

A Hope for Results - Lesson 24
2 Corinthians 12 and 13
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Our study of 2 Corinthians ends with Paul's deep desire to motivate the believers in the church to live up to their calling. He continued to counter the false teachers' accusations that Paul was not worthy to be called an Apostle, and that he took advantage of them when he was with them. Finally, Paul wanted to encourage them to live a life that demonstrated their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in preparation of another visit from Paul himself.

In last week's lesson Paul began his defense of his Apostleship by relaying the many trials and persecutions he had endured for the name of Christ. This week's study opens with Paul's further defense of his authority through visions and revelations from the Lord.

It was obvious last week that Paul felt forced to enumerate the many hardships he had lived through, for preaching Christ. But now he expressed several times how foolish he felt it was, to have to boast about this intimate evidence of his personal call from the Savior.

"And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses." [2 Corinthians 12:3-5]

Paul gave public testimony to his vision of Christ at the right hand of God, by which he was saved. [Acts chapter 9; Acts 22:2-21] In fact, it was through a vision that the Lord encouraged Paul to stay with the Corinthians for a year and a half, on his first visit to their city. [Acts 18:9,10]

But when Paul had traveled on, the false teachers persuaded the Corinthians to question Paul's authority and the veracity of his ministry among them. So, he related here what such a vision was like and how disorienting it was, so they would understand that God had authenticated his ministry in this way. It is evident that this man who had visions was Paul himself.

Benson, in his commentary, described that "Visions were things presented to a person in a supernatural manner, so as to be the objects of his sight while awake....And revelations of the Lord... were discoveries of matters unknown, which Christ made to Paul by an internal impression on

his mind or by speech,...” These experiences are said to be so vivid and amazing that it is very difficult for the person to be sure as to whether they were bodily present, or whether it was in the spirit this happened.

In the Old Testament, Ezekiel had visions about God's punishment to come on Jerusalem, and that Israel would return to the Promised Land one day [Ezekiel 11, and Ezekiel 37]. And he received revelations that the temple would be rebuilt and the priesthood would be restored. [Ezekiel 40 – 44] Daniel also had many visions: about the statue that represented the future of the nations, [Daniel 7], and visions about future kings and the anti-Christ. [Daniel 10-12].

In the New Testament, Peter had a vision [Acts 10:9-16] that revealed Gentiles would be invited into His Kingdom with the gospel. And the disciple John had a vision of heaven and the end times that we know are recorded in the last book of the Bible, called The Revelation.

So, believers were familiar with God's messages being sent through His prophets and disciples through visions and revelations. It was accepted that such visions were evidence of God trusting the recipient to pass on the revelations related in such a vision. However, Paul could not pass on the images he received from some of his visions.

In verse 4, he said he, “heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.” We understand that Christ revealed himself especially to Paul, for his conversion to faith. The further revelations may have been during his years after his conversion, to help him understand why Messiah would come to die on a cross, and to understand Paul's purpose to preach the gospel in faith. Those revelations were shared in each letter he wrote.

However, speaking about these intimate messages from Christ was too personal, and seemed like boasting. Beginning in verse 5 Paul explained, “I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” [2 Corinthians 12 5-7]

Paul had been accused by the false teachers as being less than an apostle, and being boastful, and now, as being foolish. He agreed that to rehearse this amazing list of persecutions and visions sounded foolish. He actually would rather be thought a fool, for Christ's sake than to go on with

this boasting. But he must wrestle the confidence of the Corinthians out of the subversion of these false witnesses and bring them back firmly into belief in the gospel of Christ. So, he continued to explain why he didn't brag about all he had endured. He spoke of this "thorn in the flesh", his physical weakness that Satan used to torment him.

Paul's enemies, these false teachers, came to Corinth and began to tear down his authority among the believers causing them to question his teaching by doubting his authenticity before Christ. Now that he had explained his ministry for the Lord, and that he had these visions and revelations that supported his representation of Christ, he recalled how often he had experienced the pain from this "thorn in the flesh" even while in their presence. They might also use this physical ailment to say that if he was truly an apostle, why didn't God heal him from this physical limitation?

