

A STUDY ON II CORINTHIANS



INTRODUCTION

Both 1st Corinthians and 2nd Corinthians were written to the same church in Corinth.

While Paul was in Macedonia during his third missionary journey, Titus brought him good news. The first letter (1st Corinthians) written by Paul to the church in Corinth was well received by most of its members. But Paul also learned of false teachers who were corrupting the pure doctrines of Christ and defaming Paul's character and apostleship.

In this book, Paul doesn't reveal the trouble he had to experience. However, he did suffer deep pain, ranging from severe illness to violent persecution. Paul's remedy was not to deny the reality of suffering for a Christian. Rather, he wanted his readers to set their theology in relation to Christ's suffering and consolation.

We live in the same world where Jesus Christ defeated Satan to gift us salvation. Hence, we are called to be faithful to Christ in the midst of suffering.

If 1st Corinthians gives us unparalleled insight into the everyday life of the New Testament church, 2nd Corinthians offers a unique glimpse into the heart and soul of the apostle whose work founded and built that church.

THE BIG IDEA [OF 2ND CORINTHIANS]

The entire letter emphasizes on the truth that:

- God's strength is displayed in our weakness
- God's comfort comes through the new resurrected life of Israel's Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Lord of the world.

In this letter Paul explores the meaning of the cross in terms of his own personal suffering. We should not miss the fact that Paul's deep experience of pain and sorrow led him to a new vision of God. And that vision, shaped by the Messiah, is a vision of light and love.

- Light enables us to move forward from tragedy to glory.
- Love draws us into a divine embrace, which will not only comfort in the present but remain faithful and victorious in the future.

After the crucifixion comes Easter. The grand Good News is that the Spirit of God who raises the dead can and will resurrect our weak spirit.

The heart of the gospel and Paul's central principle is that the Lord Jesus is our "wounded healer". The prayer in the beginning of the letter represents God as '*the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort*' (2 Corinthians 1:3-5). Throughout the letter, Paul emphasizes that God Himself is at work in and through strange and troubling occurrences.



CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 1-7

**Faithful Christian
life in the midst
of suffering**

**2 Corinthians
4:7-8,**

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Chapter 8-9

**Faithful act of
generosity**

2 Corinthians 8:7,

“But since you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love, we have kindled in you – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

Chapter 10-13

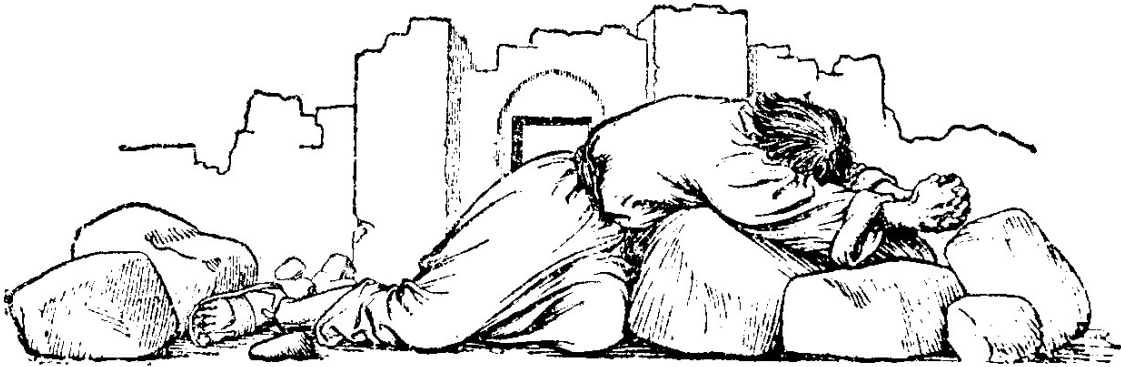
**Faithful servant
of the Lord – Paul
the Apostle**

**2 Corinthians
12:9-10,**

“But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me....

For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

2 CORINTHIANS 1-7



Don't be Self-reliant but Rely Completely on God

2 Corinthians 1:21-22, "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

Paul reminds his readers that the God who comforts can also deliver us from our enemy. Paul knew how it felt to be stripped of all confidence when he trusted his own strength. He stated that in our difficult times we learn that we "should not trust in ourselves but in God" (2 Cor. 1:9).

