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Second Corinthians

A Practical Bible Commentary by Terry Baxter



Paul's Feast for the Corinthians

In many ways, Second Corinthians is Paul's "meaty" book on holiness within the church. He had given the Corinthians spiritual "milk" in his first letter to them, but prepared a banquet feast of truth and insights for holy living in Second Corinthians. We are invited to sit at the table, enjoy what has been prepared for us, and go ever deeper into the Christian life.

First and Second Corinthians are arguably our best biblical guide to evangelism, church planting, and discipleship in modern culture. They point people to a dynamic encounter with Jesus Christ and the walk in the Spirit. Spiritual gifts were practiced in this church and became the power to overcome the counterfeit schemes of the evil one. These two books are fitting and wise as the central part of your journey to godliness and spiritual fruitfulness.



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Introduction to 2 Corinthians: 2 Corinthians 1:1-2

“1) Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia: 2) Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul now begins his third letter to the Corinthians. But you say; “Wait Terry, I thought this was 2 Corinthians?” Keep in mind, in 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul referred to a previous letter he had written to the Corinthians. Then in 1 Corinthians 7:1, he talked about a letter he received back from them.

We do not know what happened to the previous correspondence, but we are treated to an amazing set of letters from Paul to the young believers in Corinth and the entire region of Achaia. The books of 1 and 2 Corinthians are rich with morals, values, and theological insights from the Apostle Paul.

At the point of writing these two letters, Paul was with Timothy in Ephesus. A wide door for effective service had opened there and Paul was taking full advantage of it. (See 1 Corinthians 16:1-2) We are the benefactors of this correspondence.

As I compare the books of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, I see a progression into deeper and deeper content. I often refer to 1 Corinthians as “The Milk Book” and 2 Corinthians as “The Meat Book.” Take a moment and review 1 Corinthians 3:2 to see where this comparison comes from.

As Paul launches into this second book, he treats his readers to a banquet feast of truth and insights. He is beckoning them to go ever deeper in the Christian life. Paul did not want the Christians to stagnate or sit on a plateau. Get ready for an exciting study of this book!

As usual, Paul blessed them with grace and peace at the beginning of this letter. (2 Corinthians 1:2) He fully believed that Christians live by the grace and strength of God, and that true peace is only possible with a personal relationship with the God of Peace.

Comfort From the Father: 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

“3) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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.”

Paul found ample reason to rise up and bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Over and over again in his writings Paul talked about God the Father being worthy of blessing and adoration. Paul worshiped the Father for many reasons, but in these verses he shares two.

First, He is the Father of mercies. Never forget that God is a merciful God. Mercy is agape love applied to our sin and shortcomings. According to the book of 1 John, God is light and God is

love, and He cannot act contrary to either of them. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross to pay for human sin is the basis of God's mercy. His justice was satisfied paving the way for His love and mercy. I am forever indebted to the mercy of God because it means He is for me and not against me.

Second, Paul said the Father is the God of all comfort. He comforts us in all of our afflictions. In turn, He wants us to comfort others. Our struggles in life have a two-fold purpose. They are an avenue to encounter God in all of His fullness and comfort, and then they become the channel of ministering that comfort to others.

What are you going through right now? What are your trials and inner battles? Are you in turmoil? God wants us to come to Him and simply bow silently in worship. He invites us to cast all of our care on Him. He wants us to realize that He is in control. As we seek Him and focus on Him, He promises to flood us with His comfort.

The worst possible scenario is to allow our lives to be controlled by fear, anxiety, doubt, gloom, and despair. Satan loves to drive us from God and convince us that He is not present and not in control. In the midst of the storm, stop and worship God. That is the secret to peace and comfort.

Affliction, Comfort, Sufferings and Abundance: 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

"3) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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. 5) For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ."

When I read the word "affliction" in this text, I am reminded of God appearing to Moses at the burning bush and saying; 7) "The LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. 8) So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite." (Exodus 3:7-8)

Notice that God saw their affliction and wanted to deliver them. As the book of Exodus unfolds, we discover there were three places they could live. There was Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, or entering in and taking possession of the promised land. So it is with us today.

First, we can live in the affliction of Egypt under slavery to this world. It is a terrible place to live. It is a picture of lost people trying to embrace the world but always coming up empty. Sin always leads to slavery.

Second, we can move out of Egypt but wander in the wilderness for years. God did some good things there, but life was hard and difficult. They made it on a daily basis, but there was no abundance. For the most part, it was a daily struggle to make ends meet. God was with them there, but a whole generation died.

Third, God offered them the promised land of great abundance and provision. Slow down and look again at 2 Corinthians 1:4-5. Notice that four words jump out of the text. They are: "Comfort and affliction, sufferings, and abundance." The story of the Exodus suddenly becomes a profound analogy of the Christian life.

Just as Israel went from the affliction and suffering in Egypt to the freedom, comfort, and abundance of the promised land, so God wants to do for His people today. But it takes faith to enter into what God has for us. But instead of embracing the promised land, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. *They wanted out but they refused to go in.*

Once they finally got into the promised land, another problem emerged. Within two generations they became complacent, compromising, backsliding, and sinful. God had to deal with them in new ways at that point.

Sometimes God needs to afflict us in our comfort so He can comfort us in our affliction. He desires to wake us up and move us from self-dependency to God-dependency. He wants to wean us from self-focus to God-focus and from our man-sized thinking to God-sized provision.

I believe this is where the church is today. God is saying and doing extraordinary things right in front of our eyes. He is sounding the wake-up call to His sleeping church. I believe He wants to send revival and awakening never previously seen in this present age. He is washing, purifying, and preparing His bride for His soon return.

When Jesus returns, it will usher in a promised land unimaginably beyond the Promised Land He had for the Children of Israel in the Old Testament. These are exciting days! It is time to embrace everything God has for His people in His Spirit through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a mature walk in the Spirit.

So decide now. Where do you want to live? Do you want Egypt, the Wilderness, or the Promised land? We could call it as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 2-3, the natural man, the carnal man, or the spiritual man. Wake up church, the Spirit of God is speaking! It is time to move out of the wilderness and into the Promised land.

Ministry Is Deepened Through Our Suffering. 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

“3) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 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.”

It is a basic biblical truth that ministry is deepened through our suffering. God prunes us and prepares us to comfort and minister to others through the things we endure. Joseph was prepared to be Prime Minister over Egypt because of his suffering. Moses learned to shepherd God's people by spending 40 years in the wilderness tending sheep. David was prepared to face Goliath by first facing a lion and a bear.

When you go through difficult trials, it is an invitation to seek God, grow in faith and wisdom, then eventually become a channel of comfort to others. Great ministries are not started by human agency, they are born out of personal struggle and often suffering. The Holy Spirit wants to blow on the coals of our suffering until we burn with hot fire for the glory of God.

Our ministry was deepened through the loss of a newborn son years ago. I have a pastor friend and his wife who birthed a fruitful grief recovery ministry through the loss of a daughter who was killed in an accident. I could go on and on and on of amazing ministry born from the ashes of loss and suffering. We know still others whose journey with cancer, job losses, struggles with addictions, or even incarceration for crimes in their past brought them to Jesus and birthed amazing courage, faith, and witness.

If you are currently in a valley of suffering or experiencing difficult trials or affliction, run to Jesus. Cast your care on Him, learn from Him and draw near to Him. Drink in His comfort and soak up His presence. Then be prepared to share with others. Never doubt what God may want to do in and through you.

Willing To Be Spent For Others: 2 Corinthians 1:6-7

“6) 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; 7) 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.”

In these verses, Paul begins to communicate that he was willing to endure much for the sake of spreading the gospel and for the growth of other believers. His traveling ministry was not easy. He was willing to leave family and friends to reach strangers and foreigners with the good news of salvation.

Traveling in those days was anything but easy. He endured long days of travel, short nights of sleep, and often very little food. Beyond that, he was often met by persecution because of his

message. (See 2 Corinthians 11:23-33). He was willing to be spent so others could reap the benefit of Christ and the Gospel.

There are many benefits to being a Christian, but there is also a cost. Those who are sold out for Jesus will often walk in His sandals and share in His suffering. But they will also share in His comfort.

Have you counted the cost of knowing Jesus? Do you want the blessing without the suffering? Do you want an easy life or are you ready for both sides of the coin? Comfort follows affliction. The resurrection came after the crucifixion. Paul was preparing the church in Corinth to move from receiving to giving. It was time for them to step up and serve others.

The Story of a Warrior: 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

“8) 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; 9) indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; 10) who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, 11) 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.”

Paul was not complaining. He was simply laying out the facts that he was suffering much for the sake of the Gospel and for Christians everywhere. He was constantly on the front lines. He endured affliction, persecution, being stoned and left for dead, hunger, thirst, hypothermia, and violent mobs against him for the sake of the Gospel. He had no idea that much worse was still to come and he would eventually be martyred for Jesus Christ.

Those who do not know the cost that has been paid for their salvation, have no basis to place a value on what we have in Christ. Multiply Paul's suffering by that of Jesus Christ on the cross and countless other martyrs and faithful servants of Christ through the centuries in many countries and in many places and you can begin to add up the cost of our Christian heritage. I will never trample it under foot or take it lightly.

Paul's plea for prayer in this context was anything but trite. Prayer changes things. Prayer imparts the strength, grace, and presence of God into the battle. There were times like the one recorded in Acts 27:23-24, that God literally sent an angel to strengthen and encourage Paul. God's comfort can be more overwhelming than the external circumstances Satan throws our way!

Until you recognize the existence of the spiritual realm and the battle between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil for control and influence in this world, you will have no comprehension of reality. (See Ephesians 6:10-20) We as modern Christians are conditioned to trust in ourselves, our bank accounts, our big retirements, the economy, and even our

government for help. Let me caution you, those things can evaporate like water. God and not false securities are the basis of true comfort in this life and hope in what is to come.

Growing Into Godly Wisdom: 1 Corinthians 1:12-14

“12) We can say with confidence and a clear conscience that we have lived with a God-given holiness and sincerity in all our dealings. We have depended on God’s grace, not on our own human wisdom. That is how we have conducted ourselves before the world, and especially toward you. 13) Our letters have been straightforward, and there is nothing written between the lines and nothing you can’t understand. I hope someday you will fully understand us, 14) even if you don’t understand us now. Then on the day when the Lord Jesus returns, you will be proud of us in the same way we are proud of you.” (NLT)

In these verses, Paul seems to be defending the straightforward and truthful nature of his letters to the Corinthians. He had a clear conscience because what he wrote was exactly how he lived and walked with God. Unlike the Pharisees, he did not set forth one standard for them while practicing another lifestyle himself.

He acknowledged that some things were hard to understand. God’s ways and God’s wisdom are often hard to understand because they are contrary to our natural mindset and the worldly wisdom we are accustomed to in this life.

God doesn’t ask us to agree with Him, He asks us to obey Him. He invites us to live out His Word in simple faith. The understanding will come with spiritual growth and the passing of time.

When you read Hebrews chapter 11, you discover that all of the heroes of faith obeyed God without a reasonable explanation. I especially like the mention of Noah in verse 7. He had never seen rain, and yet he obeyed God and spent many years building the ark in preparation for the flood. The moment it started raining, everyone suddenly understood the wisdom of Noah, but it was too late for them.

So it is with the Christian life. We are called to obey God and accept His ways in childlike faith. As the years unfold, our understanding will catch up with the godly wisdom we have been following in God’s Word. The greatest reward will be the rich and overflowing relationship we build with God Himself as we learn how to walk in the Spirit.

When Plans Change: 2 Corinthians 1:15-20

“15) In this confidence I intended at first to come to you, so that you might twice receive a blessing; 16) that is, to pass your way into Macedonia, and again from Macedonia to come to you, and by you to be helped on my journey to Judea. 17) Therefore, I was not vacillating when I intended to do this, was I? Or what I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, so that with me there will be yes, yes and no, no at the same time? 18) But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no. 19) 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. 20) 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.”

I confess, this text is a bit hard to follow and understand. Let's see if we can pick it apart and make sense of it.

Apparently, Paul had made promises to come to Corinth and then because of circumstances beyond his control those plans changed. Some of his critics picked up the situation and began to question Paul's integrity. They were saying that his word could not be trusted. They went so far as to say that if his word could not be trusted related to travel plans, neither could the gospel he preached nor his doctrines be trusted.

Well, that's a far stretch, especially in the days of the early church. Communications were very slow and many things could interrupt travel plans. On his trip to Rome for trial, his schedule was delayed nearly a full year because of weather conditions and being shipwrecked. Not even Rome had the power to keep an exact schedule in those days.

So what can we glean from this text for our lives today? For starters, it's great to make plans, but remain flexible in case God changes things. For example, we had many events canceled because of Covid-19. I maintain that the calendar is not my Master, Jesus is!

Second, Paul also drove home the point that God is faithful even though people might let you down. The promises of God can be counted on no matter what curves this life may throw our way. That is basically his conclusion in verses 18-20. We can trust God to keep His Word!

Finally, it is important to yield to the sovereign plans of God above your own personal goals and agenda. James 4:13-17 speaks loudly to this effect. It is good to make plans and set goals, but conclude them by saying, “if the Lord wills.”

We as humans live as if we are gods and in control of everything. To the contrary, we are very weak and frail. As James said, “we are like a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.” Keep your eyes on God and not people.

Standing on the Promises: 2 Corinthians 1:20-22

“20) 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. 21) Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, 22) who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.”

In these verses, Paul was driving home the point that God keeps His Word and we can stand on His promises. I believe God wants us to search out His promises and claim them by faith. They are like the “Promised Land.” They are for those willing to enter into and take possession of the land.

Back in 1886, Russell Kelso Carter expressed this concept when he wrote the Hymn, "Standing on the Promises." Carter occupied various teaching positions at the Pennsylvania Military Academy. He both taught and published books in chemistry, natural science, civil engineering, and mathematics. He saw God as very orderly, consistent, trustworthy, and powerful. As a young man he was greatly influenced by the Methodists holiness movement and the revival that accompanied it.

When I came to Jesus, I started attending a small country church in Minnesota. This hymn was on our favorite list and was a regular part of our worship services. The same held true all through my years at Bible College. Let's take a moment and revisit the importance of this concept of standing on promises of God by reviewing the words of this amazing hymn.

Standing on the Promises

Standing on the promises of Christ my king,
through eternal ages let his praises ring;
glory in the highest, I will shout and sing,
standing on the promises of God.

Refrain:

Standing, standing,
standing on the promises of God my Savior;
standing, standing,
I'm standing on the promises of God.

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
by the living Word of God I shall prevail,
standing on the promises of God. [Refrain]

Standing on the promises of Christ the Lord,
bound to him eternally by love's strong cord,
overcoming daily with the Spirit's sword,
standing on the promises of God. [Refrain]

Standing on the promises I cannot fall,
listening every moment to the Spirit's call,
resting in my Savior as my all in all,
standing on the promises of God. [Refrain]

Two Ministries of the Holy Spirit: 2 Corinthians 1:21-22

“21) Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, 22) who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.”

In these two verses, Paul touches on two ministries of the Holy Spirit. In verse 21, he talks about the anointing of the Holy Spirit. This comes from the anointing oil in the Old Testament. The oil was called “Chrisma.” Its recipe was recorded in Exodus 30:22-32. It was reserved for anointing God’s chosen priest. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit became God’s new Chrisma. God anoints his chosen workers with the Holy Spirit to carry out His work.