Theologians have tried to determine exactly what this "thorn in the flesh" might have been. Because it was in his flesh, it was obviously something physical. Some have thought it might have been a limitation of his vision because he had looked into the very bright light when he was stopped on the road to Damascus. [Acts 9] He was then led by hand on into the city because he couldn't see. After three days, when Ananias prayed for him, it seemed like scales fell from his eyes, and he could again, see. In Galatians 6:11 we also see Paul signed his letters personally with very large writing. So, possibly, his vision was impaired as a result of this encounter and perhaps his eyes were afflicted in some way. [Acts 9,10]

Some commentators think Paul may have had continued pain as a result of internal injuries that he sustained from beatings and stoning. The Greek word used for "thorn" means: "anything pointed or sharp", and so may refer to pain from internal scar tissue or injured tissue. The word translated "to torment me", or "buffet me" (verse 7) describes being beaten repeatedly. And so this word also inferred that this "thorn" presented itself by re-occurring pain.

Paul explained that Christ had ordained that he keep this thorn, for God's glory. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." [2 Corinthians 12:8-10]

It is a beautiful dream that some Christians have that as a believer you will have no problems. This was a common belief among the religious Jews of Paul's day, that if God was pleased with you, you would be healthy, wealthy and wise! But Paul was living proof that just the opposite would be true. Jesus told His own disciples, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." [John 15:18 ff] "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." [John 16:33]

This seemed like an oxymoron. How can trouble give us peace? How can the world hating us show us God's delight in us? How can insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties show that we are strong? Because like Paul exhibited in his life, those weaknesses in us make room for Christ's Spirit to do amazing things through us. He might do such amazing things as bringing salvation to people who wouldn't listen to Scripture unless they saw God working in you.

It will be obvious that what they see happening in our weaknesses, can't be in our own power so it must be God working in us. So, like Paul, we also can look forward to our weaknesses, because God will use them to work His power. We have a weakness for this virus – but we have learned to use our computers and phones to reach out more often than we had before to families and friends. We are attuned to the news and internet as we stay isolated. But we are reaching out to help others and pray for those that we hear have needs; we may never have known about them in our otherwise busy lives. So we see that God uses our weaknesses to display His power through us.

Paul saw this happen again and again in his life. But the false teachers, whom he called "super-apostles," were swaying the Corinthians to think that they had been duped and used for Paul's own benefit. "I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the 'super-apostles', even though I am nothing. I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!" [2 Corinthians 12:11-13]

Even though Paul had demonstrated miracles and signs before the Corinthians, they had been persuaded that he had an ulterior motive to somehow get money from them for himself. So Paul reminded them that he had not even accepted room and board from them. Rather, he had worked his tent-making skills to pay his own way. He sarcastically answered these manipulating "super-apostles" accusation: "Forgive me this wrong!"

The words used to say "super-apostles" would more accurately be translated: "overmuch apostles" or "surpassers of the apostles in their own esteem." (Jamison, Faucett and Brown) Therefore, these devious false teachers were not actually any of the real disciples. Rather they were Jews who had followed Jesus somewhat during the last of his ministry. Now they were gaining money by traveling around among the churches, telling their own stories and trying to discourage the believers from believing Paul's preaching.

So in contradiction to these false teachers, Paul states his true reason for writing. "Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?" [2 Corinthians 12:14,15]

Paul truly felt as if the Corinthian believers were his spiritual children, because they had first accepted Christ under Paul's teaching. As a father, he wanted only their good. He desired that they live their lives in Christ to the fullest. He wasn't in the job of apostle to make himself rich; he wanted to spend everything he had to help the members of the church.

The words translated "spend" and "expend" give the sense of giving the last of his possessions and his own self for their good. Ellicott described this idea when he said, ". . .so he is ready to spend for them not only all that he has, but even, as if to the verge of exhaustion, all that he is. And yet with all this there was the painful consciousness of toiling without adequate return."

Yet even with this emotional picture of giving his last breath for them, Paul anticipated yet another accusation. In verses 16 through 18, he said, "Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent to you? I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not walk in the same footsteps by the same Spirit?" [2 Corinthians 12:16-18]

When we studied chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians, we read about Titus visiting Corinth with a couple "brothers" in order to help them gather an offering for the famine ridden believers in Jerusalem. Remember, we learned that the "brothers" were believers from Corinth who would accompany Titus and Paul to take the offering to Jerusalem. 2 Corinthians 8:20 and 21 gave the reason for this arrangement: "We want to avoid any

criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man."

