

Sorrowful, Yet Always Rejoicing

"We all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord"—2 Cor. 3:18

SECOND CORINTHIANS CHAPTERS 1 TO 7

AFTER his conversion at Damascus, Paul went into seclusion in Arabia, in all probability at Sinai, apparently for 3 yrs., then back to Damascus, then briefly to Jerusalem to see the apostles, and then—because of the plot on his life—to his home city Tarsus, where he appears to have stayed 5 or 6 years, until Barnabas fetches him to help with the work in Antioch.

At Antioch, probably about 46 AD, the Holy Spirit separated Paul and Barnabas for the work of carrying the Gospel to the Gentiles. In this work, Paul made 3 long journeys before going as a prisoner to Rome.

The first journey was to Cyprus, then throughout Asia Minor (Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe), then back to Antioch.

On the 2nd journey they went westward through Asia Minor and then were directed by the vision of the "man of Macedonia" to carry the Gospel over into Europe. It was on this 2nd journey, after visiting Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens, that Paul established the ecclesia in Corinth in southern Greece, staying there a year and a half. This appears to be around 50-51 AD. It was a large, prosperous, wicked, industrial city, much like our big cities today. From Corinth Paul finally returned again to his headquarters in Antioch.

On the 3rd journey, after again visiting the ecclesias throughout Asia Minor, he stayed 3 years at Ephesus.

It was toward the end of this period in Ephesus that he wrote the first letter to the Corinthians. This would appear to be about 4 or 5 years after he had left them. It is clear from this first letter that in that period serious conditions had developed there. The 2nd letter, which we are now considering, seems to have been a few months after the first.

In the salutation (2 Cor. 1:1-3) he speaks of the "God of all comfort," and arising out of this are the beautiful thoughts of the comfort that even trouble gives, when its purpose and value are spiritually discerned. Paul regards trouble (vs. 4-7) as first an opportunity to seek and enjoy more intensely the comfort of God, and secondly, as a practical opportunity to learn from it how best to comfort others who have trouble.

"Good" and "evil" circumstances are not always what they outwardly appear, and seemingly evil circumstances are often—in the deep wisdom of the Spirit—gateways to hidden and unsuspected joys.

Then (vs. 8-10) he speaks of the peril that he had recently experienced in Asia—such that he had despaired even of life. This may have been the uproar raised by Demetrius at Ephesus, which had occurred just before this, or it may be some other of the many perils which are not specifically recorded, for we know from his remarks in ch. 11 that he was in constant peril of his life.

Even from this he draws a lesson and a comfort, for it helped to teach him, he says, not to trust in himself, but to rest more confidently on God Who can easily raise the dead (as He did—at least in a figure—when Paul rose up from his stoning at Lystra.

In the rest of ch. 1 (vs. 15-24), Paul explains that his failure to visit them after he had said he would, was not due to changeableness but to spare them the unpleasantness and pain that would be entailed if he came while they were in the conditions described in the first epistle. He determined (2:1) that he would not come in heaviness, for to meet those who had been so dear to him, under such alienating conditions, was more than he could stand.

So, he explains, he had instead written to them in much anguish of heart, with many tears, hoping to move them to repentance by the entreaties of his love and care. He had no rest in his spirit

until word came back to him that his letter and his prayers and Titus' visit had been successful in inspiring them to a thorough repentance, and renewed love for him.

This leads him to the closing thoughts of ch. 2, that he was both a messenger of life and a messenger of death, according as how he—as the appointed minister of God—was received. And he says in awe—

"Who is sufficient for these things?"

He was overwhelmed with the great responsibility of life and death that lay upon him, and his high position in the purpose of God. These concluding remarks of ch. 2 cause him to say (3:1)—

"Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?"

Self-commendation, with which he had apparently been charged by some in Corinth, we know was farthest from Paul's nature and desires. And yet he was a special, chosen vessel, and he knew it, and he had to proclaim it as part of his message. He had to establish his authority and apostleship.

It was a very difficult and trying position, especially as there were always those who were eager to seize upon any apparent indication of self-glorification.

Some in Corinth questioned Paul's authority to instruct and correct them. But, he says, answering their criticism, why should I need any evidence of authority, why should I need any letter of recommendation? You yourselves are my letter of authority. You are a letter from Christ, delivered by me, written with the Spirit of God on the hearts, for all men to read in your way of life.

It is a beautiful and sobering thought: each ecclesia is a letter written by God to men. Each true saint is a part of the living Word of Life.