Paul is referring to a life-threatening situation in Ephesus (may be imprisonment or an illness he endured), which was beyond anything his team could handle. But the silver lining shone brighter than the dark cloud, bringing Paul to the realization that:

- The same God who could raise Christ from the dead can resurrect him (Paul) from his "sentence of death" (2 Cor. 1:9).
- He could trust God's sovereign providence to deliver him and his companions from similar perils in the future.
- God's strength is demonstrated in human weakness, which is the theme of the letter.

Christians are Called to be God's Aroma

2 Corinthians 2:14-15, *“But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”*

During a Roman triumphal procession, it was customary for people to burn incense and sprinkle perfume along the route. Paul uses this practice as a metaphor to spread the aroma of the gospel of Christ. The scent of the incense in a triumphal procession was fragrant to the victors but pungent to the captives.

Similarly, the message of the gospel carries:

- *A life-giving fragrance to those who accept it*
- *A deadly stench of destruction to those who reject it*
(2 Corinthians 2:16)

Paul could have reacted to some of the accusations levelled against him by his Jewish opponents. Their agenda was to spread a different message and attack Paul for calling himself an apostle.

However, Paul let his works do the talking. The Corinthian church had discovered new life in Christ, which was a living testimony to Paul’s ministry. Sealed by the Holy Spirit, Paul carried these “letters of recommendation” in his heart as evidence of his ministry (2 Cor.3:5).

Religion of Holy Spirit vs Legalism

2 Corinthians 3:17-18, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Paul wrote these words in response to those who had come from Jerusalem to Corinth to spread a form of Christianity that forced people to adopt Jewish customs before becoming Christians.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:17, “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty”. He was known to preach the liberating gospel, which states that those who are “in Christ” are free from the penalty and power of sin in their lives. Within the church, the liberated community created by the Spirit of God had been set free – free to love everyone, free to celebrate their own unique gifts, and free to minister in unselfish ways to one another. In this liberty there was a sense of joy, celebration and love that made it attractive to everyone.

The religion based on the Old Covenant struggled to impress God with:

- *Induced goodness*
- *Adherence to endless rules*
- *Physical appearance*
- *Spiritual competitiveness*



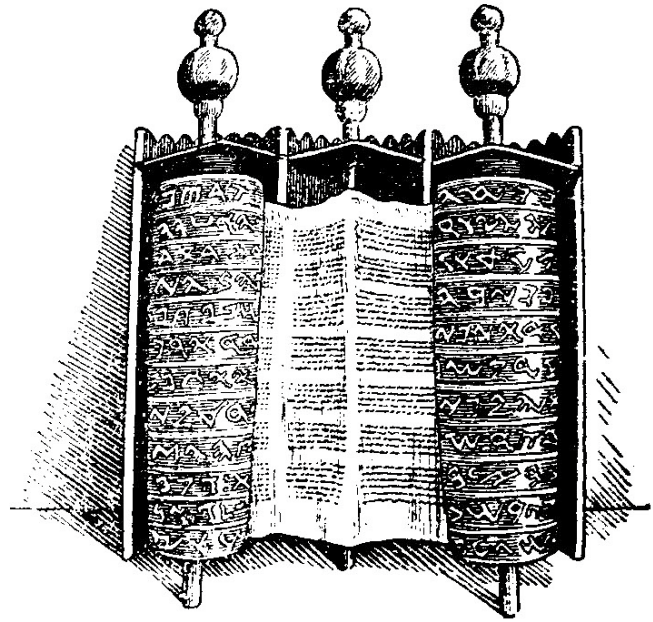
In this form of religion, Paul insists that he strictly followed all requirements only to find death and not life. He reminds his readers of the true reasons for Moses' veil over his face after descending from the mountain where he experienced the presence of the Lord.

Many people had erroneously assumed that the veil was to protect the Israelites from the glow of God's presence. But Paul reminds us all that the veil was put on after he had spoken to people, "so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away" (2 Cor.3:13). The reason for the veil was to ensure that the Israelites would not see the steadily fading glory. Paul was driving his point home about the temporariness of legalistic religion.

