

07. 2 Corinthians 8-9



2 Corinthians 8:1-8

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints – and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete expertise, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians written from Corinth some five or six years previously Paul referred to the persecutions which they were suffering (see 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14). Now, back in Macedonia the ‘**severe ordeal of affliction**’ of which he speaks may be a continuation of this. It would seem that the churches in Philippi and Beroea are also suffering. In spite of the ‘**extreme poverty**’ of the churches in Macedonia, they have insisted on making their contribution to the collection which Paul is organising for the needy Christians in Judea. One gets the impression here that in consideration of their situation Paul was not requesting their help, but that it was they who insisted. They saw the opportunity of ‘**sharing**’ (κοινωνία) in this ‘ministry’ (διακονία) as a ‘privilege’ (χάρις – a ‘**grace**’). Because of the way in which they gave themselves, Paul too sees it as a ‘**grace of God**’.

Re the collection: from Paul's earlier letter

1 Corinthians 16:1-4

‘Concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.’

2 Corinthians 8:9-15

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something – now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little” (Exodus 16:18).

One of Paul's most passionate convictions is the need for communion (κοινωνία) between the churches, and in a special way between the largely Gentile communities which he was founding and the Jewish churches of Palestine. When he was asked by James, Peter and John to do what he could to help the poor in Jerusalem, he was eager to do so (see Galatians 2:10). This was an opportunity not only to reach out to the poor in love, but to bind the Gentile converts to their Jewish brothers and sisters, and to show the Jewish Christians who felt insecure and perhaps threatened by what was happening in the Gentile churches that, through the differences, there was a communion in love – a sure sign of the action of the Spirit of the risen Jesus.

2 Corinthians 8:16-19

But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness (σπουδη) for you. For he not only accepted our appeal, but since he is more eager than ever, he is going to you of his own accord. With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming the good news; and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill.

2 Corinthians 8:20-24

We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others. And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found eager in many matters, but who is now more eager than ever because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service; as for our brothers, they are messengers (ἀπόστολοι) of the churches, the glory of the Messiah. Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.

Paul is using official diplomatic language. He wants them to be treated with the respect due to ambassadors of the Risen Jesus.

Paul is sending Titus back to organise the collection, and 2 others, one of whom has been appointed by the churches to accompany Paul to Jerusalem with the collection.

Luke mentions four men from Macedonia who were part of the group accompanying Paul to Jerusalem: 'Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Beroea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe'(Acts 20:4). Paul may be referring here to two of these.

He expects the Corinthian community to appoint someone to look after the contribution that they are making (see 1 Corinthians 16:3).

2 Corinthians 9:1-5

Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated – to say nothing of you – in this undertaking. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

There is no basis in the text for the cynical interpretation that Paul is playing one community off against the other. We should assume that his concern for the reputation of the Corinthians is genuine. He is genuinely embarrassed that he has unwittingly been in error when speaking about them to the Macedonians and wants to be open about it with the Corinthians. He does not want to be the cause of their embarrassment, and can see no way of avoiding it except their changing their mind and re-instigating the collection.

He does not want them to give because they feel cornered, and that is why he is sending ahead some discreet and competent organisers, so that when he arrives with the Macedonian delegation the Corinthians won't feel under duress, but will have had time to make their own arrangements as they see fit.

2 Corinthians 9:6-10

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly (see Proverbs 11:24), and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (see Proverbs 22:8). And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything (αὐτάρκεια), you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever” (Psalm 112:9). He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

2 Corinthians 9:11-15

You are enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry (διακονία τῆς λειτουργίας) not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of the Messiah and by the generosity of your sharing (κοινωνία) with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Their offering will mediate God's gracious love to the Christians in Jerusalem, who will be moved to give thanks to God and to pray in their turn for the Achaians. The material prosperity enjoyed in Corinth is, in this way, a gift from God which can be their contribution to the communion of saints.