

THE MESSAGE OF SECOND CORINTHIANS

by Ray C. Stedman

Reading through Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth makes you aware that this is the most personal and emotional of all his letters. It throbs with a sense of the glories of God's grace.

Visiting Corinth on my recent trip was a moving experience for me. There is very little left standing of the original city -- it was destroyed by the Romans shortly after Paul's visit there and has been lying in ruins ever since. Certain temple columns remain, though, as well as the market place and other public areas of the city. They can be clearly discerned, and the actual pavement of the judgment hall of the Roman proconsul is well preserved.

It wasn't hard for me to imagine the Apostle Paul as he came down from Athens into this city which was at the time a center of pleasure, a great commercial city and a city of great beauty, with many, many temples. It had gained a reputation as the center of lascivious worship -- the worship of the Goddess of Love. There were some 10 000 prostitutes attached to the temple of Aphrodite and the city lived up, or perhaps I should say, down, to its reputation as a place of sensual pleasure. It represented a sex-saturated society. You can see indications of this in Paul's letters to the church there. It was easy to imagine the apostle arriving in the dust of the road unknown and unheralded a simple tentmaker by all appearance. Finding two people of the same trade, Aquila and Priscilla, he lived and worked with them, and preached up and down the city streets and in the market places and synagogues. Thus God used him to lay the foundations of the church at Corinth.

As I stood there I couldn't help thinking of certain phrases that come right out of this letter of Paul's. In the sixth chapter he speaks of himself,

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. {2 Cor 6:3-10 RSV}

Standing in the midst of the ruins of the city, it was easy to understand those words. The apostle was regarded as the scum of the earth by the intelligentsia of Corinth, with its love of philosophy and the wisdom of men's words. They looked down upon this traveler, this peasant from Judea, who was passing through. He had neither reputation nor evidences of wealth or power aggrandizement or influence. Yet before he left he shook the city and established a church that survived the life of that city. The gospel that Paul preached is today a living power on earth although the city has long since crumbled into ruin.

You cannot understand this second letter of Paul to the church at Corinth without some grasp of its background. After Paul had established the church there and had labored in the city for almost two years he left and went to the city of Ephesus on the Asian mainland. From there he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. Its purpose was to correct some of the divisions that had arisen in the church at Corinth as well as some of the irregularities scandals, and immoralities that were creeping into the church from the life of the city outside. We have that letter preserved for us and perhaps you are familiar with its great themes -- calling Christians back to an understanding of what fellowship with Jesus Christ can mean, declaring again the great spiritual values which make Christian faith a living vital thing.

That is what the church at Corinth needed but after Paul had written that first letter the, Jewish party -- which had caused him so much trouble in the city -- evidently continued to gain strength. They were headed by an

anti-Pauline teacher who possibly had come down from Jerusalem and had organized opposition to the apostle's teachings. Paul was plagued with a group of Judaizers who hounded him and followed him around wherever he established churches, teaching the people that they had to observe the Law of Moses. They said that the great themes of the grace of God were not the accurate and authentic Christian gospel, and that people had to be circumcised and meet other particulars of the Law. They represented themselves as being the true followers of the Law. They called themselves the "Christ party." Paul makes reference to this in his first letter.

After Paul had written the first letter, this party apparently took over the church in Corinth, and so Paul revisited Corinth for a very short time and apparently was rebuffed by the church leaders. The very church that he had planted himself now had become so permeated with false Christianity that, when the apostle himself came to them, they rebuffed him and refused to allow him to teach within the church. You can see that as you read between the lines in the second letter. So Paul returned to Ephesus. From there he wrote a very short, sharp, caustic letter, rebuking and reproving them for their attitudes. But that letter has been lost to us. It is clear that Paul wrote one, and yet it has not been preserved, perhaps because Paul, writing in the peak of passion may have said things that went beyond what the Holy Spirit intended so that the letter, not being fully and wholly inspired as were the others of Paul's writings, has been lost. Or it may have dealt so wholly with local issues that it lacked the universal application which inspired scripture requires.

That letter was sent by the hand of Titus. While Titus took the letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle remained in Ephesus earnestly, anxiously, waiting to hear what the results would be. This is the note upon which the second letter opens. Paul tells them that he has been troubled about them. He also had undergone intense suffering while he was waiting in Ephesus for word from them.

