**THE HEART OF PAUL**

This morning we’re going to begin a 4-week study in the book of 2 Corinthians. How many of you have ever studied 2 Corinthians? Even though 1 and 2 Corinthians were written by the same author, Paul, to the same congregation, the church at Corinth; and even though they were written only a year apart, the two letters are completely different from each other – completely different in tone and content. First Corinthians is a letter devoted to various problems in the church. Second Corinthians is a letter devoted to the personal life of Paul. First Corinthians is Paul telling the Corinthian church what they need to be. Second Corinthians is Paul telling the Corinthian church what he is (an example). It’s a very personal letter. First Corinthians is a letter of correction. Second Corinthians is a letter of personal testimony (mentions a lot about his ministry). First Corinthians is written to encourage and strengthen a church for greater usefulness. Second Corinthians is a look at a man whom God has been strengthening for his greater usefulness. Second Corinthians is the most personal, the most open-hearted look into the soul of Paul of all of his letters.

As we learned in 1 Corinthians, the church in Corinth (which was first started by Paul in Acts 18) was weak, struggling with division and spiritual immaturity. Paul's authority was being undermined by opposing teachers who were misleading and dividing the people with false teachings (not truth). Not only were these people questioning Paul’s claims at apostleship but they were assaulting his character. In an attempt to resolve this issue, Paul traveled to Corinth, but his distressing visit (not talked about in Acts) only fueled the church's resistance against him. Shortly after Paul reached Ephesus he wrote again to the church at Corinth, pleading with them to repent and avoid God's judgment (this letter has been lost). Later Paul received good news through Titus that many in the church at Corinth had indeed repented. However there was a small faction who continued to cause problems there.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul lays out his defense. He refutes and condemns the false teachers, those spreading the malicious lies about him. He also encourages the faithful majority to stay committed to the truth and he reaffirms his deep love for them. It’s a wonderful letter. I’m surprised we don’t study it more.

With that bit of background, let’s jump right in to Ch 1.

READ 2 Corinthians 1:1-2

Just a few quick points about this greeting. Right from the start Paul reaffirms his claim to be an apostle of Christ Jesus. What is the definition of an apostle? We even hear that title thrown around today. Apostle means “one who is sent.” So specifically an apostle of Jesus would have been a person who knew Jesus, studied under him and then was sent out by Him to preach the gospel. How many apostles were there? Twelve – the original 12 disciples minus Judas, then Paul was called later by Jesus on the Damascus road (Acts 9). When did Jesus commission Paul to be an apostle, when did He send Paul to be a missionary to the Gentiles? Paul mentions this in Acts 22:21, when Paul was in the temple at Jerusalem praying, Jesus came and spoke to him. So Paul is a true apostle, called by the will of God. This wasn’t Paul’s choice.

He mentions Timothy, who was a person the Corinthians would have been very familiar with. Timothy was with Paul when he founded the church on his second missionary journey. He is apparently with Paul helping him out as he writes this letter from Macedonia.

Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, but also to the believers in the entire region of Achaia. It is a letter intended to encourage those believers, but it also reaffirms Paul’s credentials. The lies about Paul were widespread and not isolated in Corinth.

“Grace” and “peace” appear in all of Paul’s introductory remarks in every one of his letters. They are “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Grace is the favor we receive from God because of what Christ did for us. Peace comes when by faith we are saved and enter into a personal relationship with God thru Christ. What about the Holy Spirit? Well He is talked about in v 3 thru 7 – not by name, but His ministry to us.

READ 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Did you see the work of the Holy Spirit in this passage? What’s the key word repeated over and over? “Comfort” (or “comforted”). Ten times in 5 verses this word is mentioned. The Greek word for comfort is a form of the word “paraclete” or “one who comes alongside to help.” This is another name for the Holy Spirit. READ John 14:16-17, 15:26, 16:7. So the Holy Spirit (“Helper”) is God Himself who comes alongside us, He indwells us, and He is present to teach us, guide us, comfort us, to help us, in our affliction. From these verses, what affliction is Paul talking about specifically? Sharing in Christ’s sufferings; mistreatment, being slandered, ostracized, physically abused, made fun of, and so forth – why? Because we are different from the world. Because we speak out against sin. Because we boldly share our faith, witness to others of how Jesus can change their lives. News flash – when we Christians live out our faith the way Jesus told us to then we will experience some degree of suffering, of persecution. And when we do, the Holy Spirit will give us wisdom, encourage us.

So why does God allow suffering in the life of a believer – Jesus mentioned that this is to be expected. READ John 15:18-20. In the passage we just read Paul mentions two important reasons why God allows suffering in the life of believers. V 4, “so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction…” When we have suffered and then been comforted by the Holy Spirit we can then more effectively minister to, comfort and encourage others. But there is a second reason and that is mentioned in the next verses.

READ 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

Paul here gives personal testimony of afflictions he has just gone thru. He describes some sort of a near death experience he went thru. We aren’t sure what event he is describing [discuss some of the conjectures]. The important point he is making is the second reason why God allows suffering in the life of a Christian – to keep us from depending on ourselves and to keep relying on God, v 9 “to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”

In v 11 Paul mentions something very important about prayer. It is the conduit of God’s blessing. God’s sovereign will and purposes will be done, but throughout scripture and in the course of human history we see how God responds, yes, sometimes even from our perspective He appears to change His mind, to the prayers, the petitions of His saints. We see it in the O.T., in Exodus, where Moses interceded on behalf of the people of Israel and God spared them. We see it in the N.T. in the book of Acts where God saved Peter from prison. Here Paul indicates that the prayers of the saints in Corinth and other places helped to deliver Paul from what seemed like certain death. It is something that is hard to understand, but somehow someway our prayers work in conjunction with God’s will to effect change.

