

03. 2 Corinthians 1:7 – 3:6



2 Corinthians 1:7

Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

There has been a lot of hurt between Paul and this well-loved community. Some of the internal divisions which he addressed in his earlier letter seem to be still present and some confusion has been introduced by visiting itinerant missionaries. In spite of all this, Paul's hope is unshaken.

2 Corinthians 1:8-11

We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the **affliction we experienced in Asia**; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

2 Corinthians 1:12-17

Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God – and all the more toward you. For we write you nothing other than what you can read and also understand; I hope you will understand until the end – as you have already understood us in part – that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast. Since I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a double favour; I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time?

2 Corinthians 1:18-20

As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been 'Yes and No.' For the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not 'Yes and No'; but in him it is always 'Yes.' For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.' For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen', to the glory of God.

The gospel is not abstract speculation; it is not a 'philosophy of life'. It is about Jesus, and about what he reveals concerning the true nature of God and God's relationships with people. It is not enough for us to hear about the good news. We have to experience it in people, and when the experience is convincing and we put our faith in the gospel that has been proclaimed to us, we experience the Spirit of the living Jesus in our lives.

In all his correspondence Paul is appealing to experience. He is also constantly appealing to his own example: 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (1 Corinthians 11:1). He is therefore well aware of the fact that the quality of his relations with the Corinthians is itself a symbol of the very gospel which he, Silvanus and Timothy had preached to them (see Acts 18:5). He feels the need to defend himself against the accusation that he has been unfaithful to them, for if they believe that, they may be tempted to call into question the faithfulness of God which he has proclaimed to them.

On the very fidelity of God, therefore, Paul insists that he has been frank with them. By Yes he means Yes, and by No he means No. His thoughts go straight to Jesus.

Whatever plans Paul may make, he owes obedience to Jesus, and must change plans when instructed to do so. It is God's Son who has revealed the fidelity of God. Jesus is the one through whose faithful Yes (through whose obedience to God's will), God has carried out, is carrying out, and will carry out all his promises. It is Jesus' Yes that is mediated to the Corinthians through the Yes of Paul, Jesus' commissioned ambassador. It is through Paul's ministry that the Corinthians will learn this same Yes ('Amen'), and through their fidelity give glory to God. The Hebrew 'Amen' (1:20) is related to the word which we translate 'faith'. Paul reminds them that to say 'Amen' is to say that we accept what has been said, that we acknowledge it to be true, that we commit ourselves to make it our own and to base our lives and our decisions upon it.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22

It is God who establishes us with you in the Messiah and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment.

It is this faithful God who ‘anointed’ (χρίω) them, and set his seal upon them, claiming them for himself, giving them his Spirit – the same Spirit that gave life to Jesus. This Spirit is a pledge of the fullness of communion that will be theirs, together, and with the Messiah, ‘on the day of the Lord Jesus’ (1:14).

2 Corinthians 1:23 – 2:2

But I call on God as witness against me: it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth. I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith; rather, we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith. So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?

Paul genuinely planned to visit Corinth on his way to Macedonia. He changed his plans out of consideration for them. He judged that it would only cause them pain, and if they experienced pain, how could he experience anything else, so closely is his heart bound to them. The implication is that if he had come he would have had to speak and act firmly. He begs them not to understand this as his ‘lording it over them’ – something which Jesus warned his apostles against (see Luke 22:24-26). If he is stern with them it is only in order that they may stand fast in the faith.

2 Corinthians 2:3-7

And I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice; for I am confident about all of you, that my joy would be the joy of all of you. I wrote you out of much distress 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. But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent — not to exaggerate it — to all of you. This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now instead you should forgive [χαριζομαι] and console [παρακαλεω] him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

Did someone accuse Paul in relation to the collection? And did the community at first side with this accuser, but realised their error upon receiving Paul's (lost) letter? It appears that they have now turned against the person who accused Paul. Paul asks them to forgive and console the one who caused the pain.

But to be concerned with truth is to be concerned with the most important truth, namely, that God is love and that God is always calling the sinner to repentance so that he/she may live. Genuine love, therefore, corrects only in view of repentance, and when genuine repentance takes place, the sinner must know that it is possible to come back to one's father and one's father's house and be totally assured of a welcome (see Luke 15:11-24).

2 Corinthians 2:7-11

You should forgive [χαριζομαι] and console [παρακαλεω] him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of the Messiah. And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Correction motivated by love is a powerful stimulus to genuine repentance. It appears that in the case in point it was effective, and so Paul now encourages the community to welcome the offender back, lest Satan gain an advantage.