Paul made it clear that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit for his work in starting the church at Corinth. There were many false workers trying to nullify or take away his position over the church at Corinth, but Paul pointed out that he was anointed for that role. God put him in that position. I always respect God's anointed leader over a church. The concept of being “anointed by the Holy Spirit” is both the position and the power to carry out a calling from God.

Then in verse 22 he talks about the “sealing” ministry of the Holy Spirit. This happens at the moment of salvation. The new believer is “sealed” with the Holy Spirit. (See also Ephesians 1:13-14) In this case the Holy Spirit is given as a “pledge” or “engagement ring” by Jesus that He is going to accomplish the full transaction of our salvation in the future.

The word “pledge” in this verse was borrowed from many ancient cultures including Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Phoenician about the binding nature of earnest money given to contract a real estate transaction. The earnest money was the promise of the full purchase transaction in the future.

So also, Jesus seals the new believer with the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation as a promise of what He is going to fulfill in the future. As John 14:1-6 promises, He is going to come again and receive us to Himself and to the dwelling He has gone before to prepare for His bride.

Champion of Truth and Righteousness. 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4

“23) But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth. 24) Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.”

“1) But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. 2) For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful? 3) And this is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all. 4) For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.” 2
Corinthians 2:1-4

Paul was a champion of truth and righteousness. When he wrote the book of 1 Corinthians, he exposed sin and called for repentance. He concedes in this context that the way he so boldly confronted sin and compromise in his previous letter was not easy. He literally wrote out of “much affliction and anguish of heart with many tears.”

His letter stands as an example of tough love and truth in balance. In the same book he denounced sexual immorality and wrote the most profound chapter on love found in the whole Bible. He exposed carnality and expounded on the gifts of the Holy Spirit all in the same book. I believe he was motivated by the holiness of God and zeal to present every man complete in Christ.

Godly pastors and spiritual leaders have a difficult role in shepherding God’s people. They both cheer people on with sincere love and encouragement while keeping a watch over their souls as those who will give an account. (See Hebrews 13:15-17) They literally parent God’s people to maturity.

We need champions of truth and righteousness today. We need clearly defined moral boundaries based on the Word of God, and we need agape love that is willing to go the extra mile with people.

Tough love takes courage, but it is needed by parents, pastors and leaders. Without champions of truth and righteousness children stray, churches become liberal, and societies decay. Paul stands as an example of a champion of truth and righteousness.

Satan's Most Common Scheme Against People: 2 Corinthians 2:5-11

“5) But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you. 6) Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, 7) so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8) Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. 9) For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. 10) But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, 11) in order that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.”

Most scholars agree that Paul was referring to the man from 1 Corinthians 5:1-8 who was disciplined by the church for an incestuous relationship with his father's wife. Evidently, he had repented from his sin and stepped away from this sinful relationship. But now there was a worse problem. The church refused to forgive him and restore him to fellowship. He was being destroyed by guilt, condemnation, and rejection.

In these verses Paul exposes one of Satan's greatest schemes against people and the church. He loves to embroil them in anger, bitterness, hate, and unforgiveness. These things are the enemies of agape love.

In Ephesians 4:26-32, Paul talked at length on this subject. According to verses 26-27, anger gives the devil a foothold in people's lives. As anger begins to fester, it turns into bitterness and the Holy Spirit is deeply grieved. (See verses 30-31)

This scheme of the enemy is so common and serious it is literally at the root of most human conflict. It destroys marriages, families, churches, communities, and nations. It hardens the human heart and short-circuits reason and logic. Paul points out in 2 Corinthians 2:7-10 that forgiveness is the only cure for anger and bitterness. It is the safeguard against Satan's scheme.

You and I have a choice to make. Our hearts can be ruled by the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Satan. Love and forgiveness can sit on the throne of our life or anger and bitterness will govern our thoughts, emotions, and actions. To this end, Hebrews 12:14-15 warns about the root of bitterness and how it has the power to defile many people.

What is the condition of your heart today? Is it being ruled by agape love or the schemes of Satan against the human soul? I admonish you as Paul did the church at Corinth, embrace love and forgiveness and safeguard your heart and your relationships against Satan's schemes.

Your relationships and your emotional and physical health will be governed by how you deal with anger and bitterness. Forgiveness opens the door for healing and the precious work of the Holy Spirit in your life and your relationships. (See Matthew 6:14-15 and Matthew 18:21-35 for more insights on forgiveness)

Your journey to wholeness may include forgiving yourself for some poor decisions in your past. There is nothing so bad that the love and grace of God cannot bring you to forgiveness and freedom.

How do you smell? 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

"14) But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. 15) For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; 16) to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these

things? 17) For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.”

How do you smell? God wants us to spread the sweet aroma of the gospel of Christ everywhere. But not all people respond to the gospel message in the same way.

The gospel smells differently to those who are being saved than it does to those who are perishing. Those who are perishing avoid it like it has the aroma of death. They are repulsed by it like deep woods mosquito repellent. Some people in Paul's day responded to the gospel with violence and riots. They tried to kill him as they did Jesus years earlier. At one point they stoned him and left him for dead. They went to great extremes to stop the spread of the gospel.

But to those who are being saved it has the aroma of life. They are attracted to it like sweet perfume. These people receive the gospel message with great joy and exultation. They are like the crowd who put palm branches before Jesus as He rode into Jerusalem. They will go to great extremes to spread the gospel.

This is a great mystery to me. But thanks be to God, nothing has a sweeter aroma to me than Jesus, the gospel, and the bride of Christ. He always leads us in His triumph in Christ. Walking with Jesus gets better and better as the days go by.

Your Letter of Commendation: 2 Corinthians 3:1-3

“1) Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? 2) You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; 3) being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for 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.”

Jesus said, “You shall know them by their fruits.” (Matthew 7:16-20) A letter of recommendation, a degree in a certain subject matter, or even a casual reference can be helpful, but character and legacy are laid down over time. Just like you can learn a lot about a boat by the wake left behind it, so it is with a life. Look at the fruits that follow after the person.

When it comes to salvation and conversion, there should be an obvious change in life-fruit. Such was the case with Saul of Tarsus who became the Apostle Paul. He became a new man, with a new heart, new life mission, and new passions in life. Jesus became Lord of His life and spreading the gospel became his passion.

People are not made of stone. They can and do change. Jesus Christ and the gospel can and does change people. This is what motivates me in ministry. There is nothing more rewarding than the testimony of a changed life.

In the above context, Paul was making this point about his credentials to the Corinthians. They were his letter of recommendation written with the Spirit of the living God. They knew first-hand what God did through him while among them.

These three verses are very challenging to me and they should be to all of us. What kind of story does the wake of our life tell? What kind of fruit are we leaving behind? Some people are good at talking, but their walk tells a different story. It contradicts their talk.

Paul and James are often pitted against each other in their emphasis of justification by faith versus justification by works. In the above context, Paul is saying that the fruit of a person's life becomes their letter of recommendation. Your works are important. They validate your testimony of faith in Christ.

God Confidence: 2 Corinthians 3:4-5

“4) Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. 5) Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,”

Many self help books stress “self-confidence”, and there is a place for a positive self-image; but the practice of the Apostle Paul was “God Confidence.” His adequacy did not come from self-reliance, it came from a reliance on God.

The first depends on our fleshly gifts, abilities, talents, and strength to carry us through. The second depends on the Holy Spirit. We are limited, but God has no limits. We can only lift so much, but God holds the stars in place. It doesn't take long to come to the end of self, but there is no end to the omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence of God.

Paul expressed the practical application of His utter reliance on God in Philippians 4:13 where he said; “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” The context deals both with achieving victories and overcoming trials. Jesus gives us strength for whatever life throws at us.

I would encourage you to build your life on God and His grace for living. He can make your best talents and efforts even better and fill in the gaps where you lack. The walk in the Spirit has resources available that the flesh cannot comprehend or access.

Stepping Into the New: 2 Corinthians 3:6

“6) who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

A major shift or change was taking place. Things were moving from the old to the new. Jesus and the gospel had ushered in a new time or epoch. (See Acts 1:7). The Old Testament time was ruled by the letter of the Law that brought death. The New Covenant of grace would be ruled by grace and the Spirit who gives life.

In the next several verses, Paul develops this contrast at length. It takes time for this to sink in. Many Christians today are still living as if the letter of the Law rules. They need to shift from death to life, from despair to hope, from the Law to the Gospel, from the Old to the New, and from Moses to Paul.

Notice that the emphasis of verse 6 is that God has made us adequate as servants of a new covenant. The ministry which we have been called into should be baptized in the power of the Holy Spirit and immersed in agape love. (See Acts 1:8 and John 13:34-35)

These are the hallmarks of the servants of Christ. There is no exception to this identity as we embrace the mission to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. We are servants of the New Covenant of Life.

Ever-Increasing Glory: 2 Corinthians 3:7-11

“7) But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, 8) how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? 9) For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. 10) For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. 11) For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.”

In the Bible, the next age was always better than the previous. So also the age of grace which we are now living in abounds in glory compared to the age of the Law. Even so, the face of Moses glowed from being in God’s presence receiving the Ten Commandments, but it was a fading glory.

What we have “in” Christ in the Spirit today is so much more glorious and magnificent in every way than what Moses experienced. Don’t go back to the bondage of Law, embrace the freedom and ministry of the Holy Spirit we currently have in Christ. Open your Bible and take advantage of everything we enjoy in this age. Don’t pour new wine into old wine skins. It doesn’t work.

There is a principle here. The next age that God has is always more glorious and magnificent than the previous. The book of 2 Corinthians points to something much more glorious than what we now know today with the promised return of Christ. (See 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10; 12:1-6)

I personally believe we are at the end of the age of grace awaiting the promised return of Christ that will usher in the next mystery age of God. I can only imagine. I look forward to ever-increasing glory.

Illumination and Transformation: 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

“12) Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, 13) and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. 14) But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. 15) But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; 16) but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 17) Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 18) But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

We are in an age of unfading glory and great illumination. We are not like Moses who used to put a veil over his face when he returned from the presence of God because the glow on his face would grow dim. Not at all. Our glow comes from within. We are filled and indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God.

One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is illumination. Jesus promised His disciples in John 14:26 that the Holy Spirit was going to teach them all things. (See also 1 John 2:27) Paul prayed for new believers to be given a spirit of wisdom and revelation into the knowledge of Christ. (See Ephesians 1:17-23)

Prior to becoming a Christian, a veil covers the mind of unbelievers to the meaning of the Bible and the deep things of God. Remember, Paul talked about the natural man, the carnal man, and the spiritual man back in 1 Corinthians 2:6-3:3. Paul is now building on that understanding.

He noted that the Jewish people had a veil over their heart whenever Moses or the Old Covenant was read. (Vs 14-16) That veil is removed in Christ. When someone turns to the Lord they can suddenly see the truth about Jesus throughout the whole Bible. Biblical history suddenly becomes “His Story.” The Holy Spirit opens up their understanding of the Bible.

According to verses 17-18, the Holy Spirit then uses the Word of God to bring them to freedom and then starts to transform them into the likeness of Christ. He changes them into the same glory. Over time they begin to radiate Jesus with no lid on their potential growth or understanding. They are “transformed into the same image from glory to glory.”

If this is not your testimony, you have every reason to question whether or not you have been born again. You can be religious but lost. That was the story of the sons of Israel in this text.

Paul looked for the evidence of the Holy Spirit working in someone’s life. According to this text, salvation is accompanied by a growing comprehension of biblical truth coming from the indwelling Spirit of God and a continual process of transformation. Is God changing you? Are you growing in biblical understanding as a result of inner communion with the Holy Spirit?

If not, turn to Jesus and invite Him into your life. Read the Gospel of John and ask God to open your heart to the gospel. Begin your journey right now.

Taking Off The Veil: 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

“17) Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 18) But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

The goal of studying the Bible is not merely to gain Bible knowledge or compete well in Bible Trivia. The goal of studying the Bible is to grow in your knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The goal is to behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord and then let His Spirit transform us into the same image from glory to glory.

It took me years as a Bible student to understand this important dynamic. The Bible will forever remain a piece of literature until the Spirit of God begins to pull away the veil from your eyes and teach you the incomparable glories of Jesus Christ contained within its pages.

He will soon use the Word of God to reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom of God and the realities of the unseen realm. At that point, the Bible will be transformed for you from a piece of literature to the living and powerful Word of God. The Spirit of God will open your eyes and guide you into all truth.

Of the three prayers that Paul prayed for believers as recorded in Ephesians 1:15-23, Ephesians 3:14-21 and Colossians 1:9-14, the main theme was to grow in our knowledge of Jesus Christ and His calling in our lives. The Holy Spirit wants to use the Word of God to lead you into a continual and growing revelation of the fullness of Jesus Christ. He wants to take the veil off and give you a spirit of wisdom and relation in the knowledge of Jesus. (See Ephesians 1:17-18)

This is a wonderful thing to pray over your life and your time in God's Word. If you are a child of God, the Bible is a love letter from Jesus to you. This life is far too short to exhaust the depth of the wisdom, knowledge, and mysteries contained in the Bible. When the Spirit of God begins to unveil the Word of God for you, then you will begin to hunger and thirst after Scripture much more than the sinful and carnal things of this life.

Many times Christians are so busy they have no time for the Bible in their daily lives. God often allows a trial or a crisis to slow you down long enough to pick up your Bible. It has amazed me over the years how many believers discover the treasure of the Bible in the midst of a storm. Don't wait for marriage problems, losing your job or health, addiction issues, or even incarceration to clear your schedule for significant time in the Word.

Seek Jesus through His Word now! Seek Him daily! Seek Him earnestly! Turn off your TV and turn on your audio Bible. Over the next month memorize a chapter of the Bible and then

meditate on it throughout the day and night in your down time. Then add more chapters and even a few books to your memory bank. Warning: You are about to discover the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. The veil is about to be taken away. Your spiritual life is about to be turbo charged. You are about to undergo Spirit-anointed transformation!

Welcome To Ministry: 2 Corinthians 2:1-2

“1) Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, 2) but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.”

The gospel of grace is a perfect ministry through imperfect people. God has entrusted us with a message that far exceeds us and that is not limited by us. The Holy Spirit empowers the simple gospel message to save people and He uses common and ordinary people as His messengers.

Yet it is important that the messenger be real, sincere, and consistent with the gospel. Paul did not want a life of hypocrisy to distort the message. He renounced the hidden things because of shame and he refused to adulterate the message. He did not allow any kind of craftiness with the gospel or use it to promote himself or exploit money out of people.

The gospel has many enemies. Some enemies come in the form of false teachers. Others come from exploiters like Judas who wanted to sell Jesus for personal gain. Others are wolves in sheep's clothing. Still others talk one way but live another. The next two verses point out that Satan himself is an enemy of the gospel. (2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

Paul lived with Jesus in such a way that his handling of the gospel was truthful and with a clear conscience. Paul put his own life on the line for the sake of the gospel. Acts 20:24-30 points out that he viewed the spread of the gospel as more important than his own life and refused to shrink away from his calling or lose heart. He knew God had entrusted him with a message that would determine the eternal destiny of millions of people.

How important is the gospel to you? Do you know the treasure that has been entrusted to you? God calls each of us as believers to be His witnesses. (Acts 1:8) There is no greater calling in this life than to share Jesus and the gospel with others. If you have been born again and filled with the Holy Spirit you are a mouthpiece for God.

Be real and sincere as a witness for Jesus. Present the gospel as clearly as you can, but don’t wait until you have all the answers. Be like the Samaritan woman who met Jesus and then went out and brought her whole city in tow to Jesus. (John 4:7-45) Our calling is simply to point people to Jesus.