This leads him to (v. 6) a comparison between the Old (Mosaic) Covenant, engraven on dead stones—the ministration of condemnation & death; and the New Covenant, written by the Spirit of God on the living hearts of the regenerated believers.

If the giving of the first was so glorious an event (v. 7) that Moses had to cover his face to protect Israel from the radiance of the reflected glory of what he had experienced, how infinitely more glorious is the New Covenant—the ministration of righteousness & life!

And this leads him to that beautiful verse at the end of ch. 3 that is so full of practical instruction in the way of holiness—that expresses, in fact, the only possible hope of success—

"We all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord."

This must happen to us, or we are just part of the perishing world. Is it happening?

Therefore, he says, beginning ch. 4, seeing we carry this glorious message, "we faint not"—we never lose heart—we are never discouraged. The ever-fresh marvel and glory of it is so wonderful and inspiring that nothing can depress us, because—

"God, Who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shifted into our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

God's first creative act was to cause light to shine out of darkness, and in this Paul sees all the glory and joy of the divine purpose. As long as we keep the transcendent glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ shining into our hearts, we CANNOT be cast down.

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V. 7 of ch. 4 begins a new phase of thought—

"We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us."

The more frail and earthy the vessel, the more obvious it is that this wonderful glory that illuminates it must be divine. From here to 5:10, Paul speaks of this earthen vessel—our mortal frame—emphasizing the great contrast between the eternal divine glory and the present pitiful weakness and struggle of the perishing outward man, which was particularly intense in the apostle's own case—troubled, perplexed, persecuted, cast down, always on the brink of death for Jesus' sake.

But the constant comfort and assurance of the divine glory banishes all bitterness and despair from the present struggle—

"For which cause we faint not: for though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed from day to day.

"For our light affliction, which is hut for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

Surely the apostle's greatest appeal and inspiration is in his wholesome, ever-cheerful, spiritually-balanced discernment of the basic joyfulness and goodness of the real meaning of life in relation to God, in spite of all its present storms & shadows & valleys of sorrow and care!

The same theme is carried over into ch. 5, and we must see the whole section as a unit to understand the meaning of the much-wrested vs. 6-9 of ch. 5. The basic thought is that we should not be careful for life nor concerned about death, for as long as we are in the present mortal probation we are separated from Christ. Our whole concern should be, not about the present, but about our standing before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account.

Whatever may happen to our perishing mortal body, an ever-living spiritual body is assured, if we are found faithful. The present life is nothing to be clung to—it is simply painful probation and separation from Christ. The judgment-seat is the gateway to real glorious existence, and therefore all concern should be directed toward passing it with approval.

The latter half of ch. 5 speaks of the entirely new life of the believer in and through Christ (v. 14)—

"The love of Christ constrained us."

That is, it guides and motivates us, it has taken control of our lives, and directs all our actions—meaning both the inspiration of Christ's manifested love for us, and the dedication of our worshipful love for him—

"Because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead."

We are careful in lecturing to the alien to emphasize the vital truth that Christ died as a REPRESENTATIVE, not a substitute; to SHOW THE WAY for others to follow, not just to go instead of them.

That is Paul's point here, applied practically to our life. As Christ died (v. 15), so must we, leaving everything—all self—behind, and rising to a new life devoted to him. Wherefore, from that time forward, we know no one after the flesh—all relationships are on the basis of our spiritual relationship to Christ—all acquaintances and associations are regulated by the principle he later elaborates at the end of ch. 6—

"What communion hath light with darkness?"

As he closes ch. 5, he goes beyond Christ to the ultimate source of all good in Christ (v. 19)—

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them."

The apostle, not for self-glory, but to emphasize the height and greatness of the call, points out (vs. 18-20) that he is a direct ambassador from God—it was as though God Himself were imploring them to accept His reconciliation and love.

The Corinthians had been misled into belittling the apostle's position, and in this error they had obscured the tremendous honor and majesty of their call through him (6:1)—

"As God's fellow-worker, I implore you not to receive the grace of God in vain!"

What could be more tragic than to find in the end that because of carelessness, or thoughtlessness, or too much interest in present things, this gracious appeal to us from God had been "in vain"?

Would not this thought—kept before the mind—provide the incentive for continued effort when otherwise carelessness might intervene? Why go so far in the way of life, and then take the chance of not having gone quite far enough?—

"He that endures to the end shall be saved."

