PAUL'S EVALUATION OF THE EXPERIENCE
2 CORINTHIANS 7:8–10 67
BLESSED RESULTS HIGHLIGHTED
2 CORINTHIANS 7:11–12 67
THEIR RESPONSE BROUGHT JOY TO TITUS, TOO!
2 CORINTHIANS 7:13–16 68
EMERGENCY PLANS TO HELP THE STARVING
2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–5 69
ENCOURAGED TO GET INVOLVED – 2 CORINTHIANS 8:6–12 70
PERSONAL APPLICATION – 2 CORINTHIANS 8:13–9:15 71

"It will please God only if it is done with a willing heart!"

THE CORINTHIANS — A SOURCE OF JOY TO PAUL

In this section, Paul picks up where he left off when he began his rather lengthy digression or "parentheses" in chapter 2:14. You will recall that he cut his ministry short in Troas and took passage on a ship to Macedonia. He hoped to find Titus and get a report on how the Corinthians had responded to his disciplinary letter (2:12–13).

PAUL'S STATE OF MIND IN MACEDONIA

2 CORINTHIANS 7:5–7

Unfortunately for Paul, Titus hadn't gotten back to Macedonia, and so his anxiety continued. In fact, as he wrote this section, things actually became worse: "When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn — conflicts on the outside, fears within" (v. 5). Paul doesn't say in what city of Macedonia his harassment took place. It could have been Philippi where Paul had previously experienced fierce opposition. Other possibilities would be Thessalonica or Berea. We can only guess what the specific "harassment" was. The "conflicts on the outside" could refer to his sharing in some of the persecution that the Christians of Macedonia experienced on a regular basis. He also had to deal with the contentious attitude of those with whom he discussed theology. The "fears within" could refer to Paul's concern that the enemies of the Gospel would convince the authorities to put a "gag order" on him, as they had tried to do on his first visit to this part of the world (see Acts

18:9). His "fears" very likely included his anxiety about the kind of reception that the people in Corinth had given to the letter he had asked Titus to hand-deliver to them.

As distressing as his experiences in Macedonia had been, they were no match for the good news that his colleague, Titus, soon brought him. Titus returned to Paul with his report that the people of Corinth had responded favorably to his letter of reproof. They had a change of heart which displayed itself in expressions of genuine repentance and surprisingly, even a strong affection for their former pastor.

This favorable turn of events, Paul says, brought him "comfort." He felt a surge of inner strength, "so that my joy was greater than ever" (v. 7).

PAUL'S EVALUATION OF THE EXPERIENCE

2 CORINTHIANS 7:8–10

Paul now takes the discussion in a direction that some feel to be risky. He brings up the matter of the "painful" letter he had sent them. The wound had healed. Why open it again? Paul knew that where there has been conflict, healing cannot really be complete until both parties are able to think about it, and even speak about, without mental distress. What Titus had reported gave him the courage to bring this up. It shows that Paul had complete confidence in the sincerity of the Corinthians.

Paul used God-given tact and finesse, which he trusted would avoid stirring up old resentments. He diverted their attention from the mental and emotional anguish which they had experienced upon receiving Paul's "severe letter." He tells them about the anguish he experienced as he wrote the letter. He repeated, in essence, what he had written earlier: "For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears" (2:4). They knew their former pastor. It was not his nature to take pleasure in making them feel bad. He even admits to them that there was a time when he actually "did regret" sending the letter (7:8). However, he explains to them that his love for them required him to do it (2:4b). The consolation he had was that it would be for "only for a little while" (literally: "for only an hour!").

In verse 9, Paul describes the joy he felt because of the happy outcome of the mutually painful experience they had, "now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance." The word that Paul uses here (metanoia) suggests a complete change of mind and heart — a 180 degree change of direction! Their sorrow and their regret for their disloyalty to Paul — and to God — had produced a completely new attitude. The apostle refers to their sorrow as the kind of sorrow, "that God intended" — the kind that led to a complete change of mind and heart on their part. Such a priceless outcome had made the pain, not only worthwhile, but exceedingly "cost effective!"

BLESSED RESULTS HIGHLIGHTED

2 CORINTHIANS 7:11–12

Here Paul refers to some of the spectacular blessings their "change of heart" had produced: "See what this godly sorrow has produced in you." To express the remarkable nature of these new qualities on the part of the Corinthians, the King James translation begins each listing with "yea!" Our word "WOW!" comes close to expressing the feeling that Paul was trying to convey.

Paul's first "WOW!" was: "what earnestness!" The word suggests fervent devotion to the truth. No longer would they allow themselves to be hoodwinked by smooth-talking false teachers. They would stick with Paul's teachings! The second on Paul's list was their "eagerness to clear yourselves!" Obviously, they cared deeply

Paul describes the joy he felt because of the happy outcome of the mutually painful experience they had, "now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance."

about their relationship with Paul (Titus, too!). They could not wait to clear up anything that stood in the way of complete reconciliation between them and Paul. The third "WOW!" is closely related. Paul wanted them to know how impressed he was when Titus described their intense "indignation!" More than likely the "righteous indignation" was directed at themselves for being so gullible as to let these "peddlers" of uncertified religious ideas do their thinking for them.