Don’t lose heart with those who refuse to listen. It is not you but the Holy Spirit Who does the work. Don’t wait because you feel unworthy. I promise you will grow as you go. Don’t argue

religion with people. Just tell your story and encourage people to read the Gospel of John. Point them to Jesus and let Him do His work.

Removing the Blinders: 2 Corinthians 4:3-4

“3) And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4) in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

These verses are very clear. Paul is very candid. Satan works hard to blind people to the gospel. In the parable of the sower, Jesus said that whenever the word is sown, immediately Satan comes to take away the word that is sown. (Mark 4:15) The god of this world holds non-Christians captive and he will do anything to prevent their freedom. He works to keep people in the domain of darkness. (Colossians 1:13)

I maintain that evangelism is the front lines of spiritual warfare. This is why Paul instructed Timothy to pray earnestly for non-Christians in the course of spreading the gospel. (See 1 Timothy 2:1-8) The strongman must be bound before you can enter his house and plunder his goods. (Matthew 12:29) Pray that unbelievers might have their blinders removed so they can see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:4)

Years ago, while a student at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, I learned this lesson well. One semester I was assigned to do door-to-door-evangelism in Chicago with a group of five other students as part of my practical Christian work assignment. For safety reasons, a young man and a young woman were paired together as a team. We would drive our van to an assigned area and start walking door-to-door seeking random opportunities to share the gospel.

The first few weeks were fruitless. Few people were home and most people closed their doors. That's when I suggested to my partner that we meet an hour early and pray for our route and for open doors. What happened was stunning.

From that point forward, the two of us encountered unusual fruitfulness. We had great conversations, people were open to the gospel, we were invited into numerous homes, and some trusted in Jesus. The other two teams continued with their same dismal results. When they finally asked what we were doing differently, we shared with them about our advance prayer meetings.

The next week, both of the other teams joined us for intercession prior to our assignment. From that point forward the results were radically different. The Holy Spirit was preparing our way before us. Each team started having weekly testimonies of divine encounters with people. God was working in undeniable ways!

The same happened to the early church. They met for forty days of intercession and prayer prior to Pentecost. The results were that thousands of people trusted in Jesus and turned to the

gospel. But shortly after, the blessings ended. Unity gave way to strife and bickering. Ministry turned into a burden and the Apostles nearly burned out.

Acts 6:4 shares the story that they resolved to focus again on “prayer and the ministry of the word.” From that point forward amazing things started happening again. They encounter opposition and persecution but also profound stories of God working in unusual ways.

They learned the hard way that there is no substitute for prayer and intercession. The god of this world must be subdued in advanced prayer for ministry to become fruitful and blinders to be removed from people. Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 for a preview of how serious Paul was about this warfare.

A Bond-Servant of Jesus Christ: 2 Corinthians 4:5

“For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake.”

This is a short but important verse. It exposes the problem of many in ministry today. They exist to promote and market themselves. But we are the messengers and not the message.

Paul viewed himself as a bound servant for Jesus' sake. His only goal was to serve and please his Master. Jesus promised to build His church and not our church. (Matthew 16:18)

As long as we strive to fulfill our own agenda we fall short of the calling and anointing of God, we stand alone. We are dependent on our flesh to build monuments for ourselves. In the end they will stink of pride and self-promotion.

Let There Be Light: 2 Corinthians 4:6

“For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Satan not only blinds people to the gospel, he also uses sin and deception to keep the lost in darkness. But God and the gospel are often compared to light (1 John 1:5-7) and Jesus said believers are the light of the world. (Matthew 5:14-16)

Just as God spoke into the original darkness after creation and said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3-4), so He speaks into the darkness of sinful humanity to let His gospel light shine in the face of Christ. This comparison is so keen that we will discover in the very next chapter of 2 Corinthians that God compares salvation to a “new Creation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

When a man, woman, teenager or child trusts in Jesus after hearing the gospel, God turns on an inner light. Colossians 1:12-13 goes so far as to say the new Christian is transferred from the

kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of His beloved Son which is an inheritance of the saints in light.

From that point forward, God expects us as Christians to walk in the light and enjoy fellowship with Him. However, if we choose to live in darkness we lie and do not practice the truth. (1 John 1:6-7)

I believe that studying the Word of God, prayer, and waking in the Spirit are a continual bathing in pure light. Psalm 119:105 says, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path." It is no wonder that Ephesians 5:8 says, "For you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, walk as children of light."

There is no excuse for any Christian to be overcome by darkness. We have love, light, truth and hope. We have the indwelling Holy Spirit, God's Word, fellowship with other believers and are citizens of the kingdom of light. If you feel overcome by darkness, run to Jesus Christ! In His presence there is no darkness at all.

The Power of Clay Pots: 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

"7) But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; 8) we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; 9) persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10) always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11) For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12) So death works in us, but life in you."

Paul said, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels." Another translation for earthen vessels is "clay pots." God has entrusted a glorious and eternal gospel to people who are mere clay pots in this life. This may be a reference back to Genesis 2:7 and how God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed life into clay pots.

The end result is there is no question where the surpassing greatness of the power and often the miraculous signs that accompany the spread of the gospel comes from. They do not originate with these clay pots, they come from God. We are merely clay containers of His glory.

Of course the other side of the picture is that we as clay pots are fragile. We can be afflicted, persecuted, perplexed, and crushed. But in verse 9 Paul comes back and says "persecuted but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed."

Rome could not explain the resilience of the early Christians. The more these early Christians were persecuted, crushed, and martyred the more the gospel spread. For every one that was delivered over to death, ten would rise up to take their place with the same radiance of the love and life of Christ.

Christians are best pictured by Gideon and his 300 chosen men in Judged 7:15-22. They were armed with nothing but trumpets and clay pots with torches inside. Humanly speaking, the scene looked foolish. But at just the right time in the middle of the night, they surrounded the camp of Midian, blew the trumpets and smashed the clay pitchers. The resulting illuminating effect on the enemy's camp was astounding. They thought they had just been invaded by a huge army.

Do not miss the picture. When God allows a Christian to be crushed, the inner bright light of the Holy Spirit and the life of Christ begins to shine. Many times the gospel shines brightest through a Christian at their darkest hour.

The analogy Paul sets fourth is very powerful to explain why God sometimes allows His choice servants to undergo severe trials. Every crack in the clay pot emits a new beam of light from the inner Spirit of God. The bigger the crack the brighter the light. Welcome to clay pot ministry.

A Life That Means More Than Life Itself: 1 Corinthians 4:10-12

“10) always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11) For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12) So death works in us, but life in you.”

At first glance, these three verses seem to be contradictory. How can Paul talk about death working in him while life was at work in the recipients of the letter? (Vs 12) The answer is one of the paradoxes of the Christian life.

According to John 10:10, Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly. Then in Matthew 10:38 Jesus calls His followers to be prepared to take up his cross and follow Him.

We now see the issue Paul was talking about come into focus. Believing in Jesus and the gospel brings us forgiveness of sin, inner freedom, new life in the Spirit, and eternal life. What we have in Christ is incomparable and incomprehensible.

At the same time, being a Christian puts us on a path that is contrary to the world. Living for Jesus very well may bring persecution in this life. Paul was willing to lay his physical life on the line for the surpassing greatness of the value he gained in Christ. (See Philipians 3:7-11)

This brings up the whole conversation of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I would encourage you to read Matthew 10:16-42 to learn the full teaching from Jesus as to what it means to be His disciple.

Let me say it this way: Believing in Jesus Christ places the believer into a life that means more than life itself. Salvation ushers us into a life that is far beyond all comparison. The call to share the gospel and this amazing life with others is worth more than any sacrifice we may encounter.

Preparing for Eternity: 2 Corinthians 4:13-15

“12) So death works in us, but life in you. 13) But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I believed, therefore I spoke,” we also believe, therefore we also speak, 14) knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. 15) For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.”

Paul was not motivated by a fear of death, but he did recognize the reality of physical death and aging. This text leads into the greatest passage in the Bible on aging and death. Paul was motivated by the hope of the resurrection and the promise of the gospel.

Aging and death is common to all people. When we were born a clock started ticking within us. We may be able to extend our lifespan by a few years through clean living, good nutrition, physical fitness, and wise choices, but we cannot beat the clock. Hebrews 9:27 says, “... it is appointed unto man to die once and after that comes judgment.”

The promise of eternal life through the gospel of Jesus Christ was what motivated Paul to preach the gospel. Faith prompted him to speak. (See Vs 13)

Have you accepted your own mortality and prepared for the inevitable? Are you investing this life in the next life or are you living as if there is no tomorrow? Jesus spoke of the importance of storing up treasures in heaven. (See Matthew 6:19-21) I would encourage you to start investing in eternity.

Mind-Boggling Comparisons: 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1

“16) Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17) For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18) while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 1) For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

Paul now moves into a candid discussion of aging, death, and dying for the believer. In these amazing verses he teases our mind with some amazing comparisons

The first and most obvious comparison is glory itself. Remember in the previous chapter he said that Moses found a fading glory in His encounter with God when the Law was given. (Vs 3:7) He then went on to say that the believer had a surpassing glory in this life through the walk in the

Spirit. (Vs 3:10-11) But now when he speaks of what awaits the believer immediately after death he talks about “an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” (Vs 4:17) The progression should not be missed.

The second comparison relates to the outer man and the inner man. (See Vs 4:16) In this comparison he notes that the outer body can age and decay, but the inner man can be renewed day by day. It is possible for the believer to thrive inwardly even though they struggle and have health problems outwardly.

The third comparison relates to time. He uses the word “momentary” to describe the duration of our physical life. He then uses the word “eternal” to describe the life that is to come. (Vs 4:17) Even the longest life on earth is a blink of the eye when compared to eternity.

His forth comparison relates to weight. In verse 17 he talks about the light affliction of this life compared to the eternal weight of glory that awaits the believer after death. Any trials or health struggles in this life are very light compared to the incomprehensible weight of the glory that is to come. He says it in such a way as to suggest that those who struggle the most here will be more prepared to embrace what is to come.

Fifth, he compares the seen with the unseen. (See Vs 4:18) We are naturally accustomed to relate to and interact with the seen realm of this physical world. But Paul says there is an unseen realm that is equally as real and far more lasting. He then points out that what is seen is temporary, but what is not seen is eternal. This requires a major shift in thinking from our natural mindset.

Finally, he compares our present physical body to a fragile and temporary tent and our coming heavenly body to a durable and eternal house. (Vs 5:1) His point is obvious, do not get so attached to this life that you fail to prepare for what is to come.

Take time to mentally chew on each of these comparisons. They are packed with meaning and full of application. They were intended to cause us to not lose heart with our aches and pains in this life. A glory beyond comparison awaits the born-again believer in the next life.

A New House In Exchange For An Old Tent: 2 Corinthians 5:1-5

“1) For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2) For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, 3) inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. 4) For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. 5) Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.”

In this text, Paul compares our physical body to a tent. It is an apt illustration because he himself was a tent-maker. (See Acts 18:3) Though tents can be durable, they are not permanent. They are subject to storms and wear out over time.

By contrast, houses of his day were often built of stone and could endure for centuries. He compares our new heavenly bodies to a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

He moves on in the next few verses to concede that while we are in our earthly bodies we groan longing for something more permanent and more glorious. The Christian has the hope that one day our mortality will be swallowed up by life. Something new and something much better is coming.

In the meanwhile, God has given us His Spirit as a pledge. The Holy Spirit is like earnest money or a down payment on our eternal house. At the moment of death and separation from this body God has a new dwelling waiting for us.

I personally see a subtle reference in this text to the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:21 and God making garments of skin for them so that they might not remain naked. I believe that was the point when mankind was clothed with mortality or placed in mortal skins so that the consequence of sin which is death might start ticking. (See Genesis 2:17)

In 1 Corinthians 15:42-49 Paul painted the picture of the new heavenly body that awaits every believer. I must concede that my present earthly body has been very good to me. It has served me well during my sojourn on earth. But in recent years my tent has been wearing down.

At one point, I danced with pain every day as my knees had worn out. I sometimes point to 2 Corinthians 5:4 as an excuse to groan, but my wife does not buy my theological argument. I simply respond that my spirit is looking forward to an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison. I admit, I'm ready to trade-in this old tent for the new house Jesus has waiting for me!

Good Courage and Unshakable Confidence in the Face of Death: 2 Corinthians 5:6-8

“6) Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord— 7) for we walk by faith, not by sight— 8) we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.”

What does it mean to be of good courage? It is the idea of living with unshakable confidence that when this body expires we are immediately in the presence of God. This is the promise and hope of every believer.

Keep in mind, the context of these verses is talking about physical death. The biblical meaning of “death” is “separation.” It is the moment that the ongoing and eternal soul and spirit are separated from the temporary physical body.

Prior to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Luke 16:19-31 was the common experience of all people. There were two compartments for the dead. The Old Testament saints were in Abraham's bosom and the ungodly were in Hades. Satan had the keys of death.

But according to Ephesians 4:9-10, between His crucifixion and resurrection Jesus descended to the lower parts of the earth. He was on a mission to take the keys of death away from the devil. (See Revelation 1:18) He also led a host of captives. He emptied Abraham's bosom and took the Old Testament saints to glory with Him.

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ changed everything. He not only made a way for sinful humanity to be saved through faith, He also changed what happens at the moment of physical death for the believer. They are now ushered immediately into the presence of God. To be absent from the physical body is to be present with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8)

The most profound example of this unshakable faith is recorded in Philippians 1:20-26. When facing the possibility of his own martyrdom, Paul said; "For to me, to live in Christ, and to die is gain."

He had zero doubt what would happen at the moment of his physical death. His soul and spirit would be separated from his physical body, but he would experience glorious and conscious existence in God's presence instantly.

Of course, 2 Corinthians 12:1-6 tells us that he had a preview of what is to come. This may be partly why he had such unshakable faith and confidence throughout his entire ministry.

Having the Right Ambition: 2 Corinthians 5:8-10

"8) we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. 9) Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. 10) For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

Paul looked forward to his eventual promotion. He looked forward to being absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. But His primary ambition was to be pleasing to the Lord. No matter where he was or what he was doing, he wanted to be pleasing to Jesus Christ.

Verse 9 is an amazing ambition to live by. Before doing anything, Paul would stop and ask, "will this bring glory to God?" That measuring stick will prevent many bad decisions in life and lead us down some paths a self-centered mindset would obviously miss. Do not minimize this principle.

Then in verse 10 he said we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to be recompensed for the deeds we have done in this body. Many scholars refer to this as “The Rewarding Seat of Christ.” This judgment seat is for believers. It does not relate to salvation, rather it relates to what you have done with your life as a Christian. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 is a good cross-reference on this verse. Did you build on the foundation of Jesus Christ with gold, silver, and precious stones, or did you build with wood, hay, and stubble? We will each answer for how we have lived as Christians.

This is very different from the Great White Throne Judgement Throne pictured in Revelation 20:11-15. This is the resurrection and judgment of the ungodly. This judgment relates to eternal destiny in the lake of fire. Christians will never face this judgment seat, because Jesus bore the judgment of their sin for them on the cross. That is the central point of the gospel itself.

This text begs the question, “What are you doing with your life for the sake of Jesus Christ and eternity?” Again I might ask; “Are you investing your time, talents, and resources to lay up treasures in heaven or are you living for self consumption and the pleasures of this life?” (See Matthew 6:19-21)

Paul found a unique way to keep these questions before him. He simply made it his ambition to be pleasing to God in everything. He realized that the things that were pleasing to God automatically stored up treasure in heaven. When he pleased God he was building with quality materials. When he was walking in the Spirit he was crucifying the flesh. This was his ambition in life.