Paul is very conscious of the harm done by divisions in a community. His first letter to Corinth was largely concerned with this problem. God is love and where God is, there is love. Division involves a breakdown of love. This is the very opposite of the work of the Spirit. For the Father of all sends his Spirit to all his children to reconcile them to each other in a community of love centred on his Son Jesus. This awareness of the universality of God's love, and therefore the central place of reconciliation is one of the powerful forces motivating Paul's mission.

Let us spend time contemplating Jesus, watching him forgive and daring to think that what he said to the paralysed man he can say to me: 'Take heart, your sins are forgiven' (Matthew 9:3); that what he said to the woman who was a public sinner he can say to me: 'her sins, which were many, must have been forgiven or she could not have shown such great love ... your faith has saved you; go in peace' (Luke 7: 47,50). Let us make our own his words to Peter: 'I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:31-32; see John 21: 15-18) or to the thief on the cross: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). Watching Jesus loving the sinner, I might dare to believe that God is still offering me his love, in spite of my sin.

Of course forgiveness cannot happen without a change on my part. But I can get the courage to change only when I believe I am loved and am therefore lovable. Let us pray to listen to the invitation of God who is calling us to repentance and to the joy of experiencing forgiveness and the life of his Spirit welling up inside us (John 4:14). To know that is to want everyone to know it. It is to want to be reconciled and to have others know the peace of restored communion. We all need to know that our broken lives have meaning, that we are loved in our weakness and that healing is possible. Paul's attitude revealed in this passage was a beautiful example for the Corinthian community. He learned this, as he learned everything else that was important to him, from Jesus, the Son of God, the one who, knowing our weakness, 'breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven' (John 20:22) . This was the first gift from the heart of the risen Christ.

2 Corinthians 2:12-13

When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of the Messiah, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia.

It seems that Paul must have entrusted Titus with the delicate task of delivering his painful letter to Corinth and he was keen to hear Titus's report.

2 Corinthians 2:14

But thanks be to God, who in the Messiah always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him.

- The victorious general is honoured by incense burned at the altars.
- Paul is walking in triumph behind The Messiah who has conquered death.

2 Corinthians 2:15-16

We are the **aroma** of the Messiah to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

2 Corinthians 2:16-17

Who is sufficient for these things? (Moses: Exodus 4:10) For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in the Messiah we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.

The Corinthians know that Paul does not accept money for his ministry (see 1 Corinthians 9:12). He asks the Corinthians to reflect upon their dealings with him. They will know that 'in the Messiah' he speaks as a person of sincerity (see 7:2). His ministry is 'from God' and is carried out with God's authority. In adding 'in God's presence', he is insinuating that he does not depend on their or anyone else's approval. God is his judge and he lives his life knowing that God looks upon him with love.

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of the Messiah, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

The rival missionaries are also trying to undermine Paul's ministry by drawing attention to the fact that he does not have letters of recommendation, whereas they do. Paul has nothing against such letters (see 1Corinthians 16:3). In fact, part of this letter performs this function (8:18-24; see Acts 18:27). His point is that his rivals need such letters. He does not. His ministry carries its own authentication.

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all

The Corinthians themselves are ‘the seal of my apostleship in the Lord’ (1Corinthians 9:2). They themselves are his letter of recommendation. Everyone **‘knows’** that it was Paul who proclaimed the gospel to them, and the more closely people look at (**‘read’**) the lives of the Corinthian Christians, the more impressed will they be with what God has done there through Paul’s ministry. In a lovely touch which conveys to the Corinthians the depths of affection which he has for them, he assures them that they are **written on his heart**. As he will write later: ‘you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together’ (7:3).

you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

They are a letter of recommendation written on Paul's heart, and Christ himself is the author. It is God's Spirit who is acting through Paul's ministry as the founder of the community. If they are looking for some sort of guarantee to authenticate Paul's ministry among them, let them look at the life which they have in Christ, and they will find there, from Christ himself, the best letter of recommendation that anyone could produce. Paul carries the image further. The letters produced by the rival missionaries are written in ink. Christ has composed his letter (the Christian lives of the Corinthians themselves) through the gift of 'the Spirit of the living God' inscribed on their hearts.

2 Corinthians 3:4-6

Such is the confidence that we have through the Messiah toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Paul has a wonderful sense of living in the presence of God and of the risen Jesus, and of the Spirit who is the bond of love which is their mutual communion. This is the communion into which Paul has been invited, and this is the communion which is the life of the Christian community. He is an 'apostle of the Messiah Jesus', and 'by the will of God' (1:1). The church in Corinth is the 'church of God' (1:1). The grace and the peace which Paul wants them to receive comes 'from God our Father and the Lord Jesus, the Messiah' (1:2), to whom he expresses his praise (1:3).