What was Paul's take on religion vs spirituality?

- *Paul saw the mixing of certain elements of the Old Covenant with the New Covenant as prostituting of the gospel and undermining of the work of the Spirit.*
- *He used Moses' veil to suggest that legalistic religion lacks an understanding heart.*
- *He pointed out that when the Spirit of Christ comes into a life "the veil is taken away" (v.16) and he or she is able to understand God's message with his or her heart.*
- *There has always been something about legalism which causes people to miss the heart of things and become fascinated with the superficial.*

After all, before Paul became a Christian, he was a man who loved the Scriptures, worshiped God, defended orthodoxy, and lived a good life by the definition of his religion. But he so missed the meaning of God that he orchestrated the death and imprisonment of Christians.



His heart had been so veiled by legalism that he could not understand the religion of the Spirit. Similarly, we can join a church and have a “Christian lifestyle” without entering into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, there is always the danger that one would have all the snares of religion without the love, joy and freedom that is in Christ.

We Have Treasure in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4:16-18, *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”*

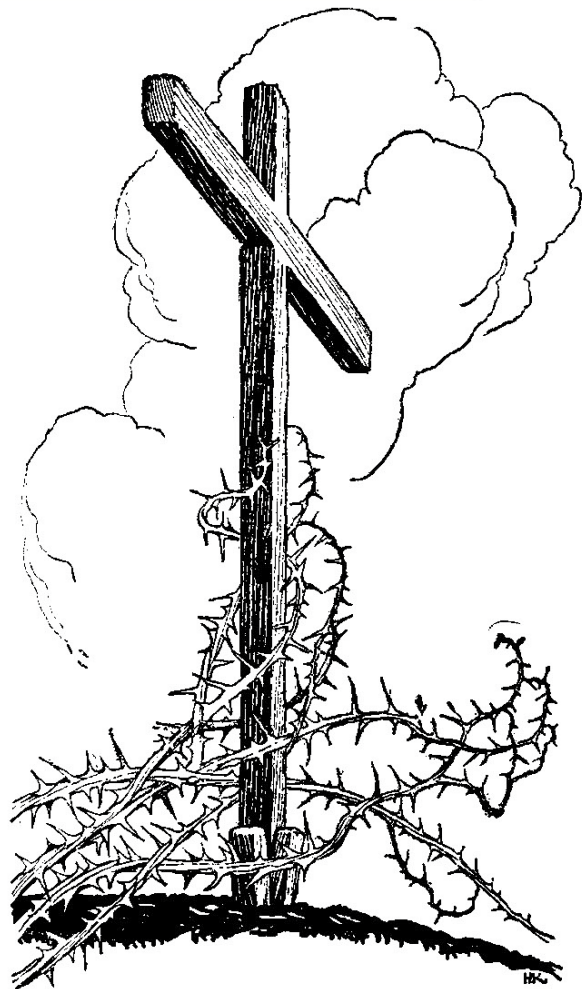
The gospel of the Lord Jesus is a priceless treasure. Paul knew that the real treasure was Christ and that he was merely the vessel that carried it.

There is no more beautiful description of the Christian life than “*we have this treasure in earthen vessels*” (v. 7).

God chose this methodology to prove that His all-surpassing power can transform our lives. Paul does not want any confusion about this, so he clearly states that the power is not from us. The apostles are weak, but the message they proclaim shows God’s incomparable power.

The most amazing truth is that the treasure that we bear is not diminished by the vessel; rather, the vessel is made valuable by the treasure.

Paul and his team suffered physically, emotionally and spiritually in the course of their work and felt like they were hard pressed on every side. But God ensured that the pressure did not crush them. They were perplexed by problems, persecuted by opponents and even struck down in vicious attacks. But God brought them through all those trials. Their endurance was God’s doing, not theirs.



Paul's own body was scarred by the stoning, flogging, beatings and deprivation he had endured. However, his life carried a compelling testimony of the resurrection power of Christ.