—not just holding to certain doctrinal beliefs to the end—but ENDURING—giving our life and strength to Christ, and not being sidetracked into our own interests and desires.

To inspire them to such continued effort, Paul again reminds them (6:4) how he himself had suffered and endured. He is neither boasting nor complaining, but simply endeavoring to impress them with the seriousness and value of their high calling in Christ Jesus.

In reading these various lists of different things which occur frequently in the New Testament, as in this case Paul's trials, the tendency is to read them right through as a whole, without stopping to think of each item individually. But that way we miss the power of his words.

"Ministers of God, in much patience."

—he says (v. 4) as he begins this list of trials. Sometimes we are, in our weakness, overwhelmingly impressed with the fact that patience is our primary problem—learning first to hold back all the surging natural reactions—learning to calmly and quietly analyze both self and the circumstances of the moment.

Patience here is not so much just the first item of a list, but rather the basic approach to all the trials that follow. "MUCH patience," he says: meeting whatever comes with cheerfulness, meekness, and godly self-control.

The sufferings he mentions (6:4-5) are in 3 groups of 3. First—

AFFLICTIONS: The word means pressure, burden, that which bears one down.

NECESSITIES: Need, hardship, deprivation of the comforts of life.

DISTRESSES: Literally, being driven into a corner, hemmed in, with relief or deliverance a seeming impossibility.

These are general. Then 3 more specific, occasioned by the viciousness of men—

STRIPES: Beatings, floggings, physical injury and abuse of every kind. Such was Paul's repeated experience, but he was never cast down in heart.

IMPRISONMENTS: He had been a respectable and respected leader in his nation. Now the company and shame of the lowest criminals was his common lot.

TUMULTS: Uproars and insurrections. Wherever he went his words and work stirred up violent hatred and opposition and set in motion all coarseness and baseness of mob excitement. What a constant strain this

would be on anyone as gentle and sympathetic and sensitive as Paul!

Then finally 3 more that were self-imposed upon the others—

LABORS: When we examine the apostle's record, we realize how little we know of what labor means—first the common physical labor for his daily bread, and then the endless and self-sacrificing labors for the brethren and the Truth. His life was a life of labor, with no thought of self. The word does not just mean "work," but toil and strength-consuming exertion.

WATCHINGS: Weary vigils, sleepless nights, because of the pressure of work or concern for the ecclesias whose problems and sorrows he bore.

FASTINGS: In ch. 11 he says he was—

"In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness."

Fasting is associated with deep spiritual emotion and devotion, as related to prayer and self-dedication. It was part of Paul's labors on behalf of, and for the welfare of, the Household of God. It speaks of a putting aside of fleshly satisfaction and gratification that the heart may draw closer to God.

Fasting is never enjoined as an external observance or ritual, but it appears to be the natural accompaniment of intense application to divine things—as in the cases of Daniel and Anna: any foregoing of normal and legitimate natural gratification for the sake of the Truth and the Brotherhood.

From his trials, Paul turns (v. 6) to his inner course of life, as manifesting the beautiful characteristics of the Spirit of Christ—ininitely more beautiful as being the fruits of such sorrow and adversity. Here again, let us not read through them and pass on, but let us stop and study them one by one—

"Purity, knowledge, longsuffering, kindness, holiness of spirit, simple sincere love."

And then the means by which he accomplished these things—

"The Word of Truth, the power of God, the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left."

What a man was this whom God had chosen as His ambassador in bonds! This man who could say in simplicity and truth—

"Be ye followers of me, even as I am of Christ."

"As sorrowful, and yet ever rejoicing" (v. 10).

How perfectly and strikingly he sums up the spirit of God's elect whose lives are purified and ennobled by this strange harmony of coexistent sorrow and joy. "O ye Corinthians," he continues (v. 11)—

"Our mouth is open to you: our heart is enlarged."

He was guileless and unrestrained in the largeness of his deep affection for them, regardless of their hesitancy to yield themselves fully to him.

"There is no restraint in my love toward you."

—he assures them (v. 12)—

"The restraint exists only in your own feelings."

And he exhorts them to give their hearts to him as freely as he did to them. Only their own hesitant reserve stood between them and the full enjoyment of the communion of mutual, spiritual love. We cannot miss the connection between this thought and what immediately follows—

"Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers."