When he is consoled it is by ‘the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation’ (1:3), and it is ‘through the Messiah’ (1:5). When he suffers he is not alone, for his sufferings are ‘the sufferings of the Messiah’ (1:5). When, against all his expectations, he avoids death, it is God who rescued him (1:10). He lives ‘by the grace of God’ (1:12). He is convinced of the faithfulness of God (1:18) as demonstrated by the Yes faithfully given by ‘the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah’ (1:19). Paul has learned from Jesus to do the same ‘to the glory of God’ (1:20). It is God who has bound the Corinthians and Paul together ‘by giving us his Spirit in our hearts’ (1:22). This Spirit is their bond of love and also the promise of the fullness of communion that is yet to come (1:22).

When Paul forgives the person who had caused such harm to him and to his ministry, he does so ‘in the presence (προσωπον) of the Messiah’ (2:10). He is aware of Jesus gazing upon him in love and inspiring him to forgive. When an opportunity for missionary activity opened up in Troas, it was the Lord who opened the door (2:12). The fragrance that permeates any place where the gospel is proclaimed is the fragrance of Jesus which gives such joy to God (2:15). When Paul speaks it is ‘in the Messiah’ (2:17) and ‘standing in the presence of God’ (2:17). It is the Messiah himself who writes on the hearts of the Corinthians with ‘the Spirit of the living God’ (3:3). In this present passage, Paul states that it is the Messiah himself who gives him confidence as he faces towards God (3:4), and that (as with Moses, Exodus 4:12), it is God himself who makes him competent for his ministry (see Romans 15:15-19).

Paul is God's authorised 'minister' (διακονος). He is therefore assured of all that he needs effectively to carry out his commission, which is to proclaim the 'new covenant' promised through the prophet Jeremiah (31:33): 'This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.'

This covenant will consist in God's gift of the Spirit that will change people's hearts so that they will no longer be hard and resistant, but will listen and respond to God's revelation. The change of heart brought about by the Spirit will ensure that the new covenant will not remain a mere 'letter', but will be welcomed and lived.

2 Corinthians 3:6

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Paul contrasts the letter which kills with the Spirit who gives life. Some simply substitute the 'law' (the Jewish Torah) for the 'letter' and interpret Paul's saying here as a criticism of the law. They go on to explain that the law kills because it gives commands under threat of death. It demands perfect obedience and because perfect obedience is not possible, people cannot but break the law, and there is no way that the sinner can avoid its accusation and the consequent judgment. In a desperate attempt to avoid death, one can only strive for perfection in obedience. This striving leads only to despair or to the Pharisaic delusion of thinking that one is sinless. Either way, according to this interpretation, the law kills.

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

This interpretation goes against everything we know about Paul's fidelity to Judaism and respect for the Torah as an authentic revelation of God. Paul sees Jesus as the Messiah who, far from rejecting the law, brings it to its intended goal. While going beyond the law, Jesus fulfils it in a wonderful way. It is unthinkable that Paul would accuse the law of being a cause of separating people from God, the source of life. At the same time, as will become clear in the following passages, Paul's contrast of the 'letter' and the 'Spirit' is made within the context of the 'law'. We are reminded of Jesus' words: 'It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless' (John 6:36). Beautiful as the law is, it cannot give life. Life can be given only by the Spirit. Paul is not belittling the law. He is recognising our need of the Spirit.

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

We are sinners, unable without the Spirit to open our hearts to the light shining upon us in the law. Because of our hardness of heart the law, left to itself, remains only a letter. It is not an instrument of death – death is the result of our disobedience. But the law needs the Spirit to make it possible for us to obey God's will and to enjoy the divine communion which is the goal of God's revelation. Recognising this, Ezekiel and Jeremiah saw the need for a new covenant in which God's own Spirit would change people's hearts so that we would listen to the revelation contained in the law and learn to obey it and so live. Paul is claiming here to have been commissioned by the risen Jesus, the 'life-giving Spirit' (1 Corinthians 15:45), to proclaim the gospel of the new covenant as it is made evident in the life of the Corinthian community.

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Paul's words are also a reminder that the words of sacred scripture are inspired by the Holy Spirit and so are to be read in the Spirit, seeking in prayer the grace to be open to the inspired, spiritual meaning, rather than being content with the literal meaning of the words understood without reference to the Spirit. We will not find life by reducing the inspired word to marks on a page. God cannot be locked between the covers of a written document.