But even with these pains taken to be above board, these false teachers twisted the faith of the Corinthians so that they worried that Paul had "tricked" them and kept the offering for himself. The actual trip from Corinth and Jerusalem took many weeks, at best. So, the brothers who helped take the offering probably had not yet returned. In their absence, the false teachers accused Paul of keeping their sacrificial gifts for himself, although they knew the people they had sent were trustworthy.

But rather than belabor his own defense, Paul shifted to speak of a second reason for this letter; that is to say he planned to come to see them again. "Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, if for your strengthening. For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged."

When Paul brought the gospel to Corinth, he saw repentance and a change of many life-styles of those who gave up their old sinful habits and began to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. But when he received their letter to him, full of doubt and questions of his authority, did that mean they had fallen back into their old way of life?

In verses 2 through 4 of 2 Corinthians Paul warned them: "I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you."

In saying this, Paul changed the tenor of the last three chapters of this letter, from defense to offense. While he had carefully defended his authority as an apostle, his personal appearance of weakness and his methods of preaching with humility among them, he also warned that when

he came in the power of that authority (for which he had given abundant proof), it would include a "harsh" use of his authority to reprimand any who refused to repent from their habits of sin.

Paul truly wanted the members of the Corinthian Church to repent of these sinful habits, and seek lives of growth in the Spirit. If they did, Paul's next visit would be one of joyful praise to the Lord, for all he had done for them. So he charges them in verse 5, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test."

So, the tables are turned. The false teachers desired to have power over the Corinthian church by destroying their confidence in Paul, their spiritual father, with a test of his authority and motives. But he challenged the church members to test themselves, whether they are actual members of the body of Christ or not. The false teachers would "fail the test" and thereby, be forced to leave the true believers alone to grow and learn without all of the turmoil their criticism had caused.

Could we pass a similar test? Like the Corinthians, might we also have fallen prey to doubts and fears during this isolation? I know that our enemy, Satan, delights in twisting our memory and causing doubt about God's goodness and power. He also comes after we have learned more about Christ from the scriptures, gets us off by ourselves, and begins to throw accusations about the motives, trustworthiness, and truthfulness of what we thought we knew. So, we also need to get back to the basics of our faith. Let us examine ourselves. Do we believe in Christ Jesus as our Savior? Have we received the Holy Spirit into our lives? Have we allowed the Spirit to teach us about Christ and help us to begin to show the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?

Put our habits to this test. Have we fallen into our old sin habits because we are isolated and think others will never know? Are we slipping into habits of "discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder" as we live so long in close proximity during this isolation? (verse 20) Are we letting our reading or viewing habits turn our inward desires toward "impurity, sexual sin and debauchery"?

If we see these habits slipping back into our lives, we also need to repent. Just as the Corinthians anticipated Paul's coming visit, we need to remember our Lord promised to come again! What if He comes today? Will we pass the test of living holy lives when He examines our deeds during quarantine and out of it? Believers are God's sons and daughters, just like

Paul considered the Corinthians his own children. How much more should we strive to examine ourselves, to be always ready to meet the Lord in the air?

Paul wanted his words to encourage the Corinthians, not to destroy them. In verses 9 through 10 he reviewed his admonitions: "We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored. This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority – the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down." [2 Corinthians 13:9,10]

In the same way that Paul came to the Corinthians in humility and the appearance of weakness, Christ also came into the world in weakness, as a baby who grew to be a rabbi, challenging the status-quo only by His words of truth. He never led an army with weapons attempting to tear down the Roman Empire. Rather He allowed Rome to crucify Him as an innocent man, to take the punishment of all of our sins.

"For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in dealing with you." [2 Corinthians 13:4] So that the same resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead, fills us to empower us to be changed, from our old sinful past, to have new life in Him.