How strikingly this contrasts with the invitation and exhortation to yield themselves wholly to him in the bonds of the pure mutual love of the Truth! How strikingly it contrasts with the touching and beautiful picture of pure divine service and suffering that he has just described. And how this contrast emphasized the bitter tragedy of unequal yoking when we see what should, and could, have been!

"What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? What communion hath light with darkness?" (v. 14).

Here is the most fundamental principle of Scripture—SEPARATION—the basis of all holiness, righteousness and faithfulness.

Be ye separate—completely apart—completely different. Cleanse yourselves from contact with all that is dark, ungodly and perishing, that you may yield yourselves completely to the glorious operation of the Spirit of God.

The things of God and the things of the world cannot be mixed. Those who understand and love the Truth, and who recognize the priceless value of their eternal inheritance in Christ, will not want to have ANYTHING to do with the things of the world.

They will be ever anxious to get away from its necessary contacts to their Father's business and joyful attendance upon His Word. They will never dream of wasting their precious hours in worldly amusements and entertainments that appeal only to the fleshly and vacant-minded.

Here is how we may "examine ourselves" to see if we are really in the Faith. We shall never be satisfied with what we find by this self-examination. It will always—if honest—reveal causes for shame and concern, but it should reveal a gradual trend in a godly direction—a gradual weakening and lessening of the tendencies to worldly foolishness and a gradual strengthening and deepening of our spiritual perception and affection for eternal things. This is what he means by being—

"Changed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord."

It is a gradual growing up, maturing, expanding, learning, discerning, perceiving and appreciating of the glories and beauties of oneness with Christ, as the beloved sons and daughters of the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth.

It is a process that will, and must, occur in all who are to be finally revealed as God's true elect. It is a joyful and glorious process—a gradual separation from the poor little natural rattles and baubles of babyhood, as the mind, by the power of the Spirit, grows and expands in the ecstasy of the marvelous things of God.

"WHAT COMMUNION HATH LIGHT WITH DARKNESS?"

How can the children of God—the children of light—find any pleasure or satisfaction in the empty amusements, entertainments and activities that belong to the foolish world of darkness?

"Light" and "darkness" here refer to the presence or absence of that spiritual enlightenment which recognizes God and eternal things as the only true realities. Those with this enlightenment will have no affinity or desire for the things of the dark world.

Beginning ch. 7, he exhorts: Having, therefore, these wonderful promises held out to us, let us cleanse ourselves from everything that is defiling to body or spirit, perfecting holiness in the reverent fear of God.

"Perfecting holiness"—that should be our life's ambition—a wonderful adventure into divinity—our highest pleasure and joy.

What are the "filthinesses of the flesh and spirit" from which we must cleanse ourselves? Generally speaking, the filthinesses of the flesh are not the problem among us that the filthinesses of the spirit are. Tobacco-addiction is about the only form of the filthiness of the flesh that has ever troubled the Brotherhood to any degree.

But filthiness of the SPIRIT is a real and pressing problem for all. This includes anger, pride, selfishness, covetousness, worldly ambition, unkindness, irritability, the natural, universal human proneness to criticize and belittle and think evil, gossip, being absorbed and interested in the passing unimportant things of natural existence, instead of setting the heart and mind and affections on the pure and eternal things of God.

This last is the key to the power that will enable us to overcome the rest. Anything—like television, worldly literature, worldly entertainment—that fills our mind with worldly things and thoughts, is working directly against the attainment of the perfection of holiness.

If we are to have any hope of success, we must be honest with ourselves and face the facts. We are weak. The attainment of the spiritual self-transformation necessary for acceptance to the Kingdom is possible to all, in the mercy and by the power of God, but not if we deliberately put stumbling-blocks in our own way and—what is worse—in the way of others who may be even weaker than ourselves.

The flesh always desires to spread its own weaknesses and corruptions. It feels more comfortable and more justified if it can get others to share its follies. Sisters who cut their hair try to get others to do the same; brethren who waste time with television and sports like to lure others into the same childishnesses and immaturities.

We, as Bereans, must have the spiritual wisdom to take a higher stand, to try to stem the tide of looseness and worldliness that is generally sapping the life of the Body, try to uphold the old standards and zeal and soundness of fellowship.

We shall stand or fall according as we are faithful or not to this position—according as we recognize the enticements of worldliness in all its deceptive guises, and honestly reject them.

We stand not just for a name, but for a principle of life. We stand for the old, sound outlook that recognizes that the common goal is the perfecting of holiness in the fear of the Lord—that we have no right to lower that standard of perfection—that anything less is a falling short that must be repented of and striven against, and never condoned and justified—and that we can have no hope of attaining if we are not sufficiently honest with ourselves to at least put resolutely away from us the obvious and major forms of enticement and diversion.