Two Strong Motivators: 2 Corinthians 5:11-15

“11) Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. 12) We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart. 13) For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you. 14) For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; 15) and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”

At first glance, these are difficult verses to understand, but when they are read in context their meaning comes into focus. Paul was leveraging the reality of death and coming judgment as the reason for his drive to share the gospel and reach people for Jesus Christ. He had no problem begging people to be reconciled to God. (See 2 Corinthians 5:20)

In these verses he points out two motivations that prompted him. First, in verse 11 he said; “knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men.” He had a righteous fear of the justice of God. He realized that coming judgment would be impartial. (See Romans 2:5-13) Unfortunately,

many today soft-peddle the coming judgment and wrath of God. Paul did just the opposite. His view of the justice of God motivated him to warn people.

Second, in verse 14 he said; "For the love of Christ controls us..." He goes on to clearly explain how the death of Christ alone atones for human sin. As John 3:16 says, the work of Jesus Christ on the cross was the greatest expression of God's love for lost humanity. It is *the* Good News! His view of the love of God motivated him to call people to repentance.

The bottom line was that Paul laid his life on the line to spread the gospel and encourage people to trust in Jesus. The casual observer would say that Paul was "beside himself" with an obsession to share the gospel. Why? Because he understood the transforming power of the gospel and that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. (See Acts 4:11-12)

His conclusion in verse 15 is well taken. Because Jesus died for us, every Christian should live for Him. We should be motivated to share the gospel out of both a fear of coming judgment and the love of God summed up in the gospel. The two motivators should compliment each other.

Promise of a New Life: 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

"16) Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. 17) Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come."

Paul no longer evaluated people from a human point of view. He wanted to know them as transformed through the gospel and mature in Christ. He viewed people through their potential "in Christ."

This leads into one of the greatest promises of new life found in the Bible. Verse 17 says, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

In 1973 as a lost and very messed up teenager, the Spirit of God led me to this verse. I hated myself. I had loaded a 12 gauge shotgun and was ready to end my life. I wanted to be a different person. I was at the lowest point in my life, but God led me to crack open a Bible and beg, "God if you are real, show me."

God providentially led me to 2 Corinthians 5:17. The words burst into my soul like a ray of light at midnight. There it was –the promise of a new life! The old things could pass away and all things could become new. I was not bound by my past. Jesus Christ could forgive me and change me.

I cried out and said, “Jesus, if you can take this mess and turn me into a new person, I give my life to you without reservation!” God answered my prayer. Things started to change rapidly in my life as I started devouring the Bible.

I had been entangled in the occult and terribly tormented by demonic spirits. Over the next months, Jesus set me free. One-by-one strongholds of sin started falling in my life. Over the next few years the Spirit of God accomplished a deep cleansing process in me. It was not easy. I lost some battles but God was so faithful.

I also had a zeal to tell others about Jesus. My first attempts at witnessing were pathetic, but my enthusiasm won the day. I started leading Bible studies and then preaching in numerous churches as a teenager. Then it was off to Bible College. 2 Corinthians 5:17 became my launching pad to a new life and eventually fruitful ministry around the world.

It all started a long time ago, but God is so good. He is still working on me and writing new chapters in my life. I am a very different person today than I was back then, but I am still madly in love with Jesus Christ. I believe in the power of the Gospel to give a new start in life. Our God is the God of the 2nd Chance.

He will do the same for you if you ask. He wants to be your Savior, Lord and best friend. 2 Corinthian 5:17 is as much for you as it is for me.

The Ministry of Reconciliation: 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

“17) Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 18) Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19) namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

These verses contain the amazing story of a loving God seeking lost and sinful people. The whole story of Jesus Christ being born into humanity, living a sinless life, ministering to the needs of people and then being rejected and crucified is part of that story. Paul says that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.”

This is the story of John 3:16-17. Most of us know John 3:16; “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him might not perish, but have eternal life.” But have you taken time to seriously consider the next verse? “17) For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

Paul calls this “the ministry of reconciliation.” God does not want to condemn and judge people, He wants to reach, forgive, heal and transform people. He wants to deliver them from the ravages of sin and Satan. He wants to pour out His love and grace on them. Just as Jesus rose from the dead to new life, so He wants to give new life to people lost and dead in sin.

But it doesn't stop there. How does He spread this good news to people? He wants every born-again child of God to become a mouthpiece of this "ministry of reconciliation." He wants us to tell others what Jesus has done in our life.

The word "reconciliation" basically means to "turn enemies into friends." It means "to put together." It means "to breach the divide." It means "to end the war and make peace." It means "to turn the enmity into a positive relationship."

Are you separated from God? Do you hate Him for no reason? Are you at war with Him? The problem is most likely rooted in your own sin or lies Satan has planted in your heart about God. After Adam and Eve sinned, they ran and tried to hide from God. (Genesis 3:8-11) Sin always separates people from God. But notice that God walked into the garden seeking Adam and Eve. God has always been seeking out sinful humanity.

In the last section I briefly shared my story. I did not find God, He found me. I was not seeking God, He was seeking me. I was running from God, but He graciously pursued me. Jesus Christ has completely changed my life. He reconciled me to Himself.

The same is true for you. God is trying to get your attention and draw you to Himself. He wants to end your inner battle stemming from sin, deception, and guilt. He does not want to condemn you, He wants to forgive you and give you a new life!

Jesus has done everything to reconcile you to God. But He will not force you to come to Him. He is the perfect gentleman. He is standing at the door of your life and gently knocking. (Revelation 3:20) It is up to you to open the door through simple faith and invite Him into your life.

Ambassadors of Heaven: 2 Corinthians 5:20

"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

Have you ever thought of yourself as an ambassador? The Great Commission makes us Ambassador of Heaven. (See Matthew 28:18-20)

So what is an ambassador? Within the realm of international affairs, "an ambassador is sent forth in an official capacity, to represent a government in the territory of another nation, whose authority and power is not measured by his own talents and abilities, but is in direct proportion to the authority of the sovereign nation he/she represents." Let that definition sink into your spirit.

Jesus has sent us forth in an official capacity to represent Him here on earth. We are not limited to our own talents and abilities. We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to be His

witnesses. (Acts 1:8) Just like Moses was given the rod of God to overcome his inadequacies, we have been given spiritual gifts that God can manifest through us for His glory. (See 1 Corinthians 12-14)

When we share the gospel, it is God Himself who speaks through us. The Holy Spirit entreats people to be reconciled to God. The invitation we give for people to trust in Jesus is as authoritative as if God Himself was speaking to them. We do not save anyone, as ambassadors we merely state the official business of God.

This became very real to me a few years ago. As Chairman of the International Relations Committee for the Iowa House of Representatives, I had the privilege of introducing the Ambassador from Israel to the United States for an address to our chamber. When he spoke, it was suddenly the voice of Israel speaking to us. He began, “Madam Speaker and Representatives of the State of Iowa, Israel extends our greetings to you and we want to thank the State of Iowa for our warm relations.” Suddenly it was the Nation of Israel speaking to the State of Iowa.

That’s exactly what happens when a Christian shares the Gospel. Heaven is speaking through us to people on earth. It is the same as if God Himself is speaking. We are doing His official business that has been entrusted to us on behalf of the Kingdom of Light. As Paul said, “we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:20b) Note the tone of authority and power in his words. He was speaking as an Ambassador for Christ.

The Gospel in Two Phrases: 2 Corinthians 5:21

“21) He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

This verse shares the gospel in two phrases. Jesus, Who was absolutely sinless and innocent, took on our sin and was judged in our place, that He might impart to us His righteousness. He took our sin and gave us His righteousness. This is the most amazing legal transaction in human history.

But when the whole story is understood, it is much more than a legal transaction before God. There is also a practical application implied in this verse. We are not only justified by faith in the work of Jesus on the cross for us, those who receive Him are also filled with the Holy Spirit. We have the inner resource to walk in righteousness.

Romans 8:1-11 tells the story. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus because Jesus condemned sin in the flesh. But there is more! The text goes on to say that those who are in Christ can live and walk in the Spirit in the newness of life!

When I was a young believer, the doctrines of justification by faith and sanctification by works were often pitted against each other. I now recognize that they are opposite sides of the coin of

salvation. I am 100% forgiven and justified by faith in the work of Jesus Christ dying on the cross from my sins ... *and* I am given the inner resources to change and live a new life!

This explains 2 Corinthians 5:17; “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away, behold, new things have come.” Jesus died on the cross not only to save us but also to change us!

Two Dangers Of The Human Heart: 2 Corinthians 6:1-3

“1) And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain— 2) for He says, “at the acceptable time I listened to you, and the on the day of salvation, I helped you.” Behold, now is “ the acceptable time,” behold, now is “ the day of salvation ”— 3) giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited,”

There are two dangers talked about in these verses. The first is insincerity and the second is indifference.

Do not be insincere and play games with God or with salvation. Do not trample grace under foot and turn your back on God. The children of Israel did this often in the Old Testament. They left Egypt as if they wanted freedom, but they quickly turned back and made a golden calf when Moses was up in the mountain.

Salvation is not on our terms, it is on God’s terms. It includes repentance from our old ways and seeking God in sincerity and truth. Do not receive the grace of God in vain. Over time you will know them by their fruits. (Matthew 7:15-23)

On the other hand, do not be indifferent and hold God at arms length and put off trusting in Jesus. “Behold, now is the day of salvation.” You have no promise of another day or another chance. I like what Paul said a few verses earlier, “... as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:20) God owes you nothing, including another chance to come to Him.

Don’t Become a Stumbling Block: 2 Corinthians 6:3

“3) giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited,”

It's the oldest trick in the book. Satan loves to put a man or woman with twisted moral character into a position of influence and power in the Christian world. When they are exposed and fall, it discredits the gospel.

It happens frequently with Christian leaders today in every denomination. Sometimes it's a sharp temper and anger like James and John who wanted to call fire down from heaven and destroy a whole city. (Luke 9:51-56) Other times it's becoming a lover for money like Judas who was willing to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. (Matthew 26:14-16) Or it may be sexual lusts,

pornography, fornication and adultery as in the case of David who brought years of disgrace on his reign and judgment on his family. He never rebuilt his reputation. (2 Samuel 11) It could even be a secret addiction to drugs or alcohol. Satan is not picky.

These are a few of the more common ones. The sinful bondage and compromise you fail to conquer as a young Christian will come back to haunt you later in life. Satan can and will set you up for a big fall in such a way that others will be demoralized and undermined in their faith.

Every year the Christian world is shaken by new disclosures of shameful hypocrisy from prominent leaders. No one is exempt. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Be humble and walk in grace. Invite the Holy Spirit to cleanse and sanctify you. Don't aim for perfection, rather aim for godliness and holiness. Be real and sincere. Don't become a stumbling block.

A Candid Picture: 1 Corinthians 6:3-10

“3) giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited, 4) but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, 5) in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, 6) in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, 7) in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, 8) by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; 9) as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, 10) as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.”

This is one of those incredibly long sentences that the Apostle Paul was known for writing. Keep in mind, it actually started in verse one. He stuffed all kinds of things into these verses, but he was dealing with a really big subject.

If someone were to ask what they could expect from the Christian life and ministry, this would be a good text to answer their question. It is full of good and bad, disappointments, and struggles and persecution interwoven with blessings and divine encounters and the power of God. It calls for patience and sacrifice and is sometimes met with misunderstanding and even persecution. Sometimes it means going without. Other times, heaven is opened and we are overcome with amazing spiritual blessings.

But above all, Paul points out that serving Jesus calls for truth, honesty, integrity, personal sacrifice, and a willingness to suffer when needed to spread the gospel. This text is far removed from the one-sided and distorted health, wealth, and prosperity doctrine. But it was Paul's story. Don't expect Divine encounters that include amazing signs and wonders if you are not willing to be squeezed to the point of despairing of life itself. Ministry is difficult.

That was true for Moses and that was also true for Paul. Both had amazing encounters with God accompanied by exhausting challenges from people that caused them to despair even of life itself. Spiritual warfare and people problems go hand in hand with ministry.

But Paul's main point was emphasized in verse 3; "giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited." No matter what happens, we are not to become stumbling blocks for the gospel. Our goal is to point people to Jesus and let Him be Lord of our circumstances. The above text is a very candid and true picture of the ups and downs of ministry and the Christian life.

Earning The Trust to Warn: 2 Corinthians 6:11-13

"11) Oh, dear Corinthian friends! We have spoken honestly with you, and our hearts are open to you. 12) There is no lack of love on our part, but you have withheld your love from us. 13) I am asking you to respond as if you were my own children. Open your hearts to us!" (NLT)

These are difficult verses to interpret. Paul had just poured out his heart about his sincere sacrifice and purity in ministry for the people God called him to serve. He was real, sincere, and devoted, but now he had to step up and warn them about the pending danger.

As we move into the next context, we will discover that some of the Corinthians were entering into wrong relationships that were emotionally entangling and threatened to short circuit their discernment and good judgment. They were relationships with an umbilical cord back to the dark schemes of Satan himself. Paul needed to warn them, but intervention when yellow lights are flashing can be difficult. It takes unwavering trust and respect for the leader.

Pastors and spiritual leaders need to foster a relationship with their people based on love, honesty, trust, and integrity. They need to be open and transparent with their people and they need the same in return.

Just like in a family, there will be times when a good pastor sees one of his people straying into moral or spiritual danger and needs to correct them. Or like a shepherd, he may see wolves sneaking in and he needs to sound the alarm. They need to earn the trust to warn.

I believe Hebrews 13:17 captures what Paul was saying in these three verses. The writer said, "17) Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."

Unequally Yoked: 2 Corinthians 6:14-16

"14) Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? 15) Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? 16) Or what agreement has the

temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them, and I will be there God, and they shall be my people."

The King James Version says, "do not be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever." The word picture is very graphic. It would be like a strong oxen pulling on one side of the yoke while being paired with a frail mule on the other side. The results would be disastrous. Shortly into the day, the mule would be exhausted and most likely crushed. Why? Because they do not pull the same. The same is true for key relationships in life.

There are generally two kinds of relationships in which believers should not be "yoked" together with unbelievers. The first is a dating or courtship relationship. The morals and values of a believer and an unbeliever are predictably very different. But hormones can blind good judgment.

Many gifted and promising young Christians have been derailed from Christian service and accumulated years of suffering, neglect, and remorse because of unwisely dating and then marrying a non-Christian. This is Satan's primary way of destroying the potential and calling of Christian young people. Avoid this trap at all costs.

There is only one justifiable scenario in which a Christian should be unequally yoked in marriage to an unbeliever. That occurs in a marriage when one spouse becomes a Christian before the other. Paul gave guidance for this situation in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16.

The second relationship with unbelievers that a Christian should avoid is formal business partnerships. The morals, values, business ethic and work ethic of the world will most likely be radically different from that of a godly Christian. If God were to judge your partner for some reason, you would automatically share in that judgment.

Paul goes on to say that the core differences between Christians and the world are as radically different as righteousness vs. lawlessness, light vs. darkness, Christ vs Satan, and the temple of God vs. idols. The values of the kingdom of God and the values of the world are polar opposites. They cannot be "yoked" together and pull equally or even in the same direction.