In chapter 1, verse 8, he says,

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly crushed that we despaired of life itself. {2 Cor 1:8 RSV }

Then he tells them how anxious and concerned he was about them in chapter 2, verse 4,

For I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. {2 Cor 2:4 RSV }

So he was waiting in Asia for word to come as to what had happened, but while he was waiting, the trouble arose in Ephesus which is recorded for us in chapter nineteen of the book of Acts. Perhaps you remember that the silversmiths caused a great commotion in the city, and Paul was threatened with being dragged before the Roman judges there. He escaped this and decided to go on to Macedonia to meet Titus, who would be coming up through Macedonia on his return from Corinth. Paul could wait no longer for news, his anxiety over the Corinthians was so great. He also intended to raise some money there for the relief of the Christians in Jerusalem who were experiencing great difficulty because of a famine there. With these two concerns at heart, he went to Philippi in Macedonia.

There he met Titus and received word that the sharp, caustic letter he had written had accomplished its work, and that the majority of the Corinthian Christians had repented of their rejection of his ministry and had begun to live again the life of Jesus Christ. A minority was still unyielding, however, and still rebelling against the authority of the apostle. So, from the city of Philippi. Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthians which expresses so much of the anxiety and agitation of the heart that he experienced.

With that background you can understand something of the passion of the apostle as he writes. From the trouble, tears and heartache that is reflected in this letter come the three great themes which it embodies: the ministry within the church; giving and service, or ministration by the church; and the subject of authority, i.e., where spiritual power and authority actually reside.

When you read them through you will find that the first five chapters, particularly, are a wonderful explanation of what the ministry within the church ought to be. The apostle knew that the church at Corinth was failing to

understand the true functions of ministers of Jesus Christ. As a result, they were waiting to obey the teaching of the true ministers of Christ -- Paul himself, Silas, Timothy, Titus and others who had come to them. Because they were failing to obey the teaching of the Word of God, they were thus failing to fulfill the ministry in Corinth. That is why this church, which seemingly had everything, could do nothing in the city of Corinth. It is to correct this difficulty that these two letters were written. With that key, we can understand the reason for Paul's trouble, tears and his anxiety.

In these opening chapters we get a great declaration of what the ministry ought to be. As Paul states in chapter three, for instance, it is not the ministry of the old covenant, but of the new. In other words, the message is not the demand of the law upon people to compel them to follow certain rules and regulations. When Christianity becomes that it always becomes a deadly, stultifying, dangerous thing. Unfortunately, it has become just that among many, many people. Then it is no longer a matter of following an indwelling Lord, but simply a grim determination to try to follow certain rules and regulations -- demands that are made upon the flesh. As Paul says that -- that old covenant, exemplified by the Ten Commandments -- makes its appeal to us, and its demand upon us, but without an accompanying dynamic to fulfill it. It is always a ministry of death. "The letter kills," he says, "but the Spirit gives life" {cf, 2 Cor 3:6b}.

He goes on, then, to set forth the wonderful ministry of the new covenant. This is the new arrangement for living, not the old grim determination to clench your fists and set your teeth and try to do what God wants you to do -- that is never Christianity -- but the realization that he has provided in you the Holy Spirit to minister to you the life of a risen Lord in whose strength and grace you can do all that life asks of you. That is the new arrangement for living. In this section, therefore, he sets forth the resources of a Christian.

First, there is the Word of God. The business of a minister of Jesus Christ (that is, every Christian) is to declare the Word of God. Notice how he puts it in chapter four:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, {2 Cor 4:1-2a RSV}

There is where the failure of the church lies in so many areas today -- clever, subtle tampering with the Word of God, undermining its authority, changing its message, ignoring its declarations, refusing to act upon the facts that are declared. Paul says we have renounced all this.

... but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. {2 Cor 4:2b RSV}

That is the first resource of the ministry -- the truth and light of God's word.

Second, as I have already suggested, there is the indwelling treasure, the mysterious indwelling Spirit of God. You see this in chapter 4, verse 7:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. {2 Cor 4:7 RSV}

It is not because of our personalities, nor that we are such clever, smart, educated people that we can live victoriously. It is obvious that what is happening is something far beyond what we can naturally do. We have this treasure in an earthen vessel in order to show that the power is not ours, but that it belongs to God. With this, Paul links the principles of the Cross. This is the secret by which the power is released.

