

The Ministry of the Gospel - 2 Corinthians 1:1-2:17

Introduction

- As you know, I like to read. Hopefully some of you do also. Have you ever read the end of the book at the very beginning of the story? One of the things I do like to do is to look at the Table of Contents and to look at the titles of the chapters and understand the flow of a book. I think that to approach a book in an orderly way makes sense to me. One of the things I like to do is to read the same book over again. When I first read a book, I read it pretty fast and then the next time I read it slower and understand the character development better. There are a few books out there that I have read multiple times.
- (1) **Lord of the Rings** – I read this three-book trilogy the first time when I was in 7th grade, and the second, and the third time that year. I think I have read it about 20 times.
- (2) **Knowing God** – This book introduced me to the importance of learning about God and getting to know Him. I try to read this book once a year and have done so most years for the last 20 years.
- (3) **The Chronicles of Narnia** – I have read these seven books over the years and even read them to my children when they were young.
- (4) **The Bible** – I read the Bible here and there over the years, but I decided in 1997 to read the whole Bible through every year from beginning to end. For seven years I read the Bible twice in a year. I have read it in many different versions: NASB, NIV, NKJV, HCSB, ESV, Living Bible, etc. Since 1997 I have read through the Bible 30 times.
- Today we start our study of the book of 2 Corinthians. Paul had helped found the church at Corinth as we learned from **Acts 18:1-4** *After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.*
- Paul stayed there for 18 months and then finally left and went on to Ephesus and then returned to Israel. Paul then started his third missionary journey and went back to Ephesus. He probably wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus at this time. Paul then went on to Macedonia and Greece. It was probably in Macedonia that he wrote 2 Corinthians. We don't know exactly how many letters that Paul wrote to the church of Corinth, but we have two.
- The church at Corinth had many issues and problems that Paul addressed in these two letters. Not all that was written to the Corinthians was accepted by them. There were disagreements, sin, hard feelings, and disputes. Through it all Paul continued to follow guidance from God and was used by God in the lives of those at Corinth.
- At the start 2 Corinthians we get a glimpse of ministry from Paul's perspective and this provides us with a number of **key lessons** that we can apply to our lives.
- The first question that we have to answer then is "What is ministry?"
- **MINISTER, MINISTRY** *a distinctive biblical idea that means "to serve" or "service" ...In reality, all believers are "ministers." The apostle Paul urged the true pastor-teacher to "equip the saints" so they can minister to one another (Eph. 4:11-12). The model, of course, is Jesus, who "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45). His service is revealed in the fact that He gave "His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28) ...Our unselfish service should especially be rendered through our spiritual gifts, which are given by God to the saints in order that they might minister to one another (1 Pet. 4:10).*
 > Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary

- In a very real sense then we are all to be “minsters” and to have a “ministry” based upon our spiritual gifts in order to serve others as it says in **1 Cor. 12:7** *But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*
- Let’s look at 2 Corinthians then and apply it to our lives.

Lesson

- **Point #1:** Ministry has its foundation in God.
- **2 Cor. 1:1** *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother*
- **2 Cor. 1:3-4** *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*
- The basis of Paul’s ministry was by the will of God. It was God who called him and God who provided for His needs. Ministry that is based upon anything other than God and His will is doomed to failure. Why is that? Ministry is not for our benefit. Ministry is hard. Ministry involves rejection. Ministry stretches us. Ministry that is not based upon the core of your relationship with God is very hard to do and may be impossible.
- *He is not an apostle because he decided to enter apostolic ministry or because he nominated himself to be an apostle. God's sovereign will called him to be what he is (Gal 1:15-16) ...In 2 Corinthians, however, Paul does not give thanks for what God has accomplished for and through the church but offers praise to God for what God has accomplished for and through him. > Garland, 2 Corinthians.*
- Notice also what verse 4 says: “*who comforts us in all our afflictions.*” It is God that provides for our needs, including comfort when we are being afflicted. He provides for our comfort, help, and encouragement. We are in the service of God, the infinite God, who controls and maintains our universe. The God whom we call Father and Lord. The God who provides for all of our needs.
- **Point #2:** Ministry is for the benefit of others.
- **2 Cor. 1:4** *who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*
- We are called to help others in their needs. We are not to do ministry to satisfy our ego or purposes. We are called to help and comfort them. Notice also that a key part of ministry is that we can share how God has comforted us and helped us and thereby we can provide them comfort because God has provided comfort to us. What we have experienced is the springboard of our ministry. The valleys that God has brought us through are the valleys we can bring others through because God has been faithful to us. Those we are ministering to can have confidence that what they experience has already been taken care of in our lives because God has been faithful to us.
- Do not despair when you struggle and tough things come. Turn to God. Turn to others that have experienced the same thing in their lives.
- **2 Cor 1:6-7** *But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.*
- God does not promise us instant prosperity or gratification, but He does promise to be with us and He will help us.
- What does He promise? **Rom. 8:18** *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*