Sadly, I need to add in closing that I have seen professing Christian spouses and businessmen and women with terrible attitudes, morals, and business ethics. This is a travesty beyond comprehension. It is an utter betrayal of Christ and denial of the Gospel.

If this is you, I beg you to repent and invite the grace and presence of God into your public life. Being salt and light for the glory of God includes our family relationships and our business dealings. Christians are to be "yoked" together with Christ and pulling in the same direction.

Set Aside For God: 2 Corinthians 6:16-18

“16) Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 17) Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says the Lord. “And do not touch what is unclean. 18) And I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,” Says the Lord Almighty.”

Paul was an Old Testament scholar. He owned and maintained numerous Old Testament scrolls himself. Everything he taught was anchored in the Word of God.

In these verses he was using the Old Testament to call God's people into separation from the world. Paul was establishing the point that God wants His people to be set apart for Himself.

This is not legalism. It is a call to holiness and intimacy with God. The Apostle John emphasized this call into fellowship with God in 1 John 1:5-7. If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with God. If we walk in darkness, that fellowship is broken. Sin always separates us from God and interrupts fellowship. God calls every believer to forsake the world and live a life set aside for Him.

This is one of the aspects of the Christian life seldom preached in modern evangelicalism. God calls us to forsake the world and embrace close and uninterrupted fellowship with Himself. This communion with God through the indwelling Holy Spirit moves the consecrated believer into the potential for surpassing fellowship with God unimaginable to the Old Testament saints.

One of my favorite Psalms is 4:3-4; “3) But know that the Lord has set apart the godly man for Himself; the Lord hears when I call to Him. 4) Tremble, and do not sin; meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still.” What we have in Christ and the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit far surpasses anything David experienced or understood, but the basic principles are the same.

We need to be a separated people. Legalism focuses on rigid separation from sin. Walking in the Spirit focuses on separation into deep and intimate communion with God. We fully embrace grace, the fruit of the Spirit, and an unquenchable thirst for God. This is not talking about salvation, it is talking about consecration and experiential intimacy with God.

The Spirit-filled believer forsakes sin not because it is merely wrong, but because it interrupts intimacy with God. They hunger and thirst more for communion with God than acceptance by the world or fleshly pleasure.

A carnal Christian has no understanding of this deep and precious connection with God through the Spirit. This was part of Paul's message to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 2 and 3. I urge you to be set aside for God.

The Dungeon or The Palace: 2 Corinthians 7:1

“1) Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

Because of the promise of intimacy with God recorded in 2 Corinthians 6:16-18, we have both reason and motive to strive toward personal holiness. The full context of 1 Peter 1:3-19 concludes with the same calling. “14) As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, 15) but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourself also in all your behavior, 16) because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am Holy.”

Paul says that this process is on two levels. First, we are to move toward holiness on the level of the flesh. Jesus Christ wants to set us free from the deeds of the flesh as recorded in Galatians 5:19-21. In Christ we can come to freedom from sinful and fleshly bondage. We need not be slaves to sinful lusts or compulsions of any kind. Jesus Christ can break the power of sin in our lives.

Look carefully at the wording in 2 Corinthians 7:1, we are to “cleanse ourself of all defilement.” The word “cleanse” is a picture of the cleansing of a leper. (Matthew 8:3) Jesus made his flesh totally clean. Both the infection and the stigma were gone. He was no longer subject to the ways of a leper. Because of what Jesus had done for him, he could part from life in the leper colony.

Ironically, the word “defilement” is even more graphic. It relates to acts of defilement produced by the body. It would not be a stretch to say; “don’t live in the sewer any more.” We need not live like pigs that wallow in their own manure. God wants our outward condition to change.

The implication is that we have a choice in the matter. We can keep living in the leper colony or wallowing in the manure pile of sin, but that’s not where the Holy God dwells. If you want to fellowship with the Holy God, you better take a bath and change your clothes. *Don’t continue to dwell where He doesn’t abide.*

Genesis 41:14 might provide a mental picture for us. Joseph was living in the dungeon when he was suddenly called to appear before Pharaoh. The text says, “and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to pharaoh.” He was already clean on the inside, but outwardly he needed some attention. Why? Because Joseph was leaving the dungeon and heading to the palace. He was being invited into the presence of the King. He was transitioning into a new life that included a new address. If you want to hang out with the king, you better put off your dungeon ways.

But second, Paul says we are to move toward holiness on the level of the spirit. This is now inward. Stop filling your heart and mind with garbage and instead start feeding on that which is good and wholesome. (Philippians 4:8-9)

I believe that practical holiness is a process and not an event. Colossians 3:1-17 may be the most practical explanation of this growth process. When we study this text, we quickly discover that these are things God calls us to do. He does not do them for us. We are called to “cleanse ourselves” as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 7:1. God gives us His grace, strength, and cleansing ministry of the Holy Spirit for the journey, but He doesn’t force the change or the process. He calls, but we must follow.

We Need Each Other: 2 Corinthians 7:2-4

“2) Make room for us in your hearts; we wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one. 3) I do not speak to condemn you, for I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together. 4) Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction.”

These verses illustrate not only the integrity of the Apostle Paul in his approach to ministry, but also his genuine affection for people. He wronged no one, he corrupted not one, and he took advantage of no one. He was ready to both live and die for the family of God. Wow! That covers it all.

He wasn’t milking his database for money, exploiting the vulnerability of the elderly, or hitting on the women for sexual favors. To the contrary, he was protecting them. His only goal was to present each person complete in Christ. (See Colossians 1:28-29)

The Body of Christ has to be built on mutual trust, love, and commitment. We need to make room for each other in our hearts. We need to sacrifice for each other. We need to follow the example of the early church. I suspect the days before us will be very similar to the external dynamics of the early church. We will need each other!

Being a Honing Stone: 2 Corinthians 7:5-7

“5) For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. 6) But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; 7) and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.”

Paul had written a very candid and direct previous letter to them. 1 Corinthians was both informative but also corrective. He exposed sin on many levels and called for repentance and change. After sending the letter it seems that he regretted it. He had second thoughts about being so blunt and direct.

News traveled slowly back then. He prayed, waited, and kept ministering at his present post. But Paul was not trying to gain the approval of men, rather he was trying to present men as

approved by God. Speaking the truth in love is not easy. Truth might hurt and offend people, but letting them live in open sin will ruin them and distort the gospel.

As Paul writes this chapter, he records the story that Titus had just returned to him and brought news. It almost reads like Titus walked in right at this point in his writing this Epistle. He had good news. Paul's previous letter had sparked genuine repentance and poured new zeal on their love for God. Paul had reason for rejoicing.

Before moving on to the next content, it is important to talk about the role of a good mentor. Do you have someone in your life that can hold you accountable and even confront you when you mess up or go astray? If you do not, you are living in the danger zone. Sin is deceitful and the human heart can be deceived.

The other side of that coin is also important. Has God put you in a place to watch over some friends? Have you earned the right to tackle the truth in love in the life of others? I am not talking about being a critic. I am talking about being a true friend through the good and the bad.

Proverbs 27:17 says; "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Don't shy away from iron sharpening iron relationships. They are important. Living life on the front lines today can take the edge off in a hurry. I value the honing stones God has placed in my life.

The Conviction of the Holy Spirit: 2 Corinthians 7:8-10

"8) For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it— for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while— 9) I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. 10) For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death."

The truth can hurt, but it is good for us. In these verses Paul shares his heart about how hard it was for him to write the letter that is 1 Corinthians and send it to them. He spoke to them truthfully about numerous sins that were overtaking them. He talked about divisions in the body, carnality, law suits, sexual immoralities, and spiritual pride manifested by self-promotion. The letter called them to repentance.

He did not write the letter to condemn them. He did it because he loved them and did not want them to grieve the Holy Spirit or miss the deep fellowship God has for those who walk in the light. (Ephesians 4:30-32, 1 John 1:5-7) He was not legalistic, he was calling them to wholeness and holiness.

As he writes these verses, he is rejoicing in the fact that though the truth caused sorrow, the Holy Spirit used it to bring them to repentance. I personally value the conviction ministry of the

Holy Spirit very highly. When people come under conviction because of preaching of truth, it is the Holy Spirit wrestling with them. (John 16:7-11)

Many pastors today never talk about sin because they do not want people to feel uncomfortable. But apart from the Holy Spirit bringing conviction, there can be no repentance.

I like what Isaiah 57:15 says; “(15) For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.” Both of the Great Awakenings were accompanied by deep conviction of sin, contrition, and repentance. But it was not the evangelists who did the convicting, they merely preached the uncompromising Word of God, while the Holy Spirit brought conviction.

I have never seen a wondrous conversion apart from sorrow over personal sin, tears, contrition, confession, and repentance. Salvation is not an intellectual exercise, it is the work of the Holy Spirit deep within the soul and spirit of people. When the Holy Spirit is working in His role of conviction, there will be a godly sorrow.

As Paul said in verse 10, “the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces repentance without regret, but the sorrow of the world produces death.” Why? Because the sorrow of the world is based on condemnation with no accompanying grace, mercy or hope of forgiveness. But the conviction of the Holy Spirit offers forgiveness and new life. His goal is to build up and not tear down. He wants to heal and not destroy.

When the Spirit of God brings conviction into your soul, respond quickly. Repent from your sin and turn from it. Invite Him to wash you and sanctify you and make you clean. I believe the Christian life is a cleansing process that moves us toward experiential holiness. Notice, I did not say legalism. Holiness and legalism are radically different concepts.

Tempered with Love and Grace: 2 Corinthians 7:11-13

“11) For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. 12) So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the offender nor for the sake of the one offended, but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God. 13) For this reason we have been comforted. And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all.”

There are times we may need to correct others, but we also need to be willing to celebrate others. Such was the case with Paul. When Titus returned from Corinth, he brought good news. They had received Paul's letter and responded with love and godly maturity.

From all appearances, it looks like a misunderstanding had taken place and rather than getting upset, the Corinthians had responded with love and patience. Titus had talked things through with them and what could have been a crisis turned instead into a bonding experience.

We are not sure which accusation proved unfounded, but rather than defending himself, Paul was quick to humble himself and turn it into a celebration. He was overwhelmed by joy at the godly way the Corinthian believers responded.

Be sure that misunderstandings will happen between Christians. Paul was courageous enough to check out the rumor. Though we are not told which area Paul missed the mark on, it must have related to something quite serious. At least he cared enough to ask.

In response, the Corinthians did a great job of following the advice of James; "... be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger." (James 1:19) They were innocent but responded in a godly way. Agape love defused the matter and turned it into a revival.

I relish the fact that the Bible gives us examples of human error. It records both the good and the bad about people. It lets us know that our biblical heroes were human and made mistakes. It also shows us that the Holy Spirit can work through any situation and turn it into good. Always leave room for love and the grace of God!

Follow Paul's example and be ready to admit when you are wrong and eager to celebrate others when they are right. This is a great example of how the early church worked through a conflict. They were not immune. They were human, but tempered with love and grace.

The Value of Christian Community: 2 Corinthians 7:13-16

"13) For this reason we have been comforted. And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. 14) For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I was not put to shame; but as we spoke all things to you in truth, so also our boasting before Titus proved to be the truth. 15) And his affection abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. 16) I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you."

Titus was a messenger sent by Paul to the church at Corinth, but they received and treated him with sincere love and acceptance. I am not sure how difficult his journey was getting to Corinth, but they made his trip more than worth the effort. Verse 13 says "his spirit has been refreshed by you all." Then verse 15 says, "And his affection abounds all the more toward you." The bottom line is that the believers in the church at Corinth and Titus abounded deeply with each other.

For many years our family did itinerant ministry across the United States and around the world. We made many friends. To this day we have cherished relationships in many places. The Spirit of God can bind people together in indescribable ways.

I maintain that Christianity by definition is highly relational. Much of the work God wants to do in your life and through your life will happen on the relational level. Learn to love people the way God loves people. If you have been deeply wounded by others, your healing will come as you let others affirm you in agape love.

I met a young Christian man recently who talked about the value of Christians living in community together. He was referring to this very principle. God calls people to a local church to add value to each other. Ministry unfolds through mutual interaction and relationships within the body of Christ. It does not happen in isolation or in a corner.

So have we ever had a bad experience or been burned by people. Of course! People are people, but Jesus wants to change and impact them. Some of the most painful people encounters turned into the deepest ministries over time. Some people are very needy, broken, and hurt. Who knows, you might be the healing hand of Jesus to start them down the road of healing. Relational ministry is mutual. Some ministry will be for you, while others will be through you.

I don't know if Titus was a loner or not, but the church at Corinth poured into him in a transformational way. He was deeply impacted. What about you? Could it be that God wants to add value to your life through sincere interaction with His people? Do you need to step out and connect in Christian Community?

Introduction to Heaven's Accounting System: 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

"1) Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia. 2) They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. 3) For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. 4) They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. 5) They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do." (NLT)

The New Living Translation does an excellent job of capturing the abundant kindness of the churches across Macedonia for the relief of the suffering Christians back in Jerusalem. Paul was on a mission to raise money for them. Even though the Macedonian Christians themselves were poor, they begged for the privilege of helping in this benevolent endeavor.

This is a sign of maturity in every believer and in new churches planted on the mission field. At some point, they begin to help others. Instead of always living with their hands out trying to receive, they begin to dig deep, sacrifice, and give to others.

This is the point where adolescence turns into adulthood. This is when we discover God as Provider in new ways. This is the crucial faith-building stage when God begins to work in

multiplication rather than mere addition in our life. Paul now invites the Corinthians to become part of God's amazing supply chain within His Kingdom.

The next two chapters are going to deal with stewardship in great detail. We are about to discover heaven's accounting system toward those who learn the secret of generosity. Paul is about to share with them that it is impossible to out-give God.

Answer the Invitation to Test God: 2 Corinthians 8:6-8

"6) So we have urged Titus, who encouraged your giving in the first place, to return to you and encourage you to finish this ministry of giving. 7) Since you excel in so many ways—in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love from us—I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving. 8) I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches."

The subject of stewardship and giving is never easy to talk about. Paul was sending Titus back to talk to the Corinthians about this subject, but he was careful not to command them to tithe or give. It is something the Holy Spirit has to birth within God's people.

Shortly after becoming a Christian, God started speaking to me about this subject. Matthew 6:19-21 says; "'19) Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20) But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; 21) for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

That settled it for me! If my heart was going to follow my money, I wanted it to be on fire for God. I started putting God first with my giving. Sometimes it was very hard. I was saving for college and then became a part-time pastor while going to Bible College. My pay was \$75 a week plus an apartment. Welcome to Heaven's Accounting System! God paid my way through Bible College without any loans.

I remember one time I was standing in line to pay my semester bill with almost nothing in hand. I had been wrestling with God that if He didn't supply by the time I stood in front of the cashier, I would drop out of college for a semester. There I stood with little money and a big bill. I didn't have nearly enough money, but just as I turned to walk away, the cashier suddenly said, "Wait a minute, there is a note on your account. It says you have money carried over from last semester. It looks like it is the exact amount you need with the cash you have in hand. You are good for another semester!" To this day I have no idea how that happened.

Raising a growing family on a pastor's salary was very tight at times, but we wanted to put God first. Then it became even more interesting when we moved into full time missions work. Eventually we had eight children. But God has been faithful. Through all of these years we have sincerely tried to be givers on many fronts and we have watched God provide in supernatural ways.

I understand exactly what Paul was saying to Titus. There are many areas of growth in the Christian life, but the big lessons of faith are learned in the area of personal finances.