Paul's suffering for Christ was real. He does not hide it, but considers it to be light and momentary in comparison to the eternal glory that is to come (4:17). He makes it clear that:

- *One needs to understand that serving God and living according to His will does not guarantee a carefree or painless life.*
- *However, we can be certain that God's sustaining grace and strength will carry us through the difficult seasons of life.*
- *By faith, one can see that suffering, though real and painful, is temporary and produces an eternal weight of glory (interestingly, the Hebrew word for 'glory' also means 'weight').*

Knowing this truth, Paul and his team kept their eyes fixed on eternal and everlasting glory. The words of the hymn ring true for all believers, "*The things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.*"

Continuing with the theme of suffering and perseverance, Paul provides some images to explain what he means. He compares his body to a tent - a weak and temporary shelter that will be destroyed by death. But the loss of the tent does not matter, for he also has a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands (5:1).

We are the ambassadors for Christ

2 Corinthians 5:20-21, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

When the Lord Jesus Christ comes into our lives, it creates new unity, new direction, new goals, and a new commitment to the responsibility of being an ambassador for Him. We have all been given ‘*the ministry of reconciliation*’.



Our goal must be to proclaim that the work of Christ made it possible for all sinful human beings to be reconciled with our Holy God (5:9). The momentous result is that we become the righteousness of God (5:21).

Genuine and full reconciliations with God demands genuine restoration of relationships with our fellow believers and with those who are not believers.

As it says in Romans 12:18, as far as it is possible, we must live in peace with everyone. That is the charter of God's kingdom. Believers are to model this reconciled lifestyle in the presence of others, and thus, with integrity invite them to receive the gracious gift of life in God's kingdom.

Since God in Christ demands an exclusive and intimate relationship with His people, we must strive to achieve the following:

- Flee all pollution and corruption (6:17).
- Reject everything that contaminates body and spirit (7:1).
- Just as the Israelites were to leave every impure thing behind when they left Egypt, so the Corinthians are to depart from all spiritual and moral impurity if they are to be God's sons and daughters (6:18).
- Practice repentance. Paul closes this section with gladness that his letter has led to repentance (7:8-9). This kind of godly sorrow produces good fruit (7:10), as opposed to the anger, resentment and denial that are the deadly fruits of worldly sorrow.

It was worldly grief without repentance that drove Judas to suicide after his infamous betrayal of Jesus. By contrast, it was godly sorrow and grief that led to Peter's repentance and restoration.

The principles that Paul models for us here can be applied to every area of life such as our marriage, our friendships, our work, among others.

2 CORINTHIANS 8-9

Learning to enjoy generosity

Few people are more attractive or more contagious than those who find happiness in generosity. Because ours is a society that is preoccupied with “getting,” we often fail to experience the joy of giving. Christ said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul picks up an initiative that had been introduced previously — offering for the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He was not only concerned about the plight of those Christians who were in desperate need, but for the Corinthian Christians. He knew they needed to feel responsible for their brothers and sisters in Christ if they were to grow spiritually. Also, such an offering would create unity between the Jewish & Gentile believers in Jesus Christ.