Is your life this way? Are you showing the kind of life that can only be explained in terms of God at work in you? That is what Christianity really is. As people observe you, they should see the earthen vessel and say, "Well, I don't understand. The kind of life this person is exemplifying can never be explained by the sort of stodgy, dull person he naturally is. Something else must be at work." The secret of the release of that kind of radiant power is the principle of the Cross. You find it set forth in chapter 4, verse 10,

... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. {2 Cor 4:10 RSV}

That means always to accept God's judgment upon the flesh -- upon the natural life. He has judged it in the Cross and declared it to be worthless. Paul says, "I am always carrying about with me that sentence of judgment upon the natural life, in order that the life of Jesus, with all its glorious possibilities, might be manifest in me." Furthermore, "while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake," i.e., we are always being put into places of difficulty, pressure, hardship and trouble. Why? In order that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. That is why you have difficulties. That is why tomorrow morning you may have a hard time at the office. Your boss may call you in and rip you up one side and down the other quite unjustifiably. If you whine to yourself, "Why does this kind of thing happen to me? Why does it always have to be me? What have I done to deserve this?" -- it will reveal how totally ignorant you are of the basis of Christian living. You are put into these situations in order that you may react, not like the men and women of the world with resentment, bitterness, railing and fighting back, but, rather, in such a way that the life of Jesus might be manifest in your mortal flesh. That is the secret of the new arrangement for living, and that is what Paul says is the glory of the Christian ministry and the Christian life.

He goes on to declare the great hope of the believer, that "we look not at the things which are seen, but the things which are unseen" {2 Cor 4:18 RSV}. We know that we have a body which cannot be destroyed "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" {2 Cor 5:1 RSV}. God has a great future ahead for us. The life we now live is the preparation for that life which is to come. Therefore, as he says,

... this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, {2 Cor 4:17 RSV}

The present is but prologue to the future. Then he declares his motives in chapter 5, verse 11,

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men; {2 Cor 5:11 RSV}

And in verse 14:

For the love of Christ controls us {2 Cor 5:14 RSV} [constrains us, drives us to move out]

This brings us into a face to face confrontation with a great scriptural declaration of the transforming character of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This good news does what nothing else can do. That is why Paul was never ashamed of it, in Corinth, Rome, or anywhere else, because it can do what nothing else in the world -- no philosophy, no line of argument, no education process, no reformation of any type -- can ever accomplish. It is a transformation by the implantation of a new life.

And he [Christ] died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. {2 Cor 5:16-21 RSV}

Paul says that God has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation and "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" and declaring that he has already reconciled the world unto himself and that his message then to all men is "be ye reconciled unto God." "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That is the Gospel.

In chapters eight and nine we have Paul's declaration of the ministrations of the church. The great discourse on giving was occasioned by the collection Paul was taking for the relief of the famine-stricken saints at Jerusalem. Giving, he says, is to be the proof of love. In this section we find that great verse (9 of chapter 8):

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. {2 Cor 8:9 RSV}

That is the reverse process by which Christianity operates -- as poor, and yet making many rich. Even out of their poverty Paul says, the Macedonian Christians gave liberally, beyond themselves, and thus God poured spiritual enrichment back into their lives. This is the essence of Christian living, and it is the basis for the great principles of Christian giving which are declared in chapter 9, primarily in verses 7 and 8:

Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. {2 Cor 9:7 RSV}

There is no warrant here for financial campaigns or pressure programs to try to extort money from Christian people. Nobody is to be put under any pressure. Nobody is to be put under any compulsion. We are to give as each one has made up his own mind, "not reluctantly, nor under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." With that goes this great promise,

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. {2 Cor 9:8 RSV}

Have you dared to try that? That word is as true in this 20th century as it was in the first century when Paul wrote it. "He that scatters abroad," Paul says, "shall receive much; he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, but he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully," {cf, {2 Cor 9:6-7 RSV}}.

Now in chapters 10, 11 and 12 we have a change of tone entirely. Here Paul begins to speak to that rebellious minority of Christians in Corinth who were still refusing the authority of his ministry among them. It wasn't, Paul says, that they were refusing the word which he brought; they were disobedient to the truth of God. From this situation comes a great dissertation on the basis or ground of authority in the Christian life. These false teachers were claiming the following of the people on the basis of certain things about which they were boasting before them -- how faithful they were, how abundant they were in serving them, how they endured much hardship and such difficulties for the cause of Christ. They were exalting themselves before these people and boasting about their lineage, their background and their education.