There is little point and little hope in praying to be delivered from temptation if we are so foolish and unfaithful as to deliberately set ourselves in the way of temptation.

The heart of man is sufficiently deceitful that there will be always plenty of stumbling-blocks, even when we have done our honest best to put away the obvious ones.

The apostle says (7:3)—

"I speak not this to condemn you."

That was neither his nor any mortal's prerogative. That is reserved for the judgment seat of Christ. His duty and desire was to exhort, up-build and inspire—to present the vision of the beauty of holiness with such infinite and appealing desirability that the mind will be ennobled and enlarged, and perishing worldly things will lose their deceptive attraction and will stand revealed as ugly stumbling-blocks in the glorious way to life.

"Great is my boldness of speech toward you."

—he continues (v. 4). Why? Because they had reacted so wonderfully and affectionately to his former entreaty.

He had, as he said, written his first letter with anguish of heart and many tears. He had not long since called them out of darkness and corruption to form in Corinth a community of holiness and

zeal. Then in his absence the light had grown dim and the world had slipped in among them—the mind of the flesh had reasserted itself.

All his labors seemed to have been in vain. The divine fire he had kindled among them seemed to be on the verge of extinction. So he wrote in tears, and waited in prayerful apprehension for their reaction. He had no rest in his spirit. How relieved and overjoyed he was when godly sorrow worked such repentance in them! (v. 11)—

"What carefulness it wrought in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what revenge!"

"I am filled with comfort," he exclaims. "I am exceeding joyful, even in all my tribulation." Why should he care? Why should he let the failures of others make him so disturbed and unhappy? Could he not say: "The Lord knoweth them that are His"? Could he not just quietly do his own faithful part, preaching, exhorting, and warning, and leave to God the concern about results and increase?

If others would not rise to the height of their calling, need Paul agonize and strive so much about it? In the end, the elect would all be there. Unnumbered millions had been perishing in darkness for ages. Need he be so upset if a few insisted on slipping back among those millions?

But Paul did not look at it like that. His whole outlook and attitude was just the opposite. He was terribly distressed and concerned at every sign of weakness and declension and slipping away. THIS MAY BE, FOR US, THE BIGGEST LESSON OF THE WHOLE EPISTLE. The first words of defiant human rebellion against the mind of the Spirit were—

"Am I my brother's keeper?"

Paul felt that he was, and he felt the obligation to its fullest extent. His whole life was one of labor and concern for others—not because they deserved it, but because they needed it. We must guard against the easy outlook that our own salvation is our only concern.

Nor does this mean that we are fulfilling our duties to others by just criticising and condemning. Anyone will happily do that.

In order to help, there must be a sacrifice of self. There must be a basic desire to help and rebuild, based on sympathy and love, a desire to understand, to strengthen and comfort and inspire—a fellow-feeling for every human weakness born of a humble recognition of our own weakness and failures.

No man liveth to himself. All who try to just shrivel up and die. Jesus said of himself in a beautiful enigma—

"Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

"He that loveth his life shall lose it" (John 12:24-26).

Paul, in his concern for his brethren, perceived the secret of the corn of wheat that did not abide alone, but fell into the earth and died. The second great command is—

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Where does the command stop? How far does it go? The only limit is our ability to perceive its boundless implications. Paul said (v. 12), of one aspect of his letter of admonition—

"I did it not for his cause that had done the wrong, nor for his cause that had suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear unto you."

As he had said in 2:4—

"I wrote, not that ye should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly to you."

Paul's power to inspire was in his care and love for his brethren. Unless we have the same care and love one for another, we can accomplish nothing. God's purpose in Christ, and Christ's work for us, are founded in love. We are out of harmony with that work and purpose—which we meet here this morning to remember and commemorate—if all that we do is not likewise founded on love.

Criticism, without love, is alienating and destructive, but if—like Paul's—criticism is the sincere outpouring of anxious love, then it is purifying, unifying and upbuilding—a wholesome and necessary activity.

Let us, in this especially, "examine ourselves." Let us be sure the sincere love is there first, the sincere, humble, sympathetic desire to strengthen and save.

Until it is, we are not ready to speak, for we have not learned the primary lesson of love and care and sacrifice for others that this bread and wine is designed to teach.

—G.V.G.