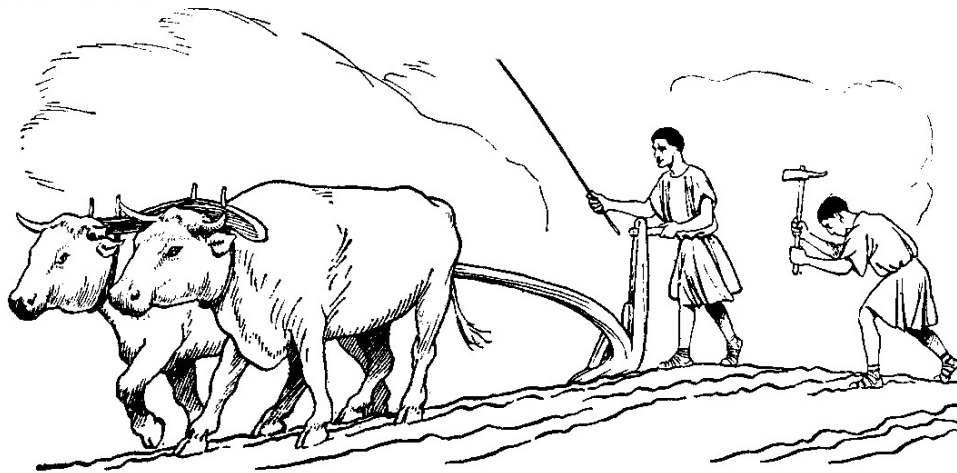
Excel in Giving

2 Corinthians 8:7, “But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”

Paul acknowledges that God had given the Corinthians many gifts, including faith, speech, knowledge and sincerity. But he also wants them to excel in the grace of giving. Their giving would prove that their love was as genuine as that of other generous congregations (8:8). In return, they would experience ‘overflowing joy’.

They were encouraged to overcome this oversight through Paul's gentle push in his letter.

Paul does not command the Corinthians to give per se. However, he refers to the Macedonians as a model of overflowing generosity, who gave not out of abundance but rock-bottom poverty, while enduring severe afflictions (8:2). He was showing that giving depends on the heart more than the circumstance.



Paul uses an agricultural analogy of sowing and reaping, reminding them that the size of a harvest depends on the farmer's generosity when he is sowing (9:6). He wants the Corinthians to sow generously - a bountiful offering that will match the extraordinarily sacrificial generosity of the Macedonians and of the Lord Jesus (8:1-5). In doing so, they could expect to reap an abundant harvest.

Here, he also stresses on the effect of developing an **attitude of giving:**

- None should expect a rich harvest if they give grudgingly after feeling guilty or pressured.
- Rather, they should give willingly and with great joy, for God loves a cheerful giver (9:7).

Finally, Paul points the Corinthians to God, the ultimate source of all spiritual and material blessings. God provides these blessings as resources, as seeds for sowing not for hoarding.

What should we do with God's blessings?

- *Blessings are to be used in the good work He has assigned for us (9:8,10).*
- *Our blessings to others will bring blessings from God, which should in turn lead to even greater generosity on our part in every occasion (9:11).*

Paul burst out in praise of God for His indescribable gift – the Lord Jesus Christ (9:15). Paul's model for sacrificial giving was Christ Himself, "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich". This should be the primary motivation for all Christian giving: God gave us the supreme gift of Christ Jesus who gave himself to serve others and to save us. We are called to imitate his self-giving love in concrete ways.

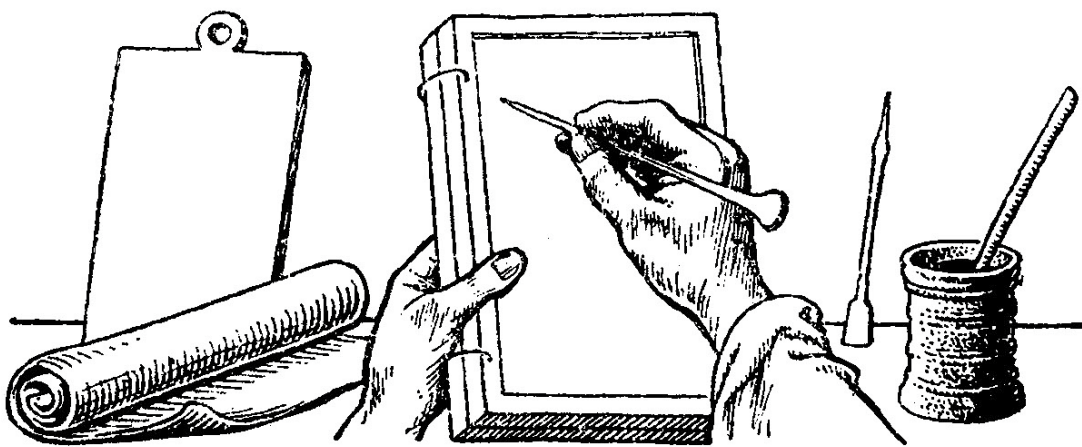
Faithfulness to God in and through the Local Church

True disciples of the Lord Jesus are recognized by their attitude of giving faithfully and cheerfully to the church where God has planted them. In the Christian world there are wrong examples of manipulating people for money, one must practice wisdom in giving to people or ministers that are masquerading as angels of light.