- God promises that the glory that is coming can't even be compared with our struggles in our lives today. What we experience is transitory: **2 Cor 4:17** *For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.*
- That is message to those we are ministering to: What we suffer is only for a short while and the glory that comes is so much more than what we suffer in this life. We are to have a **heavenly perspective**, a godly perspective about what is going on in our lives. We are to look heavenward for our comfort.
- **Comfort** - *Once during Queen Victoria's reign, she heard that the wife of a common laborer had lost her baby. Having experienced deep sorrow herself, she felt moved to express her sympathy. So she called on the bereaved woman one day and spent some time with her. After she left, the neighbors asked what the queen had said. "Nothing," replied the grieving mother. "She simply put her hands on mine, and we silently wept together."*
- That simple act by the Queen is a model for us how on how we may be a comfort for those that God brings into our lives.
- **Point #3:** Ministry is sharing our lives with others.
- **2 Cor. 1:8-9** *For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.*
- Paul did not hide what was going on in his life. He was truthful and honest to those he was ministering to what was going on in his life and how God was teaching him lessons. Ministry always has a context: our lives and their lives. God is working in both of our lives and we have to share with others what is going on in our lives. It includes our struggles, our feelings, our victories, our defeats, and our heavenly perspective.
- Paul's life has not been easy: **2 Cor. 11:24-26** *Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren.*
- Paul put his trust not in himself, but in God who forgives sins and raises the dead. His faith was squarely upon God's shoulders and not his own accomplishments or abilities. Paul leaned fully upon God. He had set his hope upon God who would deliver him.
- *When things are at their worst and all human resources are exhausted, then one is most receptive to learning about the power of God.* > **Garland**
- Isn't that a true statement? God wants us to turn to Him and put our faith and trust in Him daily and sometimes God brings things in our lives to turn us back to Him.
- **Point #4:** Ministry is praying for others and being prayed for
- **2 Cor. 1:10b-11** *And He will yet deliver us, you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.*
- Ministering is praying for others and being prayed for. We are called to share honestly so that others can join us before the throne of God so that God can work in all of our lives. Paul wants God to be glorified in everything, to give thanks and have grace bestowed upon us. Paul also communicated that he needed

their prayers for himself. They are co-ministers with him. Ministry is a two-way street. As we minister to others, they also minister to us.

- Share your deepest needs and let others pray for them so that God will be glorified. Be diligent to pray for others. Don't make the comment that "I will pray for you" and not really mean it. Seek God and plead before Him on your knees for those we are ministering to.
- **Prayer List** – Chuck Swindoll related the following story: *Cynthia and I had a dear lady in our home church by the name of Aunt Mae. She was in touch with us regularly to ask us what our needs were. And she would say, "Now you're accountable to me. I'm praying for you. And I need to know how you are doing." Later she would say, "Now the last time we were together, you mentioned such and such. How did that work out?" "Well, it's pretty good." "OK." She would take her pen and scratch that off her list. Then she would say, "I want to know what else I need to pray for." – That is what it means to pray for someone else.*
- **Point #5:** Ministry is based upon truthfulness and integrity
- **2 Cor 1:12** *For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.*
- **2 Cor. 1:18-19** *But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no. For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not yes and no, but is yes in Him. For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.*
- Paul's ministry was based upon a clear conscience and a life of godly sincerity and the grace of God, not in fleshly wisdom that is opposed to God. His conduct had been above reproach. His boasting was based upon what God has done, not what he had done, as it says:
- **Jer. 9:23-24** *Thus says the Lord, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the Lord.*
- Whom are we to boast in? Ourselves? No, but in God! Our confidence is based upon God and what He has done, not what we have done...
- *Essentially to boast means to take pride in something or someone, and in Paul's writings it is used both negatively and positively. Used negatively, it refers to an unwarranted pride in one's own merits, but used positively, it denotes legitimate pride based upon what God has done and enabled one to do (cf. Rom. 15:17–19). > Kruse, 2 Corinthians*
- We cannot lie and tell someone something about God that is not true. We are not to stretch Scripture to say something it does not say. We are not to proof text and find verses that have the right words or phrases that seem to support a position that is misleading. We are called to be sincere in our ministry and in the accurate handling of the Word of God:
- **2 Timothy 2:15** *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.*
- (1) Paul had conducted himself with sincerity
- (2) Paul had been found to be truthful, honest, and transparent
- (3) Paul did not make decisions based upon worldly wisdom
- (4) Paul boasted in God and not himself
- (5) Paul represented God as faithful, holy, trustworthy, and a promise keeper