According to Malachi 3:8-12, this is an area God invites us to test Him in. I would encourage you to study that text and let God speak to you about the area of giving. According to verses 8-9, some people have a curse on their finances because they are robbing God. But then in verses 10-11, God invites us to put Him to the test. This is the only time in the Bible God challenges us to test Him. I would encourage you to study the text and sign up for the challenge!

Jesus Became Poor to Make us Rich: 2 Corinthians 8:9

“9) For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.”

Our salvation is based on the principle that Jesus willingly laid aside the riches of deity in heaven and put on the poverty of humanity on earth. He left eternity to step into time. The Creator became part of the creation... and He did it all knowing He would be rejected by men and crucified on a cross.

Agape love is about giving and not receiving. It is about serving and not being served. John 3:16 says; “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son...”. Love moved the Father to give.

But did you notice that Paul said Jesus became poor that we might become rich? He came to earth that we might go to heaven. He stepped into time to open the door for us to one day step into eternity. He took on humanity to provide a way for us to share in His divine glory.

The context of this verse is about giving to the needs of others and letting God run the accounting system. We have a glimpse of the way God works in Philippians 2:9-11.

After telling the story of how much Jesus suffered for our salvation, the text goes on to share the end result. “9) For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10) that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11) and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:9-11

Blessing always follows sacrifice. God has a way of balancing the ledger. Paul uses Jesus as the example for giving. The point is that you and I can never out give the goodness and kindness of God.

Wise Advice for Giving: 2 Corinthians 8:10-15

“10) Here is my advice: It would be good for you to finish what you started a year ago. Last year you were the first who wanted to give, and you were the first to begin doing it. 11) Now you should finish what you started. Let the eagerness you showed in the beginning be matched now by your giving. Give in proportion to what you have. 12) Whatever you give is acceptable if you give it eagerly. And give according to what you have, not what you don't have. 13) Of course, I don't mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality. 14) Right now you have plenty and can help those who are in need. Later, they will have plenty and can share with you when you need it. In this way, things will be equal. 15) As the Scriptures say, “Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over, and those who gathered only a little had enough.”” (NLT)

Sometimes it is hard to follow Paul's line of reasoning when reading 2 Corinthians. When that happens, I often switch to the New Living Translation. This is one of those times. This text is packed with very helpful insights on giving.

It seems that the Corinthian church had started supporting the relief effort for the believers who were suffering in Jerusalem because of persecution and then they dropped off. Paul was encouraging them to see the effort through to the end. In this paragraph he shares some amazing insights about giving. Let's take a serious look at his counsel for wise and responsible giving.

First, finish what you start. Ministry is built on faithful monthly givers. It is vital to keep the supply line going so those on the front lines can focus on the work.

Second, give based on what you have, not on what you hope to receive. This is very important. It ensures that you are able to keep your commitments.

Third, it is ok to give a one-time gift if that is all you can handle, but make sure you communicate your intent. One-time gifts can be vital to cover special needs like traveling expenses, drilling a well, or building a church, Christian school, orphanage or medical center.

Fourth, commit to ongoing giving out of careful prayer and calculated thought and not in response to an emotional appeal. Make sure you can handle what you promise over the long haul. If you are sponsoring an orphan or a pastor from a less affluent country, they count on your faithful giving. I have seen the pain and suffering caused in other ministries when well-intended supply dries up and orphanages have to close –children suffer.

Fifth, pick your giving organization carefully. Make sure you are giving to good causes and that you are not being scammed. Sadly, there are many dishonest organizations out there who exploit a crisis and play on the emotions of people as a means of making easy money. The same thing was happening in Paul's day.

Sixth, recognize that the believers you support now may become God's supply for other ministry later. Giving has a way of compounding. At some point you might be the one in need.

Seventh, recognize that God has a way of balancing the books. In verse 15, Paul uses the illustration of the children of Israel gathering daily manna. Some gathered more than others, but in the end the supply covered the full need. That's why God wants you to give according to your ability. Some may be able to give more than others, but in the end every gift counts.

Finally, recognize that you will never be able to outrun the blessings that God has for you as a faithful monthly giver. The pastors, mission efforts, or orphans you support on a monthly basis will rise up to become the leaders God wants to work through to shape nations for His glory. Your giving will be multiplied many times over.

If you are looking for a trustworthy and responsible place to direct your monthly giving, I encourage you to look up GoServ Global. I helped start this International mission agency over a decade ago. What God is doing through GoServe Global is absolutely amazing.

But don't take my word for it, look us up on the web and read the stories. Better yet, sign up for a short-term mission trip with us and become part of the miracle. If you are part of a local church looking for a place to plug in to world missions, contact our office and we will arrange a way to come and share the story.

GoServ Global is a gathering of many people, churches, and Christian-owned businesses joining hands to make a big difference at home and around the world for the glory of God. Some give, some go, and many do both. We are not extravagant, glitzy, or fluffy. We just focus on getting the grunt work done in the trenches where real ministry happens. We maximize every dollar God sends our way. I invite you to join us to help change the world for the glory of God!

The Big Picture of God's Supply Line: 2 Corinthians 8:16-24

"16) But thank God! He has given Titus the same enthusiasm for you that I have. 17) Titus welcomed our request that he visit you again. In fact, he himself was very eager to go and see you. 18) We are also sending another brother with Titus. All the churches praise him as a preacher of the Good News. 19) He was appointed by the churches to accompany us as we take the offering to Jerusalem—a service that glorifies the Lord and shows our eagerness to help.

20) We are traveling together to guard against any criticism for the way we are handling this generous gift. 21) We are careful to be honorable before the Lord, but we also want everyone else to see that we are honorable.

22) We are also sending with them another of our brothers who has proven himself many times and has shown on many occasions how eager he is. He is now even more enthusiastic because of his great confidence in you. 23) If anyone asks about Titus, say that he is my partner who

works with me to help you. And the brothers with him have been sent by the churches, and they bring honor to Christ. 24) So show them your love, and prove to all the churches that our boasting about you is justified.” (NLT)

I know this is a long text, but it should be considered as a whole. It is impossible to read these verses without concluding that the preaching of the Gospel was intended to go hand-and-hand with benevolent ministry.

Jesus never intended for the Gospel to be preached while ignoring the basic needs of people. In Matthew 10:7-8, when Jesus sent out the twelve to preach the gospel, He added “8) Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give.” The bottom line is that Jesus cared for people. He took care of their urgent needs.

Jesus did not want His church to focus on itself. His people were to care for sick, hurting, broken, poor, downcast, and displaced people. James emphasized this same message in James 3:14-16. He included food, clothing, and shelter. In James 1:27 he also includes the care of orphans and widows. The preaching of the gospel was always intended to be accompanied by deeds of love and benevolence.

This long passage from 2 Corinthians 8:16-24 highlights the extent to which the early Gentile church took this calling. They took a major offering and sent it with godly evangelists to distribute among the needy as they preached the gospel to them. It was time for them to minister to their persecuted Jewish counterparts. Keep in mind, all Jewish people were eventually persecuted. Helping with their physical needs opened the door to address their spiritual needs.

I know there is a danger of neglecting the gospel and focusing on humanitarian efforts, but we at GoServ Global have found the opposite to be true. When we come in the name of Jesus and care for the physical needs of people it opens their heart to the gospel. It screams “Jesus loves you and He cares for you. He cares for your physical needs and He cares for your spiritual needs. Let me share the full story of Jesus with you.” Sharing the gospel in the context of meeting the urgent needs of people is like putting a hand in a glove.

I often hear people ask; “How can the church become effective again?” The answer is “get out in the world and start caring for the needs of people in Jesus name.” Stop judging and putting people down because of their circumstances and start connecting, caring, loving, and healing them in Jesus name. In the process, share the good news of the gospel.

I was at a men's ministry recently and heard an amazing concept. The leader said, “There are not four Gospels in the Bible, there are five.” That got my attention. He then went on to say very slowly; “Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and us as Christians.” That hit me really hard. We have been entrusted to be the gospel to the world as we share the gospel with the world.

That is the approach Jesus taught His disciples. His people would be known for their love and compassion for people. (See John 13:34-35) That is the same approach Paul was illustrating in the text above. He understood that caring for the needs of people was the door into the human heart for the gospel message.

I am tempted to ask the question; "Who was the most effective evangelist, Billy Graham the preacher or Franklin Graham the founder of Samaritan's Purse?" While Billy Graham preached to millions, Franklin Graham raised thousands of "hands-on" workers who faithfully share the gospel as they care for the needs of people around the world. Billy Graham conducted a handful of crusades every year. The workers for Samaritan Purse minister in the trenches to many thousands of hurting people every day around the world.

I invite that comparison because it highlights the difference between the modern church and the early church. The modern church stands back and preaches to the world, the early church rolled up their sleeves and jumped in the trenches with hurting and displaced people in the world.

I do want to add that Billy Graham was instrumental in pointing Franklin Graham to fill the missing void in evangelism. The Graham family has greatly impacted the world for the glory of God.

God wants to empower, mobilize, and unleash His Church to be and share His gospel around the world daily. He wants to put love in shoe leather to undergird the message of the Gospel. When the church rediscovers this calling, the world will be wide open to hear the gospel we preach. When God's people give they keep the supply line of benevolent love flowing.

The Principle of the Sower: 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

"6) Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7) Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8) And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed;"

After challenging the Corinthians to prepare in advance for the special offering, Paul points to the principle of the sower. He reminds them that you reap what you sow. If you sow sparingly, you will reap sparingly. If you sow abundantly you will reap abundantly.

This principle applies to many areas of life, but in this context Paul is applying it to stewardship and finances. Let me be clear, I utterly reject those who exploit poor people by telling them if they sacrifice and give everything, God will make them rich. That is false, sinful, and wrong.

However, there is a principle in these verses that God pours out His grace on those who become part of His faithful supply-line for ministry. He can and does take care of His givers. He has very creative ways of multiplying resources for His givers.

This comes back to Malachi 3:8-12. God invites us to test Him by faithfully tithing. In the Old Testament, the tithe was based on giving God 10% of our earnings. Some today reject the concept of tithing, but I believe it is a good starting point. We also believe in giving as the Spirit of God prompts us above and beyond the tithe.

We have found amazing things happen when we faithfully tithe. God's grace surrounds our finances. It can come in the form of finding great deals when shopping, unexpected discounts, timely and unexpected gifts, and even promotions and salary increases. It can also include God blessing a business venture, adding abundance to your crop harvest, or even good health.

The opposite is also true. According to Malachi, when you selfishly consume what belongs to God, He allows devourers to consume your resources. The devourer can show up in many ways as well. I don't even want to venture down that path.

We have learned the hard way that you never get ahead by cheating God out of the tithe. We have walked on both sides of this principle. Let me simply conclude by saying it is much better sowing cheerfully and abundantly and leaving the results in God's hands than being a Judas with your finances. Things did not end well for Judas.

Let me touch on being a cheerful giver. Jesus said; "... where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 7:21) Few things give me a heart rush more than following the promptings of the Holy Spirit with our giving beyond the tithe. I love Kingdom investments that will keep on giving long after we are dead and gone. This is a source of abundant joy.

If you have never followed God in the area of tithing and giving, I would encourage you to follow the advice of Malachi and accept the challenge for one year. Be diligent and faithful and see what God does. God is putting His character on the line with this test. God promises to open the windows of heaven in your life. That should evoke your curiosity and attention.

Become a Psalm 112 Man or Woman. 2 Corinthians 9:9

"9) as it is written, "He scattered abroad, he gave to the poor, his righteousness endures forever.""

At first glance this verse does not seem to fit the context of what Paul is writing about in 2 Corinthians 8-9. But the mystery is solved when we turn and read Psalm 112:9 in the context of the whole chapter.

Psalm 112 is describing the blessings and prosperity of the man or woman who fears the Lord and walks in His ways. We discover they are not only godly and righteous but also very gracious and compassionate. They naturally care for the poor and needy and as a result have no fear and will never be shaken.

Paul was encouraging the Corinthians to become Psalm 112 men and women. Go back and study this amazing chapter and make it your goal as well. Set your sights on becoming a Psalm 112 man or woman.

Ever-Increasing Supply: 2 Corinthians 9:10-12

“10) Now 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; 11) you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. 12) For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God.”

Just as Jesus fed the multitudes with a few fish and a few loaves of bread, God has a way of multiplying the seed for the sower and the yield for the harvest. Only in this case, Paul seems to be talking about the supply for those who faithfully give to support ministry. God has a way of increasing their supply for giving.

Nothing causes you to grow or be more blessed than stepping away from personal greed and self-consumption and becoming part of God's supply chain. When you abundantly give and help meet the needs of orphans, widows, the poor, needy, and the Great Commission, God starts doing something fresh and magnificent within you.

The text says you will be “enriched in everything for all liberality.” It is impossible to out-give God. It is through this process that you begin to transfer earthly wealth to heavenly wealth. As Jesus said, this is how you store up treasures in heaven. (Matthew 6:19-21)

I have met many people who have earthly treasure but they are suffering from heavenly bankruptcy. I have also met people who seem to have modest means here, but they will be crowned with wealth untold in heaven. Why? Because they learned how to become good stewards and became part of God's supply chain for missions and ministry.

The Church on Task: 2 Corinthians 9:12-13

“12) For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God. 13) Because of the proof given by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all,”

On January 12, 2010, a magnitude seven earthquake literally destroyed the small country of Haiti. That marked the humble beginning of GoServ Global that married with some previous work already started in India and Peru. Looking back over more than a decade of work is mind-boggling. Hundreds of people have helped along the way and thousands are now part of the GoServe Global family which now also includes countries like Guatemala and Uganda and soon to be more.

Deep, impacting ministry is more than preaching a few sermons and moving on. It includes preaching and teaching God's Word, but it also involves supplying food, clothing, and shelter. It rolls up its sleeves and meets needs by building churches, orphanages, homes for families, medical centers, dental clinics, productive agriculture, mentoring many people, and even helping with college when the orphans are grown up. True ministry gets into the trenches of everyday life and becomes family with people.

The early church practiced transformational ministry. They were willing to do whatever it took to get the job done. They showed up wherever there was a need or crisis. As they mobilized to meet the need, God Himself accompanied them with love, supernatural provisions, and transforming power. Soon the recipients of the help became the second wave of workers. Churches were planted with a proper understanding of ministry and they in turn joined the work.

Paul was trying to capture this dynamic of ministry. Their gifts were not only meeting the needs of the persecuted saints back in Jerusalem, but it was also overflowing to many others. As ministry became more and more effective, God opened His storehouse in Heaven. He supplied the needs.

Behind this text in 2 Corinthians 7-9 are thousands of unrecorded testimonies of the goodness and power of God to hurting and needy people. It is a picture of the gospel going out in a way that eventually changed Rome itself.

When I read these two verses, I close my eyes and see two thousand years of the church being the hands and feet of Jesus to a lost and dying world as it heralds the message of salvation. To the degree that it has been faithful to this calling, it has been transforming. To the degree that it has strayed from this calling it has become irrelevant and useless.

Exposing a Rift in the Church: 2 Corinthians 10:1-2

"1) Now I, Paul, appeal to you with the gentleness and kindness of Christ—though I realize you think I am timid in person and bold only when I write from far away. 2) Well, I am begging you now so that when I come I won't have to be bold with those who think we act from human motives." (NLT)

It appears that Paul had a group of critics in Corinth who were actively working to undermine his authority and credibility. He starts by approaching the subject with gentleness and kindness. It was a potentially explosive situation.