The apostle cuts right across all this, saying, in effect, "You have been deceived. This isn't where authority is based; this isn't where mastery comes from." Then in an ironic almost sarcastic fashion he shows them the true basis of authority. He says, "If you insist upon being impressed by these kinds of things, well, I could boast before you too. If I did, I would be a fool. I would only act like these foolish men whom you follow so easily, but since you are so impressed by this kind of thing, all right, I will boast a little. I will tell you what God has done through me."

And then there comes this great passage in chapter 11:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one -- I am talking like a madman -- ["Anybody who talks like this is foolish, but that is what you like; that is what impresses you. All right"] with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. {2 Cor 11:22-23 RSV}

Then he gives this tremendously impressive list of ordeals that he underwent:

Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. [Thirty-nine stripes five different times in his ministry.] Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. [We have the record of it in the book of Acts.] Three times I have been

shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city; danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. {2 Cor11:24-27 RSV}

Then, he says, this is all idle boasting. "This is not where my authority lies. If you really want to know," he says, "where my authority lies and where true spiritual power comes from, let me tell you how I began to learn the lesson. This is not going to sound very impressive, but I want you to know that I am telling you the truth. This is the event I boast about more than anything else in my life -- the moment when I began to learn the secret of genuine power." Then he says this amazing thing, starting with chapter 11, verse 31:

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed for ever, knows that I do not lie. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped his hands. {2 Cor 11:31-33 RSV}

What a thing to boast about! But Paul says, "As I look back upon that night, when I was so discouraged, so defeated, I can see that then I started to learn the secret of effective, victorious living, I had thought my learning and my intelligent understanding of the Scriptures, my Hebrew background and all my qualifications would be the keys that would open the hearts of these Jews in Damascus to me, but I found that they weren't. I had to flee like a common criminal. There and then the Lord Jesus began to teach me the wonderful lesson that out of weakness I am made strong; that when I am weakest, he is the strongest. Out of that," he says, "I have learned the great lesson of rejoicing and glorying in my weakness."

For when I am weak, then I am strong. {2 Cor 12:10b RSV}

In this connection he recites his experience with a "thorn in the flesh," this ugly thing that kept pestering him, prodding him, aggravating him and hurting him. He begged to have it taken away, but the word of the Lord came,

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness." {2 Cor 12:9b RSV}

That is the secret of strength: not outward impressiveness; not great prestige, pomp and favor; not great ornate buildings decorated to the highest degree, enclosing impressive statuary and wonderful paintings. Oh, no. Spiritual power never lies there. Neither does it lie in a brilliant, impressive personality, nor in ability to speak with eloquent oratory, with command and mastery of language. No, it never lies there. It lies in a heart that realizes that it can do nothing apart from a dependence on a living Lord within. The weaker you are, the stronger Christ can be.

Isn't that encouraging? Doesn't that strengthen you? Are you saying, "Well, I can't do anything"? Of course you can't. If you could, it wouldn't amount to anything. But he can do all things through you. That is the great secret of this letter. That is what the apostle longed to impart to these people. This is what Corinth so desperately needed, just as Palo Alto so desperately needs it today -- men and women who will quietly believe this great, commanding and compelling principle by which God's power is manifested in human life: Out of weakness comes strength.

So Paul closes the epistle by addressing these people at Corinth as he addresses us today,

Examine yourselves to see whether you are holding to your faith. {2 Cor 13:5a RSV}

Are you believing God? Are you counting on him to do what he says he will do through you? Are you walking into situations and crawling out on limbs where, if God does not come through, you will be made a fool of? "Examine yourselves, whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves," {2 Cor 13:5a RSV}.

Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? {2 Cor 13:5b RSV}

That is the secret of Christian living.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that the passion of this apostle may not be lost upon us today, that we may realize afresh that the world is as sick and as troubled and as anxious, as problem-ridden and as despairing in this 20th century as it was in Paul's day. It needs, above everything else, the declaration of the mighty Gospel of God, the new arrangement for living, the new covenant by which the Holy Spirit takes the image of Christ within us and makes it fresh and new to us, thus empowering us to live in the strength and glory of his life in us. "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." May these truths grip our hearts in reality, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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