I mentioned out the outset that 2 Cor was a very personal letter and beginning in v 12 Paul begins a defense of his character, which had come under attack.

READ 2 Corinthians 1:12-14

Some have termed the conscience, v 12, as “the soul’s warning system.” It is something that God placed inside of every person to allows them to contemplate their motives and actions. It then allows them to make moral evaluations of what is right or wrong. We Christians have the Holy Spirit so we submit our conscience to the Holy Spirit. In v 12 upon his own careful examination of his recent actions specifically in regard to the Corinthian believers, Paul felt he had acted appropriately and in a godly manner. His actions were above reproach.

Paul has apparently been accused of flip-flopping, changing his message. In v 13 he says that what he has written to the Corinthians, harsh words oftentimes, was always clear, understandable, consistent and from his heart. He says, “I hope you will fully understand –“ Paul’s writings as you know are pretty deep and it takes a while to completely understand everything he is saying. He knows that the Corinthians partially understand and his hope and prayer is that, as they grow spiritually, they will understand more fully.

As I reflected on Paul’s words in v 14 I recounted the song by Ray Boltz, “Thank You.” It speaks about a time when we’re in heaven and when we will all stand up one by one and offer testimony to Jesus about how certain individuals and groups impacted our lives in a positive way for the Lord. For me personally I have had many mentors – mostly people you do not know or will ever know. But they had a profound impact on me and my spiritual growth. I think that may be what Paul has in mind here. On the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we His church, the saints of God are gathered together, Paul says you Corinthian Christians will boast of us, offer testimony about us to the Lord, as Timothy and I will boast of you. We often think of the Corinthian church in light of the problems addressed in First Corinthians, but they were a church with remarkable Christians who truly loved the Lord and who made an impact on Paul and Timothy. Ministry is a two-way street. As your Bible study teacher I may from time to time say something that makes you think or convicts you thru the Holy Spirit or even blesses you. I hope and pray that’s the case. But trust me, YOU all bless me more than you know and someday when I stand before Jesus I’m going to tell Him about you and what you meant to me. And that is from my heart. So thank you.

Now Paul mentions a specific situation that had occurred and which he had been criticized for by his detractors –

READ 2 Corinthians 1:15-18

Paul had planned to travel to Corinth from Ephesus on the way to Macedonia and then come back to them after leaving Macedonia. This was what he had communicated to them. He enjoyed being with them and he wanted to go to Corinth and fellowship with them, to be a blessing to them, to bring them “a second experience of grace.” But something had come up which changed these plans. We all know from our own experience that we can make plans, but things happen to change them. His critics jumped all over this as evidence that Paul was a liar. Paul in essence tells the Corinthians “You know me better than that. I don’t make plans in the flesh (apart from the leading of the Holy Spirit) or do things to purposely deceive you. I am a man of my word who means what I say.”

READ 2 Corinthians 1:19-20

Not only was Paul’s character under attack by the false teachers in Corinth, but apparently also was the character and work of Jesus. So Paul defends Him. God keeps His promises and speaks truth – thru His apostles, like Paul, and thru the teachings of Jesus, which we can read today in the gospels, in Acts and in Revelation. “In Jesus Christ it is always ‘Yes.’ For all the promises of God find their “Yes” in Him.” All of God’s promises, O.T. and N.T. find their fulfillment in Jesus. The “Amen” we speak is an affirmation that what God says will happen will, in fact, happen.

READ 2 Corinthians 1:21-22

Notice here all three members of the godhead are involved in the work of salvation. God the Father establishes us, places us on a firm foundation in Christ. He established His plan of redemption from the foundation of the world. It was always Plan A. There was no Plan B. It was the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, God the Son, on the cross that provided the only way for us to be saved. It is the Holy Spirit who anointed us, commissioned us, set us apart for the Lord’s service. And it is the Holy Spirit who seals us. Ephesians 1:13-14 says that we “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the **guarantee** of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.” Possession of what? Our eternal salvation. This is the word Paul uses here in 2 Corinthians – “guarantee.” The Holy Spirit secures and preserves our salvation; He is given by God as His pledge of our future inheritance.

As you can see there is a lot of good doctrine we can learn from 2 Corinthians.

READ 2 Corinthians 1:23-24

Paul goes back to that incident surrounding his change of plans in not coming to Corinth, the one which he had been so harshly criticized for. Paul saw that as the hand of God giving the believers in Corinth the time they needed to repent of their sinful behavior (identified in 1 Cor). Here we see the heart of Paul. He has the authority to say what needs to be said as God directs him. But he is also loves these believers, cares about them, knows what they need. He doesn’t want to “lord it over” them but to work with them to help build up their faith and fill their lives with the joy of the Lord.

Don’t you see how different 2 Corinthians is from 1 Corinthians? In spite of all the issues mentioned in 1 Corinthians we know that they have changed, they’ve repented, God has done a mighty work in that congregation. So for application as we close let me just say this. God can change lives. None of us is perfect. We all have flaws. Pray for each other. Take time to get to know each other. This small group is where ministry will take place. My prayer for us is that we will grow together in both truth and love as we yield ourselves as individuals and as a class to the Holy Spirit.

Sing that great hymn, “Standing on the Promises”