2 CORINTHIANS 10-13

Paul's Apostleship

In this section of the letter, we see Paul defending his character and ministry. He exposes and threatens his critics for what they are, while boasting of both his credentials and accomplishments. He also maintains his authority as the founder of the Corinthian church.



These four chapters are believed to be written later by Paul (circulated as one letter) when he was attacked for a second time by “false apostles” who were Judaizers questioning his credentials as an apostle. They accused him of:

- Being cowardly in face-to-face situations (10:1)
- Not being spiritual and living by the standards to the world (10:2)
- Being unimpressive in speech and appearance (11:6)
- Refusing to accept offerings, which was a sign of inferiority (12:13-16).

Paul's response is spread out in these last four chapters of the letter.

Boasting in the Lord

2 Corinthians 10:17-18, “*But, Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.*” 18 *For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*”

2 Corinthians 11:30, “*If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*”



Paul is doing something unusual in these passages, he is boasting about his great achievements and Jewish heritage, as well as his weaknesses and his many sufferings for the sake of the gospel. Paul claims that his suffering on behalf of Christ should put him in a totally different league of apostle, far from those who claim to be super apostles.

The Corinthian believers were the fruit of his labour, not theirs, and the seal of his apostleship. Therefore, it was fair and appropriate for Paul to boast about the Lord's work in his ministry (10:17). But Paul did not overstep the boundaries by taking credit for what the Lord had done.

God's power made perfect in weakness

2 Corinthians 3:17-18, *“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

Paul could have boasted of planting churches in many places. He could have also spoken pompously about the miracles God had performed through him. Instead, Paul chose to:

- *List the adversities (11:23-28) he had to endure to highlight God’s grace and power that helped him endure difficult seasons and gave him a place in Christ’s triumphal procession.*
- *Avoid boasting about the visions and revelations that God gave him (12:1-2). Instead, he prefers to boast of his weaknesses – “a thorn in the flesh” (12:7) – which could have been a constant opposition and persecution from false apostles or a physical issue/disability that might have hindered his ministry and caused some people to look down on him.*

In spite of his prayers to remove it, God only gave him these comforting words - **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9)**. As a result, Paul delights in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in difficulties because he sees suffering as a place where Christ’s resurrection power can be manifested (**Philippians 3:10**).

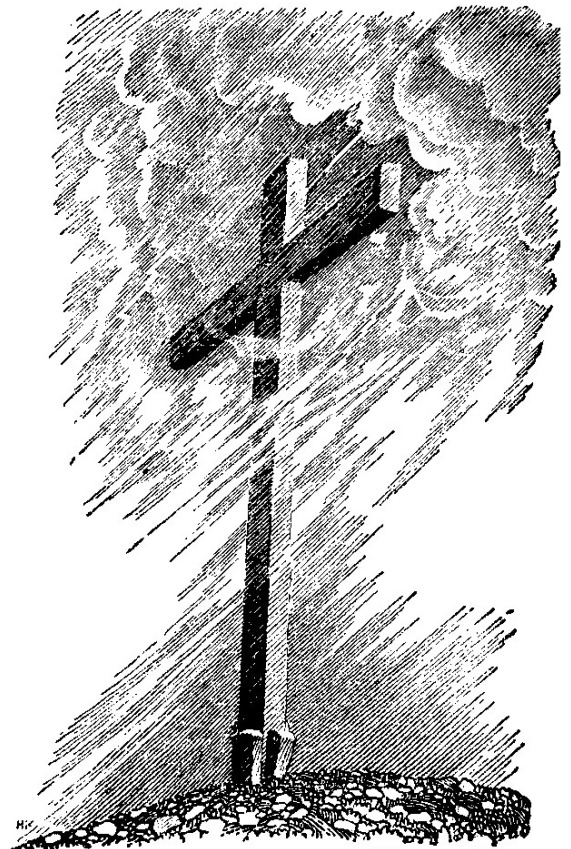


Paul never came to feel that the thorn in itself was a good thing, rather believing that it was “a messenger of Satan” (12:7). But he did come to that place in his life where he could see how God’s grace could transform something bad into good.