Paul also remembered how Titus had mentioned "the alarm" that some parishioners in Corinth had spoken about. In this connection it was very likely the vivid realization of how close they had come to spiritual disaster! Evidently, they sighed a collective "Whew! That was close!" It was a "wake-up call" for them, and they were glad they had heard it. Paul proceeds to put the spotlight on another important "attitude change" he had observed: "What longing!" This could refer to the unabashed fervent desire on the part of all of them to return to "the way we were" in their relationship with God and God's special "ambassador." They hoped that Paul would be able to "forgive and forget!"

The final item Paul really appreciated was their "readiness to see justice done!" Apparently, there was absolutely no reluctance, no holding back, on their part to carry out, ASAP, every single directive Paul had given them concerning the offending party (or parties). In summary, Paul makes the observation; "At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter" (v. 11b). As far as Paul was concerned, there was nothing standing in the way of complete and healthy reconciliation with these people whom he loved so dearly.

Verse twelve was a generous statement on the part of Paul to let them know how encouraged he was. Their wonderful response, as he had just described proved, without a doubt, that they understood and appreciated, the apostle's loving purpose in writing the letter that caused them personal anguish "for a little while." Their response brought him tremendous joy!

THEIR RESPONSE BROUGHT JOY TO TITUS, TOO!

2 CORINTHIANS 7:13–16

Sensitive to the fragile condition of a relationship in healing, Paul took advantage of everything that he could which might have therapeutic value. He goes on to remind them that their behavior not only brought him encouragement and profound joy, and he states: "we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you." Paul relates how he had sought to alleviate Titus' reluctance to take on the assignment to deliver the "painful"

letter. He tells them: "I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me." It may have been with a little lightheartedness that he told them: "Just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well." Remember it was one of the charges brought against Paul that you can never believe what he says! The people of Corinth "came through" for the apostle. Titus raved about the great reception he had received: "you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling." Paul turns this into another occasion to give them "positive reinforcement" as he expresses his pleasure at knowing that he can have "complete" confidence in them (7:16). How quickly the shattered relationship was healing!

EMERGENCY PLANS TO HELP THE STARVING

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–5

Evidently Paul's confidence in them was so strong that he didn't hesitate to toss them a rather significant challenge. He brought up the subject of his fund-raising effort to bring relief to the famine-stricken Christians of Judea. He was even okay with the idea of introducing the topic with a reference to the sparkling performance of the Macedonian churches just a few miles to the north. Paul knew that a challenge could have a beneficial effect as it called for a significant exercise of their newly restored faith.

A noteworthy example was when Paul held up the Macedonians in their generous support of this fund-raiser, he did not shine the spotlight on the people, nor even the amount that they came up with. He told them "we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches" (8:1). The focus was on God, who enabled them to do what they did. True, the picture that Paul portrays is rather remarkable! Here they were; people who were already living below the poverty level. Rome had impoverished the country by exacting from it most of its natural resources, notably its timber and minerals. Today we would call it a "Third-World Country." Their poverty was even worse because they were Christians and treated as second-class citizens. They were the poorest of the poor.

This may help to explain why Paul says he originally wasn't even going to ask them to participate in the fund-raiser. Remarkably, it was: "Entirely on their own," Paul says, that the Macedonians "urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints" (3b–4). Paul explains: It was "their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty that welled up in rich generosity." Come again, Paul! Did we hear you correctly? How could their "extreme poverty" be a factor in producing a spirit of generosity? Because their relationship with the Almighty God was strong and healthy, they had learned to trust Him completely for their eternal well-being and also their earthly well-being. They had faith that God would care for them no matter what the economic conditions were. The "joy" they felt in this relationship with their Heavenly Father, and their trust that God would provide their basic needs. It cleared the way for a spirit of compassion and generosity to develop and express itself. Paul was thrilled to be able to praise the generosity of the Macedonians because he was, in effect, praising God who was at work in their lives.

What an inspiration these Macedonians are for us! What an example of a God-pleasing attitude! If our first reaction is that these people are simply "out of our league," Paul asks us to listen to him as he describes the essential steps that accounted for this demonstration of dedication. It is not only what God had done in bestowing upon them a rich measure of His grace. Paul says the people of Macedonia were able to do this because "they gave themselves first to the Lord" (8:5). This suggests a specific transaction; a time when they had declared that they were no longer in charge of their lives, and that they had "signed-off" to God the "pink slip"

of their being. When that takes place in sincerity, a person has a totally radical view of life. Everything we are and have belongs to God, but God gives us the honor and privilege to manage everything in a responsible way, as He directs.

Paul makes the observation that the Macedonians looked to him as God's spokesperson on earth. This is what he meant when he said that they had first given themselves to God, "and then to us in keeping with God's will." For us, too, it takes total surrender, first to God, and then to Paul and other "holy men of God who spoke [as they were] moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21, NKJV).