One of their claims about Paul was that he wrote with boldness when absent from them, but that he was very timid in person. In these two verses Paul was sending them fair warning. He was about to defend his apostleship and expose their folly. It had been brewing for a long time. (See 1 Corinthians 4:18-21)

Spiritual warfare often unfolds within the area of interpersonal conflict, rebellion toward God-given leadership and division within church leadership. Jesus warned about this in Matthew 12:24-26 when He observed that any kingdom divided against itself shall not stand. One of Satan's primary schemes is to bring division into a church.

By contrast, in Ephesians 4:1-3 Paul calls God's people to humility, love, and unity. It is in this environment of unity and submission to godly leadership that the Holy Spirit is unleashed and ministry thrives. This environment in the church must be protected.

We discover in Acts 6:1-2, that grumbling and complaining against the Apostles started to take root very early in the church at Jerusalem. The Apostles acted quickly and appointed additional leaders while they devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:4)

It is also noteworthy that the same spirit of rebellion emerged under the leadership of Moses and Aaron when Korah gathered disgruntled men against them. (See Numbers 16-17) This text is very instructive as to how discord and division can spread among God's people.

The spreading of strife and discord within a church almost always includes grumbling and complaining against God appointed leadership. It can spread like a plague and become very destructive. Those behind the strife have no regard for the damage they cause or how they are grieving the Holy Spirit.

It is sad to note that no church is exempt from this attack. It often comes when the church is thriving and God seems to be working in extraordinary ways. That's when leadership often gets overwhelmed and distracted from the essentials of prayer, unity, and team building.

As we shall discover in the next few verses, Paul approached this as spiritual warfare. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6) As a result, we are about to move into some of the most instructive chapters in the whole Bible on this subject.

Becoming a Prayer Warrior: 2 Corinthian 10:3-6

"3) For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, 4) for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. 5) We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, 6) and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete."

Paul made it clear that though he lived in a human body like everyone else, he was equipped to battle in spiritual warfare with divinely powerful weapons. He was well equipped to pull down the strongholds of the enemy.

This is exemplified in Acts 19:15 when the evil spirit responded to the Jewish exorcists and said, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" The evil spirit then overpowered the Jewish exorcists so that they fled naked and wounded.

Paul spent considerable time equipping the believers in Ephesus for spiritual warfare. (See Ephesians 6:10-20) Every Christian has the power to stand "in Christ" and resist the evil one. It is not based on our talents or abilities, it is based on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross to disarm and defeat Satan. (See Colossians 2:13-15)

But keep in mind, the context of 2 Corinthians 10:1-7 is church conflict. Paul recognized that he was not fighting against flesh and blood, but spiritual forces of wickedness. He turned the battle to the right source. He went for the head of the serpent.

When the evil day comes, we need to discern the true source of the conflict and battle at that level. We need to pull down the strongholds of the enemy and expose all deception that enables him to work. Truth and the Word of God are essential weapons. Every Christian should become skilled in the use of God's Word.

But we also need to learn how to pray in the Spirit. (Ephesians 6:18-20) This is where the enemy is confronted and bound. Any ministry that is not undergirded with prayer is open season for the enemy. Paul was a seasoned prayer warrior. It is in the realm of prayer that we move beyond the restrictions of the flesh to become mighty in battle. This is where the strongholds are pulled down and the enemy is defeated.

These words of Paul must be taken seriously by God's people. We need to move beyond the limitation of our flesh and learn how to do battle in the Spirit. Like Paul, we need to become seasoned prayer warriors.

Becoming a Builder: 2 Corinthians 10:7-8

"7) You are looking at things as they are outwardly. If anyone is confident in himself that he is Christ's, let him consider this again within himself, that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. 8) For even if I boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be put to shame,"

When it comes to resolving conflict within the church, proceed with caution. After you have prayed diligently and dealt with the unseen enemies in the spiritual realm, then proceed to deal with the problem people.

The first thing Paul establishes is that all parties need to shift their focus to Christ and not the conflict itself. Don't look at things as they appear outwardly from a fleshly perspective. The selfish and self-centered perspective will always get it wrong because it is about self and not others.

Second, Paul encouraged them to consider godly authority and its single calling. Paul pointed out that his goal was to build them up and not tear them down. That is a monumental concept. Paul never gave up on them. He recognized that his opponents were believers and he saw their potential. In these verses he was tearing the walls down and using the rubble to build a bridge.

Finally, Paul pointed them to a principle that was and still is profound. The fruit of the Spirit and the call of Christ is always to build up and not to tear down. From the first day of Creation, the Bible presents God as a builder and not a destroyer. Satan is pictured as the destroyer in the Bible.

When carnal men or women take over the reins of influence, things start falling apart. The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God and it cannot carry out the purpose of God. Carnal Christians have mindsets, morals, and agendas that are not in line with God. When the Holy Spirit calls people to repentance and starts a fresh work in their life, it is part of a larger pruning and building process. (See John 15:1-8)

As Paul moved forward with this process, he pointed them to a heavenly calling. He wanted them to put off the flesh and focus on God. He then proceeds to share his own testimony. I believe his goal was to wet their appetite for what they could have in Christ if they turned from their fleshly and worldly ways and sought Jesus.

The Folly of Comparison: 2 Corinthians 10:12

“12) For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding.”

Paul was exposing the trap of comparison that is so easy to fall into. When we compare our God-given qualities with those of other people, we set ourselves up for either self-rejection and discouragement or a false sense of importance.

There will always be people who shine better than we do in different areas. Some may sing or play music better. Others may be gifted in the fine arts of poetry, painting, or sculpture. Others may be better at research or teaching. Still others may be better at oratory or persuasion. Undoubtedly others will come across as more friendly or popular. Still others may excel in sports or be natural athletes. Do you see the folly?

God does not measure our value by how we stack up against others. He loves and accepts us because He created us in His own image. Of course He wants us to do and be our best, but acceptance with God is not based on our performance, rather it is based on the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. He does not love the pastor, scholar, or athlete any more than He loves the prison inmate who has turned to Jesus.

Early in my Christian walk, I fell into the comparison and performance trap. I was trying to earn God's love and acceptance. Then one day when I was studying for a message on love, Jesus reached into my broken self-image and said, "Terry, I love you simply because I love you." I sat in my office and cried for close to an hour as the Holy Spirit enfolded me in agape love. That was the beginning of a new relationship with God and a new freedom in ministry.

Stop comparing! Stop comparing different pastors and Christian leaders with each other. Stop comparing your friends with others. Stop comparing your spouse with others or you will destroy your marriage. Stop measuring your children by others or you will set them up for discouragement and failure. Learn how to love and accept people for who they are and where they are while you focus on being an encourager. Be a cheerleader and not a critic. Beware of the folly of comparison!

The Regions Beyond: 2 Corinthians 10:13-18

"13) But we will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you. 14) For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; 15) not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, 16) so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another. 17) But he who boasts is to boast in the LORD. 18) For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends."

William Carry was hard-pressed in ministry with huge burdens and trials. That's when he turned to his colleagues and said, "I think I know the problem, we are attempting too little for God." He came to the realization that if his endeavors were not God-sized they would forever be trusting in themselves for the results. That's when he made the profound statement, "Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God." No wonder he became known as "The Father of the Modern Missions Movement." A study of his life is a worthwhile endeavor for every believer.

Paul was expressing the same concept in the above verses. Some were accusing him of being overextended. They thought he was biting off too much. Paul's response was profound. He was looking past Corinth to the regions beyond. He wanted to carry the gospel where it had never gone before. He was willing to go where others wouldn't go and endure what others could not imagine for the sake of the gospel.

Paul was a pioneer for God. The Spirit of God compelled him to be sold out for the gospel in ways that others could not comprehend. Buckle your seat belt, he is about to tell his personal story.

I believe it is dangerous to be content and stop reaching and stretching for the glory of God and the spread of the gospel. Faith always looks to the regions beyond where we are currently. That

is true of personal growth, ministry, influence, and fruitfulness. There is always more! We all have a region beyond where we are now.

Spiritual Adultery: 2 Corinthians 11:1-3

“1) I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me. 2) For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. 3) But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.”

Paul was concerned for the Corinthians because they were beginning to blend Christianity with pagan religious doctrine and practice. Not only was their faith being watered down, the gospel was being distorted. This also happens when we blend secular philosophy, psychology, or morals with our belief system.

Possibly the greatest take-away from this text is found in verse 3. Paul made it very clear that Satan can and does deceive Christians. We are not exempt from his schemes. Just as Eve was deceived by the craftiness of the serpent, Paul was concerned that the Corinthians were being led astray from simple and pure devotion to Christ.

Notice that the text opened with Paul talking about betrothing them to one husband, that is Christ. He wanted to present them as a pure virgin. But they were on the verge of committing spiritual adultery. Paul was making a very serious allegation.

Dear fellow believers, beware what you believe and how you live. Satan thrives on deception. He wants to mislead you. Do your homework and make sure your faith is anchored in the Word of God.

Pick Your Teachers Carefully: 2 Corinthians 11:4-6

“4) For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully. 5) For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles. 6) But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge; in fact, in every way we have made this evident to you in all things.”

Make sure you have high standards for who you read, listen to, and follow as a teacher. Are they spouting their own agenda and ideas or are they anchored in the Word of God and handling it accurately. Unfortunately, there is a lot of what I call “Jesus Junk” out there. Just because the author or speaker talks about Jesus and claims to be a Christian is no guarantee they are handling God's Word accurately.

The Corinthians developed the bad habit of listening to anyone and everyone. Many teachers were not even Christians. Some of them even started blending Christian doctrine with pagan religious belief and practices. They were distorting the gospel.

In this text, Paul is starting to defend His apostleship and teaching. He is basically saying that his doctrine and teachings were trustworthy and truthful. He is going to establish this over the next few chapters.

The same holds true today. Beware who you listen to and what you believe. There are many false teachers out there and there is no end to books being written on almost any subject matter. Many of them are stacked in the section called "Spiritual and Self-Help Books." Many of these books are full of deception and false practices. Take them out of your reading diet.

My practice is to make Scripture my primary study text. I do read other books and listen to some great audios, but I make sure they measure up to the Bible. If I start hearing strange teachings, I tune them out quickly.

A Case For Mission Support: 2 Corinthians 11:7-11

"7) Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? 8) I robbed other churches by taking wages from them to serve you; 9) and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so. 10) As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be stopped in the regions of Achaia. 11) Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!"

This is a bit of a difficult text. Paul was explaining to the Corinthians how mission support worked. Other churches supported him so he could go out and start new churches without charge or expense to the new work. That was the case when he came to Corinth. His expenses were covered so he could focus on the work of church planting.

As we can see, mission support has been a Christian tradition from the time of the early church. But the church in Corinth was now established. It was time for them to step up and support the Great Commission to other places.

There are few blessings greater than giving to help the gospel spread or to help sponsor a church, orphanage, or pastor in a less affluent country. Participating in this kind of work is a sign of spiritual maturity.

If you have not stepped into the realm of being a supply for ministry to the regions beyond, I would encourage you to go to the GoServ Global webpage and see how you can make a difference. Better yet, sign up for a short term mission trip and come with us to one of many fields. Your walk with Jesus will be pushed to a new level.

The Craft of Deception: 2 Corinthians 11:12-15

“12) But what I am doing I will continue to do, so that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting. 13) For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 14) And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. 15) Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.”

Paul was diligent to expose false workers. He warned the Corinthians just as he had warned the Ephesians that Satan's workers would try to sneak into the church and prey on believers. (Acts 20:28-32) They present themselves as apostles of truth, but they are false workers. Suddenly they turn and become savage wolves.

Many times they appear peaceful and loving as they gain trust and then they inject their poison. They disguise themselves as apostles of Christ, but they are deceitful workers. They are so good at their craft of deception that they are sometimes placed in leadership or even called to be pastors.

To expose this phenomenon, Paul makes a stunning revelation in verse 14: Satan often disguises himself as an angel of light. Isaiah 14:12 calls him the “star of the morning, son of the dawn”, but he works to deceive nations and mislead humanity. In his very first appearance to humanity, he presented himself as a harmless serpent in the Garden of Eden who was bent on good. He used this hypnotic demeanor to disarm Eve by his craft of deception. Make no mistake, his bite was deadly.

Paul concludes that it is not surprising if his servants and workers disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Satan's masterpiece of deception is not vile evil, it is pseudo good and love. It is not ugly, it is beautiful. It is not presented as wrong or destructive, it is marketed as being harmless and in your best interests. He spins his lies in such a way that to think otherwise comes across as irrational and heartless.

His workers are good at what they do. They go about peddling antiChrist morals, values, and doctrine with such cunning that people embrace them with open arms. Just as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness (2 Corinthians 11:3), they convince people that they have their best interests in mind. In the process, these false teachers lead multitudes down the road of destruction.

But keep in mind, the context of 2 Corinthians 11 is that these false workers prey on Christians as well. They leave behind them a wake of confusion and compromise in the church. This craft of deception always leads people away from the gospel, truth, and God's Word. The drift can be so casual people do not even notice how far they've strayed. Guard yourself!

Putting Everything on the Line to Serve Jesus. 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

“16) Again I say, let no one think me foolish; but if you do, receive me even as foolish, so that I also may boast a little. 17) What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting. 18) Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. 19) For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly. 20) For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face. 21) To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison. But in whatever respect anyone else is bold—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold myself.”

People were coming through Corinth peddling all kinds of religious stuff. Some were obviously connected to pagan religions, but some were offshoots of Judaism or Christianity. These made all kinds of claims about themselves and their teachings. Unfortunately, the Corinthians were listening to them and confusion was spreading through the church.

To counter these false teachers, Paul decides to set forth his own resume. He was very reluctant to engage in this exchange because it bordered on bragging. But nevertheless, he launches into a review of his own credentials.

He starts in 2 Corinthians 10:22-33 by sharing what he had personally suffered for Jesus and his call to spread the Gospel. I will copy this text in the New Living Translation without verse markings for emphasis. It needs no explanation. Paul was the real deal. As we shall see, he put everything on the line to serve Jesus.

“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger? If I must boast, I would rather boast about the things that show how weak I am. God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, who is worthy of eternal praise, knows I am not lying. When I was in Damascus, the governor under King Aretas kept guards at the city gates to catch me. I had to be lowered in a basket through a window in the city wall to escape from him.”

A Channel of Divine Revelation: 2 Corinthians 12:1-6

“1) Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2) I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. 3) And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows— 4) was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. 5) On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. 6) For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.”

As Paul continues to expound his credentials, he relates an amazing experience of being caught up to the third heaven which he also called “paradise.” This is undoubtedly where Jesus personally taught him numerous things such as Paul referred to in 1 Corinthians 11:23-30. In that text, he claimed that Jesus personally taught him the events of the upper room and the Lord’s Supper.

We are not sure when this happened, but Paul often referred to a special stewardship of God’s grace and revelation that was made known to him. (See Ephesians 3:1-6) We also do not know if he had one revelation or numerous events. (See also Galatians 1:11-24)

The one thing that stands out is that the Apostle Paul was to the New Testament and the doctrine of grace what Moses was to the Old Testament and the giving of the Law. They both had extraordinary encounters with God.

Moses had a unique calling at the burning bush and later on the mountain where he received the Law from God. Paul also had a unique conversion and it seems that he was later caught up to the third heaven and received special revelation from Jesus Himself into the gospel. The contrast between these two is more than coincidental.