That same resurrection power that allows us to be changed was the power that could help the Corinthians to overcome their sinful habits and the doubts that had brought divisions in their own church. So, Paul wanted to leave this letter with encouragement for the church. In verse 11 he said, "Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you."

The Greek word, translated "restoration" in verse 11 carries the sense of putting a dislocated body joint, like a shoulder, back into place. Now, I have never had a shoulder that has shifted out of joint. But I understand that it is very painful. And it is so painful that all of the body pulls to protect it, until it can be put back into place and heal.

This is a very good description of the condition Paul found the church of Corinth to be suffering. Because they had false teachers among them, all of the body of the church was crippled with doubt. They were suffering from all of the questions these unbelievers were charging against Paul, so much so that many were even falling back into their old sin habits. They needed

to be “reset” - restored so the pain would be over, and they would regain their ability to grow again in their faith.

Through all that Paul endured on behalf of these unbelieving, false teachers, he desired to be used to motivate the believers to strengthen their foundation in Christ. He wanted them to build on that foundation by cleaning away all of the doubt about Paul, and replacing it with a restored, cleansed Christian faith. Then, as they began to live in this faith, their lives would be changed.

Paul wrote to the Philippians “Finally my brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” [Philippians 4:8] As the Corinthians gained restoration of their church, they would regain also their sound thinking in their minds which would result in encouragement and peace.

I love this passage in Philippians because it is a prescription for a sound Christian mind. Don't we all need a sound mind? The Corinthian Church had come a long way from the enslavement they had had in their pagan lives. But a “virus” had threatened to drag them away from a sound mind, back into the slavery of doubt and sin. But Paul wanted them to “be of one mind, live in peace.” The way they could be “cured” from this “virus” of doubt and sin, was through “the God of love and peace” being with them.

So thinking about God would be the same for the Corinthians as it was for the Philippians (and us); replace the teaching of the false leaders, by thinking about “whatever is true.” Jesus said He is “the Way and the Truth and the Life.” Think about what is noble: Jesus is the King of Kings! Think about “whatever is right” and Jesus is the Righteous One. Think about “whatever is pure”: like the perfectly pure Lamb of God! Think about “whatever is lovely” - Jesus is Love! Whatever is admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy – Jesus is the admirable Son of God whose excellent, sinless life was given for us to redeem us and restore us to the Father in His righteousness!! He is absolutely worthy of all praise.

Therefore, the answer to the virus of doubt is to think on Jesus. That is the foundation to which Paul wished the church to return, and be restored. Our Lord Jesus Christ, and His love and truth is the antidote that can bring all dislocated members in the church back into our correct place in the body. And as we live in His grace and follow His directives, we will again live at peace with other believers and that is what Paul encouraged in the

last three verses of 2 Corinthians. "Greet one another with a holy kiss. All God's people here send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." [2 Corinthians 13:12-14]

The early church was known to greet each other during each service with this "holy kiss." The men would embrace and kiss each other on the cheek, as would the women with other believing women. This was a unifying act that broke down people's diversity of class, economic levels and racial differences. All were as brothers and sisters before the Lord. The church at our time experiences this closeness in our small groups, although we may not greet with kisses anymore!

Paul also reminded the Corinthians that they were part of a bigger picture. They were all members of Christ's body through His grace, both those in Corinth and believers in other parts of the world too. That unity makes a significant difference between Christians and pagans in the world. Jesus prayed that all the believers who would follow Him would experience this unity. "My prayer is not for them alone, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." [John 17:20-21]

The love of God should be the sign of that unity. Jesus said that if we love Him, it will show in our love for each other. John wrote "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble." [1 John 2:9-10]

So, Paul's emphasis on restoration was motivated by God's love, desiring them to repent and be reunited in Christ rather than be divided and lost in their sin. And the Holy Spirit will share God's love among the restored members to bind them all in fellowship as they gather and encourage believers together.

Did you notice that all three members of the God-head are present in Paul's final blessing? The Lord Jesus, the Son gives us grace. The Father, God gives us His love. And the Holy Spirit unifies us all together in fellowship. As Paul had addressed all of the divisions present in the church at Corinth, he asked that the church would now be united, in the fullness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. May we also find that spiritual unity in God, even while we are physically apart from each other. Then, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."