- Let your ministry be based upon truth and sincerity.
- **Point #6:** Ministry manifests God's love and forgiveness
- **2 Cor. 1:23** *But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth.*
- **2 Cor. 2:1** *But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again.*
- **2 Cor. 2:7-8** *so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.*
- Paul did not want them to be sorrowful or angry when he was with them and he decided not to go to them in order to spare them. Paul's overall motive was for them to express the love of God. He also wanted them to forgive the person who had repented of his sin. God is a God of forgiveness and restoration. Paul wanted them to grow in their faith and manifest the love that God had shown them in Christ dying for their sins. But he also wanted them to be obedient:
- **2 Cor. 2:9** *For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.*
 - (1) Paul wrote so that his next visit would be joyful, not sorrowful (2:3)
 - (2) Paul wanted them to know of his love for them (2:4)
 - (3) Paul wanted them to forgive and restore (2:7)
 - (4) Paul wanted to test their obedience (2:9)
- Paul wanted them to take responsibility for their walk and faithfulness to God and running their own church. He wanted their growth and maturity. He wanted them to stand and walk and trust in God daily.
- **Point #7:** Ministry is ultimately based upon the gospel
- **2 Cor. 2:15-16** *For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.*
- The gospel is a dividing line: It can lead to death if it is rejected and it can lead to life if it is accepted. The gospel creates a crisis that demands a decision: to accept Jesus or reject Him. The gospel is God's good news to man that the enmity that exists between man and God is changed to peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ:
- **Rom 5:1, 10** *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.*
- Here in 2 Cor. Paul uses the image of a triumphal Roman procession: *In the Roman victory procession, the incense was offered to the gods, even though it was the people who smelt its aroma. So likewise, while Paul is primarily concerned here with the response of the people to the proclamation of the gospel, nevertheless he realizes that the proclamation of Christ is well pleasing to God: it is to God the pleasing aroma of Christ.* > Kruse
- We are the fragrance of God to the world. To some it is life and to some it is death. We are called to minister to others and spread the good news of the gospel and allow God to work in their lives. What we do for others is based upon what Jesus has done for us. He died so that we can live. Let us continue to put the message of the gospel at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of all of our ministry.
- **Application:**

- Every time you approach God's Word, whether listening or reading, ask yourself these questions: ***What does it mean? How can I apply it to my life?*** The Bible is meant to change us. It is not a philosophy or history book. It is God's living Word to us. Remember...
- **2 Tim. 3:16** *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.*
- **Heb. 4:12** *For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*
- (1) Find a ministry that you can be involved with, don't just be a viewer. God wants us to use our gifts, to be involved with others, and be used by God sharing our experiences and to help others in their walk with God.
- (2) Be involved in a ministry that is God centered and not man centered. We are called to present Christ and present it in a way that is glorying to God.
- (3) Share your life truly and fully. We are not Lone Ranger Christians. We are in a community of believers that we can help and be helped. Ministry is a two-way street. Let God use us in the lives of others and let others minister to us.
- (4) Make a prayer list that you faithfully pray for. Don't just tell someone you will pray for them and five seconds later you don't remember even what they asked. If you say you are going to pray for them then do it. Follow up with them and ask them how they are doing.
- (5) Have as your goal love and reconciliation. We are called to tell others about the reconciliation that is possible by Jesus' death. If someone sins confront them but then forgive them when they repent.