It’s a similar principle that Paul is stating in **Romans 8:28** when he declares that “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

He wasn’t saying that everything that happened was good. Let’s face it - lots of bad things happen to good people. And he wasn’t saying that everything that happened was necessarily what God had willed to happen. But out of experience Paul learned that God could take our weaknesses and use them to demonstrate His power.

Paul was affirming that God can turn any bad situation into good for His children. Our God doesn’t build a wall around us to isolate us from the risk of harm, but He does surround us with grace that enables us to positively transform anything that happens to us. Remember the words of the Lord Jesus in **John 16:33**, “*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*”.



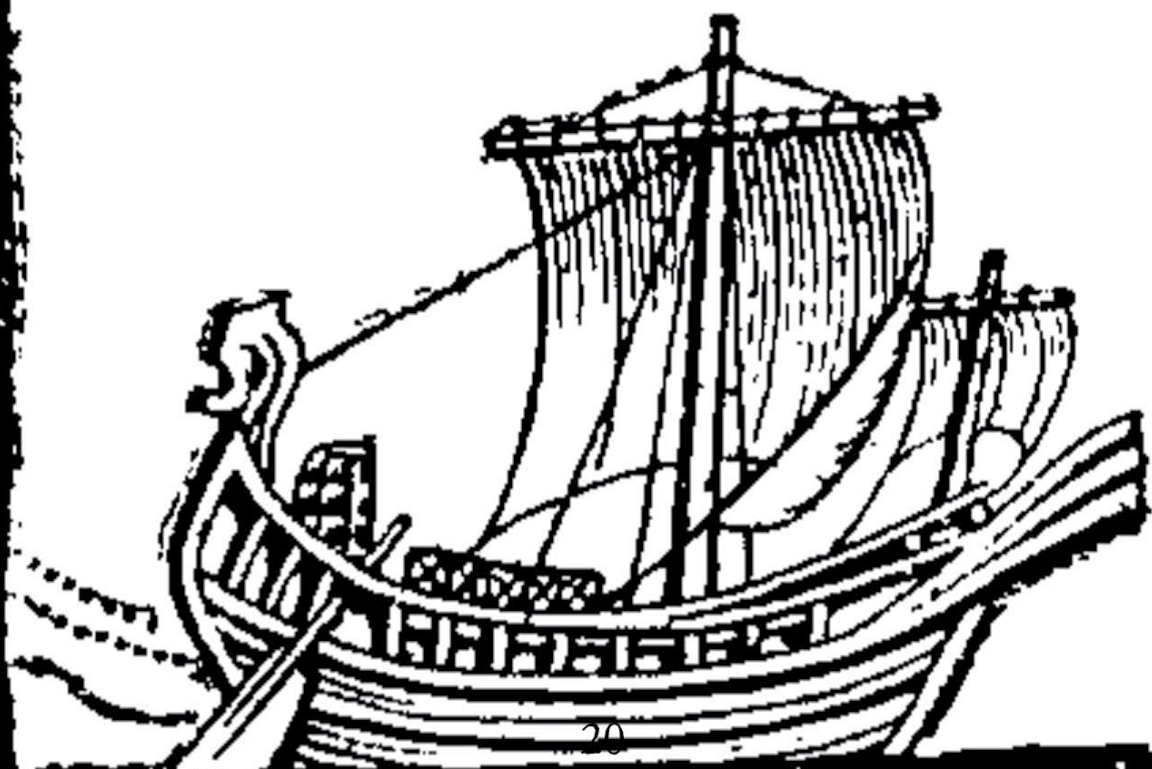
CONCLUSION

This letter is primarily written:

- **To motivate** you when you're discouraged to put your confidence in what God is doing. He is able to use your weaknesses for His glory because of the resurrection power that is at work in you.

- **To encourage** you to be faithful in giving to the Lord in the church where God planted you.

- **To urge** you to serve God with your gifts, talents and weaknesses in and through the local church for the extension of God's Kingdom.



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