ENCOURAGED TO GET INVOLVED

2 CORINTHIANS 8:6–12

Paul's comment about the remarkable response of their fellow Christians to the north was his way of leading into the topic of their personal participation in the relief effort. Late in the previous year, Paul had sent Titus to Corinth to co-ordinate the plan (v. 6). Evidently, this project had become one of the casualties of the rift between Paul and the Corinthians. Now that everything was okay, once again, Paul felt it was time to go back and pick up where they had left off. He ties it in with what he had said about the Macedonians; he sees the role of Titus as helping them "bring also to completion this act of grace on your part" (v. 6). Once again he expresses complete confidence that they would be "up" for the challenge. As they excelled in other Christian virtues, he wrote, "See that you also excel in this grace of giving" (v. 7).

Paul must have sensed the possibility that these last words might have come across as an order. "I am not commanding you." He did not want them to think of it as an obligation — that would diminish their personal joy. For what it might be worth to them, he doesn't hesitate to add (v. 8) that he really hoped they would take the challenge and give it their best effort. It would mean a lot to him and be good for them. He said it would be a "test" of their faith, an opportunity for them to demonstrate their sincerity. He would be proud (like a parent) to put them right up there with the Macedonians as outstanding examples of the handiwork of God.

Paul now reminds them not to forget that they had a source of motivation that was more important than just pleasing him. It was the unbelievable love which Jesus had already shown them: "That, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty, might become rich" (v. 9). Jesus willingly left His Father's home in heaven, sacrificing everything, including his very life on Calvary's Cross, to meet their basic and eternal needs, ensuring them of a place with God in heaven. What an example! What an inspiration for us! As we put our name in Paul's formula and give thought to the unbelievable depth of Jesus' love for us, how else can we respond, but look for ways that we can express our love to Him in obedience to his urging to love our neighbor as He has loved us.

As part of his encouragement for them to get involved in this relief effort, Paul reminds them (v. 10) that when Titus came with the appeal a year ago, they "were the first not only to give, but also to have the desire to do so." With the same attitude of eager willingness, Paul says, "pick up where you left off, and get the job done!" More important to God than our actual accomplishments, Paul says (v. 12), is the attitude of eager willingness. It is a yardstick by which we can measure every Christian act of kindness. It will please God only if it is done with a willing heart! Think about it!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

2 CORINTHIANS 8:13–9:15

Thank You, Heavenly Father, for giving me the capacity to communicate through speech. Forgive the wrongs of my tongue, and with the aid of Your Holy Spirit help me to use words that bring honor to You and blessings to those around me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Review:

1. Which group of Christians did the apostle hold up as a model for the Corinthians to emulate concerning the collection for the needy "saints" in Judea? (See 8:1–5)

Please list the qualities that impressed Paul.

1. 3.

2. 4.

Which characteristic impresses you the most? Why?

2. "Comparisons are odious" is a widely accepted maxim. What is different about the way Paul held up the example of the Macedonians' generosity? To what and to whom did he give the credit?

3. Whom did Paul hold up as the most persuasive example of the "Grace of Giving" (8:9)?

2 Corinthians 8:13–15

4. To which phenomenon in the Old Testament did Paul refer, to show that his appeal was in line with God's way of doing things?

What was so remarkable about God's plan then?

How did it apply to the Corinthians?

What does it mean for us today?

What does Ecclesiastes 11:1 urge us to do?

2 Corinthians 8:16–24

5. Whom was Paul sending to the Corinthians to "coach" them concerning their response to Paul's appeal for funds?

How does Paul explain his choice of Titus as the leader of this delegation (vv. 16–17, 23)?

Who selected the two "nameless" members of the team (vv. 19, 23b)?

In addition to their "coaching" assignment, what other important role would they have? (8:19–20.)

Why was this important to Paul (v. 21)? (See also 2:17, 11:7–11, 12:14–18; 1 Thessalonians 2:3–12)

What can we learn from Paul's great concern — not only to do what is right, but to avoid even the appearance of wrongdoing (v. 21)?

Can you think of an example from daily life?

2 Corinthians 9:1–5

6. For what does Paul give the Corinthians credit (9:1–2)?

Do you think that this is a role that we should try to cultivate? (See Hebrews 10:24)

Paul "left no stone unturned" in his effort to assist the Corinthians to respond wholeheartedly to his appeal and in the process enjoy a great spiritual experience (9:3–5). Do you see "learning" here for people who have a God-given responsibility for the spiritual well-being of others — e.g., pastors, parents, and teachers?

2 Corinthians 9:6–15

7. What truism from the world of agriculture does Paul mention to encourage a generous outpouring of funds?

Do you think this is still true?

Do you know from personal experience that it's still true?

Would you like to share with the class?

What other attitudes does God look for (9:7)?

When you give generously and in the right spirit, what does Paul say you can count on, according to verses 8-10?

In addition to critical physical needs being met, what precious spiritual blessings take place (v. 12) in the lives of those who are recipients of the donations?

What other satisfaction should be an incentive for being as generous as you can (vv. 13–14)?

Ultimately, who is the source of all this good "stuff" as far as Paul is concerned (v.15)?