One thing is certain, Paul was called by God as a channel of Divine Revelation to humanity. Even Peter recognized that Paul’s writings were to be regarded as Scripture. (See 2 Peter 3:14-16) Paul was in a category all of His own when it came to suffering for the gospel and special revelation into the biblical truth. The defense of his Apostleship had huge merit.

Turning Weakness Into Power: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

“7) And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! 8) Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9) And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 11) Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with

distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul now makes mention of his thorn in the flesh. Some believe from Galatians 4:12-15 that Paul might have had a serious eye problem. It may have been very distracting and left him disfigured and nearly blind.

Whatever his thorn was, he points out that it was a messenger of Satan to keep him humble. It seems that he sought healing three times but was not healed. Instead, God assured him that His grace was sufficient for him and that power was perfected in weakness.

Many times a perceived weakness within us is the very thing God uses for His glory. Certainly that has been the case with Joni Eareckson Tada who was left paralyzed from her waist down as a teenager. God has been magnified through her weakness many times over. She has reached thousands for Jesus.

What was ironic in Paul's case was that the healer could not heal himself. God performed amazing signs and wonders through him. He casted demons out of others, but he could not stop Satan's buffeting in his own life. (See Acts 15:12, 16:18, 19:11) I have even pondered the possibility that his thorn in the flesh may have been a leftover impairment from his many afflictions of being beaten and stoned. (See 2 Corinthians 11:24-26). He is a great example of making the most of a negative situation in his life.

If you have some weakness or impairment in your life, you have a choice to make. You can either reject yourself and remain angry or bitter, or you can turn it over to God and invite Him to magnify His power and glory through your weakness. Those who start out with less inevitably end up with far more as they invite Jesus into their area of perceived weakness, disadvantage or struggle.

God may want to heal you. That's ok. Paul prayed for healing three times. But God may leave you in your affliction for a far greater cause. Who knows the mind of God? Far greater ministry might grow out of your affliction than what would come from your healing. Jesus is sovereign over every area of our life.

Just make sure that your attitude is healed. That happens the moment you sincerely start thanking God for your affliction and purpose to glorify Him through your weakness. Let Jesus shine through you and start focusing on others.

Paul's weakness became the open door to his amazing influence and capacity for the glory of God. Trust God to do the same through you. That happens when you attach new meaning to your struggles.

The Final Proof of His Calling: 2 Corinthians 12:11-13

“11) I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. 12) The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. 13) For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!”

Paul now gives a final line of defense for his calling. The works that Paul performed spoke of his apostolic calling. While among the Corinthians he performed numerous signs and wonders and miracles. He was in no way lacking the anointing and power shown through Peter, James, or John. His works confirmed his office.

There was only one way that Paul lacked the authority of Peter back in Jerusalem. He refused to use his position for financial support. Paul worked hard with his own hands and often paid his own way to do ministry. He refused to make it look like he was in the ministry for financial gain.

Paul was in every way in what is often called a “faith missionary.” He trusted Jesus to pay his way and provide for him. And God did just that for many years for the Apostle Paul. He put everything on the line for Jesus and the gospel.

Though he was the least of the apostles while on earth, history proves that he left the greatest impact on Christianity and early church history. God used him to defend the doctrine of justification by faith and to write much of the New Testament.

Many of us will be like Paul. Only eternity will calculate the full extent of our fruitfulness. In fact, many times as we evaluate on a daily basis our role and ministry may seem small. Be faithful and let heaven keep the books. It will be worth it all when you see Jesus.

Servanthood Leadership: 2 Corinthians 12:14-18

“14) Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. 15) And I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? 16) But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. 17) Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? 18) I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct 12 ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?”

Paul displayed what is commonly called “servanthood leadership.” He was in ministry to serve and not to be served. He did not want to be a burden to the people God sent him to reach. He was willing to be spent for the sake of others. He taught his students the same thing.

One of the problems with ministry today is that many of our leaders have these roles reversed. They want to be well known, treated like celebrities, and the main subject in every sentence. That was not the case in the early church.

Learn this lesson early in your Christian life: "Serving Jesus will cost you and not promote you." Agape love will call you to put your desires and ambitions aside for the sake of others.

I believe Jesus taught this in the story of the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:30-37) He was willing to step into harm's way to help a stranger in need. He adjusted his schedule, spent his own resources, took care of a broken man who had no way to repay him and then even paid his bill. This is the Jesus way. This is "servanthood leadership" in action.

If you want to be effective for Jesus, take your eyes off yourself and start considering the needs of others. (See Philippians 2:1-11) Follow the example of Jesus. Go and be a servant!

Going the Extra Mile: 2 Corinthians 12:19-21

"19) All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved. 20) For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; 21) I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced."

Once again we have some difficult verses to understand. We need to keep the backdrop of the book of 2 Corinthians in mind. Paul was writing because there was sin and conflict within the church at Corinth. Some were working hard to discredit him and remove his influence from the church. We can learn some very important lessons from these verses.

First, from verse 19 we discover that Paul's motivation was pure in Christ and was ultimately to build them up. Though there was strong interpersonal conflict taking place, Paul kept his sights on the bigger goal of edification.

Second, it is instructive that Paul was not willing to ignore the problem and hope it went away on its own. Sin never fixes itself. Though it is difficult to face sin and interpersonal tension between believers, it is best to open direct and constructive lines of communications. That is what Paul was doing in verse 20. Paul recognized that sin and carnality would eventually manifest itself with open strife and even angry tempers. Paul was willing to squeeze the pimple until the puss came out.

Finally, repentance is the vital and important step in removing a sinful bondage and coming to lasting freedom. I believe that is what Paul was getting at in verse 21. It is not enough to merely

walk away and try harder next time. True repentance includes both confession and contrition. Both the mind and the heart need to change.

As I read the context of both 1 & 2 Corinthians, it amazes me how persistent Paul was at confronting sin. He wanted it crucified and removed. He wanted to present every Christian complete in Christ. (See Colossians 1:28) Discipleship in the early church rolled up its sleeves and got in the trenches with people. It aimed for conversion and transformation. It went the extra mile with people even when the process got ugly.

Exposing Sin: 2 Corinthians 13:1-3

“1) This is the third time I am coming to you. Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. 2) I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone, 3) since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you.”

Paul had anything but a casual attitude toward sin in the life of a believer. As you read the past eleven verses in context, he confronted sin head-on. By contrast the church today is almost indifferent about the way Christians live. There is very little preaching against sin and instead an insistence on acceptance and inclusion. One might wonder why the contrast?

As we retrace our steps back through 1st and 2nd Corinthians, we discover nine reasons why Paul preached against sin and refused to let people live in compromise.

First, from 1 Corinthians 5:1-8, Paul understood that sexual immorality spread like leaven. He did not want the church to let its guard down.

Second, from 1 Corinthians 6:18, Paul understood that sexual sins were extremely addictive. They can lead to devastating bondage.

Third, from 1 Corinthians 6:19, Paul understood that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and that sin deeply grieves God. To maintain fellowship with God it is imperative that we walk in the light. (1 John 1:5-7)

Fourth, from 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, Paul understood the freedom and glory God wants to bring into the life of a believer. He doesn't leave us in bondage.

Fifth, from 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, Paul understood spiritual warfare and how Satan wants to blind people and keep them from the true gospel. Paul refused to settle for mere religion.

Sixth, from 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul understood that every believer will one day stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Paul wanted to prepare people for that day.

Seventh, from 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Paul understood that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light to lead people astray and into sin and darkness. Paul worked to expose his schemes.

Eighth, from 2 Corinthians 12:1-6, Paul understood the reality of glory because he had been caught up to the third heaven and knew the glory that is to come. Heaven was a reality to him.

Ninth, from 2 Corinthians 12:19-13:3, Paul understood that exposing sin and pointing people to righteousness was doing them a favor in the long run. He wanted to present them complete in Christ.

Paul was not about to turn the church in Corinth over to the power of sin and darkness. He was persistent to preach against sin and attempt to rescue those caught in its ravages.

Examine Yourself: 2 Corinthians 13:3-6

“4) For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you. 5) Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? 6) But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test.”

As Paul was wrestling with the carnal believers in Corinth to live godly lives, he brings up another possibility. He says, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!”

The puritans used to talk about the “unrepentant confessors.” These are religious people who go to church and know all the Christian jargon, but they have never truly been born again. They are religious, but lost.

There is nothing more frustrating than trying to disciple a non-Christian. You can pour time and energy into them, but those who are in the flesh cannot please God. A religious person cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit.

I learned years ago that it may be counterproductive to give assurance of salvation to religious people who have never truly been converted by the Spirit of God. Their doubt might be the Holy Spirit convincing them that they are lost. It never hurts to challenge people to “test themselves to see if they are in the faith.”

Over the years of conducting church renewals across the country, we had many religious but lost people converted by the Spirit of God. They had been going to church all their lives, but had never truly trusted in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. How glorious to watch them come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and cry out to God to save them!

This was actually the spark that launched both the first and second Great Awakening. Church going people started to come under conviction that they were religious but lost. As they started

turning to Jesus in genuine salvation, they were suddenly transformed by the Spirit of God. In many cases the transformation was astounding.

Soon spiritual hypocrisy was replaced with genuine fervor for God. Instead of playing church, they started burning with fresh zeal for God. For many, it was as profound as the day of Pentecost in Acts Chapter Two where religious Jews were suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit.

Revival usually starts in the church and among the religious lost. God suddenly ignites the fuel that is in them from years of hearing Bible stories, but they have never personally trusted in Jesus. This was the message Jesus gave to religious Nicodemus in John chapter three. He was a religious leader, but he did not personally know God. He needed to be born again.

In the text above, Paul was challenging the Corinthians with the same possibility. He concluded that their root problem might very well be they were religious but lost. They needed to examine themselves to see if they were in the faith. What about you? Do you pass the test?

Pseudo-Christian Living: 2 Corinthians 13:5-10

“5) Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? 6) But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test. 7) Now we pray to God that you do no wrong; not that we ourselves may appear approved, but that you may do what is right, even though we may appear unapproved. 8) For we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth. 9) For we rejoice when we ourselves are weak but you are strong; this we also pray for, that you be made complete. 10) For this reason I am writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me for building up and not for tearing down.”

Paul did not want the Corinthians to settle for a pseudo-Christian life. He did not want carnality to become normal for them. That's why he urged them to test themselves to see if they were in the faith.

He then set himself forth as an example of the normal Christian life. He wanted them to be complete in Christ. He wanted them to be at least as on fire and fruitful for Jesus as himself and other believers who were walking in the Spirit.

From the beginning of the book of 1 Corinthians and all through this second letter, Paul worked to combat carnality and sinful compromise within this church. It had become normal for them. They had become like the church at Laodicea that Jesus Himself warned in the book of Revelation. (Revelation 3:14-22). They were settling for being lukewarm. In this letter, Paul was trying to build them up and ignite a fire in them for Jesus.

This casual carnality has become the signature of the modern church as well. It is dangerous and must be confronted. Carnal Christian living must never be accepted as normal. It produces a pseudo-Christian life and leaves God's people distracted and dull of hearing the Spirit of God.

It also presents a false gospel to the world. It says you can live any moral value system you choose as long as you say you believe in God. But the true gospel brings repentance and radical conversion. It does not leave people "religious but lost." It does not leave them in bondage to sin and Satan. It leads to freedom and a new life in Christ!

A Final Push Toward Jesus: 2 Corinthians 13:11

"Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you."

When this verse is read in light of the context of Paul's two letters to the Corinthians, it suddenly becomes powerful and profound.

He was crying out to the Corinthians to throw off their sin and compromise and become complete in Christ. He was begging them to walk with God and not contrary to the ways of God. He was imploring them to deal with their guilty conscience and discover the peace of God that comes from being like-minded with Him.

He was not blessing them to continue down the road of wrapping a robe of Christianity around paganism and then selling it as a new Gospel. He was telling them that the love and peace of God will be with them only when they become courageous for Him in truth. (See 2 Corinthians 13:8)

Ironically, we now come back to where we started at the beginning of our study of these two letters: "The books of 1 and 2 Corinthians are corrective in nature." Paul was working desperately to fix a broken church.

When viewed from this light, no books of the New Testament are more relevant to the modern church than these two letters. In them, Paul courageously addresses every issue that is choking the life out of the modern church.

Spiritual warfare is a reality and Satan works tirelessly to render the church ineffectual. Like was the case in Corinth, the god of this world wants the church to be introverted, filled with internal strife, distracted by worldly morals and values, divorced from agape love, void of truth, and barren when handing the gospel. If he cannot stop the church he will detour it into a rut of self-delusion.

But Paul was not willing to give up on the Corinthians. He recognized their potential and pointed them back to Jesus Christ. He worked tirelessly to put them back on track and invited them to

seek God earnestly. The end result was two of the most insightful books in the New Testament. This verse is a final push toward Jesus Christ and truth.

Divine Glue Within The Body Of Christ: 2 Corinthians 13:11-14

“11) Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12) Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13) All the saints greet you. 14) The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”

As Paul concludes the book of 2 Corinthians, he enfolds the believers in loving brotherhood. He encourages them to greet one another with a holy kiss and he sends greetings from the broader body of Christ.

This bond was about to become providential as persecution increased and spread across the Roman Empire. The early believers were going to need one another. Paul commended them to the grace of Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Notice that the trinity shows up in this conclusion. Paul identifies the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit. They are the Divine source of grace, love, and fellowship. I maintain that the world cannot duplicate these qualities. They are the glue that bonds the true body of Christ together.

Despite the fact that the Corinthian church had its problems, God did not give up on them. I find that very encouraging. God will never forsake His own. He never has and He never will.

The same is true for the body of Christ today. Jesus is preparing His bride for His soon return. He loves His church and longs for her. The end times will be accompanied by difficult times. God wants to bond us together with the same glue He used in the early Church.

The Final Wrap: 2 Corinthians 13:14

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”

I want to take a moment and do a final wrap of the books of 1st and 2nd Corinthians. These two books have been very influential in my personal walk with God because they deal with virtually every problem faced by an individual Christian and the body of Christ.

Corinth was a very immoral city with a blend of pagan and secular philosophy that shaped the moral climate. Everything from alcohol indulgence to prostitution and homosexuality was legal and promoted in Corinth. The new converts in this church came from very secular backgrounds.

These secular values were undergirded by a Greek Mythology view of religion and reality. The spiritual climate in Corinth was tuned into the dark side of the spiritual realm. Alcohol, sex, and

the mystery religions blended into a secular culture that had no boundaries and significant demonic activity and manifestations.

It is not much of a stretch to say that modern western culture is very Corinthian. One reason for that is that our liberal arts approach to education is based on a Greek model. Yet, that's where God sent the Apostle Paul to share the Gospel and do church-planting.

In these two letters, Paul tackles virtually every challenge faced by Corinthian converts seeking to put off their old ways and grow into godly living. He also worked to mold this group into a functioning local church. It was a very difficult task, yet Paul stuck with them through every pitfall in the journey.

Why is this important? These two books speak volumes to the modern church struggling with the same issues. From reeling in their sexual morals to committing to fidelity in marriage, this book dealt with it all. The church had frictions, fights, divisions and theological heresy that came from trying to blend pagan religions to the Christian faith.

I believe these two books are the best biblical guide to evangelism, church planting, and discipleship in modern culture. They point people to a dynamic encounter with Jesus Christ and the walk in the Spirit. Spiritual gifts were practiced in this church and became the power to overcome the counterfeit schemes of the evil one. I would encourage you to make these two books a central part of your journey to godliness and spiritual fruitfulness.