God through the revelation that the Holy Spirit gave to the apostles which is now recorded for us in Scripture.
 - When we rely on the flesh, we try to make Christ attractive to the world and we end up denying Him.
 - It happens all the time—we reject or at least downplay the things the world does not like or the things they ridicule and we end up with a gospel that in the end is no gospel at all.
 - We have a social justice club or a sentimentalist society or theological institute or a self-help therapy group;
 - but we do not have a church that brings people to God.
 - When we war according to the flesh,
 - we do not break down the strongholds of the world...
 - we do not bring people out of bondage so that they can come to God in Christ!
 - Only Scripture, ministered and received by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, can set the prisoners of this world free in Christ.

- B. Don't let the boasting of the "super apostles" deceive you.
1. Their method is to display themselves as having it all together.
 - Everything for them is about their image and their outward appearance.
 - In 10:7, Paul asks, **"Do you look at things according to the outward appearance?"**
 2. Paul says, okay, if you want to play that game, let's talk about outward appearance.
 - Verse 7 again, but to the end... **Do you look at things according to the outward appearance? If anyone is convinced in himself that he is Christ's, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he is Christ's, even so we are Christ's.**
 - a. First, in 10:12-18, he reminds them that he is the one that founded the church—the false apostles are building on the church that he founded.
 - b. Second, in 11:1-4, he reminds them that he betrothed them to Christ, not to worldly philosophy, success, fame, prosperity, and all the rest.
 - In 11:2-4 he expresses his fear that the false teachers are leading them away from a simple faith in Christ...
 - **For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. ³ But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. ⁴ For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!**
 - c. Third, in 11:5-21, he boasts that he preached the gospel free of charge to them.
 - These false teachers strut about in the worldly financial success and look down on Paul for his poverty.
 - Paul asks if this is a proof of his inferiority—that he does not have the riches that these prosperity gospel preachers have...
 - No, it is rather a proof of his sincerity that he preached without pay.
 - d. Fourth, in 11:22-33, he goes into detail about his pedigree, but most of all about his sufferings for Christ and the gospel.
 - He produces a great list...
 - 11:22ff: **Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they ministers of Christ? —I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. ²⁴ From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned...** and so forth
 - False apostles do not endure such things.
 - They present themselves as prosperous and successful in the world, but Paul presents himself as one suffering for the sake of the gospel.
 - e. Fifth, he tells them in chapter 12 of how he received revelation as a true apostle...

- In 12:1-6, he explains that he actually has been to the third heaven and seen Christ, yet, he will boast in his infirmities.
 - It is not about his fleshly wisdom or strength, but about the revelation he has received from God.
- In fact, as he explains in 12:7-10, he was given an infirmity of some kind—a thorn in the flesh he calls it, so that he could not boast in his strength or worldly prosperity.
 - We don't know what this was, nor do we need to.
 - His strength is not in himself, but in the truth that God has given him.
- f. Sixth, to confirm that he was speaking for God, he was given signs of apostleship—miracles.
 - In 12:12, he says: **Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.**
 - God always gave signs to prophets and apostles to prove that He was speaking through them. Paul had plenty of these.
- g. And seventh, in 12:14-21, he speaks of the love that he and Titus have shown in their service to the Corinthians.
 - Everything they did among them was for their growth or edification in Christ.
 - They asked for nothing from them, but poured out their lives in ministry to them.

TRANS> In chapter 13:1-3, he tells them that if they continue to slander him, he will deal with it when he comes and he will not be gentle.

- They had said he was a softy. They will find out otherwise if they keep on opposing him.
- Paul is not just concerned for himself, but as he said, they are being drawn away from Christ by those who are speaking against the apostle that founded their church.

C. All those who are attracted by the prosperity preachers need to look at Christ.

- Christ is the ultimate model of faithful ministry and apostleship!
- 1. He did not present a prosperity model, but a model of weakness and suffering.
 - Look at 13:4: **For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.**
 - Clearly, weakness and suffering is part of the reality of the Christian life.
 - Paul says (13:5-6), **Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you unless indeed you are disqualified? But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified.**
 - The prosperity folks need to ask if they even know Christ, the suffering Saviour, at all—
 - Certainly they should not suppose that Paul His apostle is disqualified on account of his sufferings.
 - Suffering is not a proof that he is not in Christ, but rather that he is in Christ.

2. He urges them to let him come in peace, not as one with rebukes, but with encouragement for their faith.
 - That is what he wants—faithfulness in them.
 - That is why he suffers—for their sake, that they might be edified.
3. So he closes with a benediction that they, as those who suffer, will know God's comfort.
 - **2 Cor 13:11-14: Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints greet you. ¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit *be* with you all. Amen.**