

BaptistWay Bible Series for Oct. 17: Paul was faithful in ministry despite hardships_100404

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Paul was faithful in ministry despite hardships

2 Corinthians 6:1-13; 7:2-4

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In last week's lesson, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 was considered—a text centered upon Paul's ambassadorial role as a minister of reconciliation. Paul was convinced God had given him a reconciliatory ministry and entrusted him with the message that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (5:18-19).

In the passages this week, Paul reflects further upon his apostolic ministry with special reference to the Corinthians. At this point in the letter, the apostle appeals to his own afflictions and affections as well as to his personal character and commitments in an effort to reinforce his recipients in the faith and in their relationship with him.

As one who works with God in reconciling people to God through Christ,

Paul enjoins the assembly not to compromise their received faith. He does not want the grace of God they have embraced to be rendered inoperative in their lives (6:1). To iterate their need to act with all due diligence and allegiance to God's kindness made manifest in Christ, Paul cites Isaiah 49:8. The apostle employs this text not only to underscore God's mercy, but also to call the Corinthians to renew their commitment to the gospel. All deferring and delaying will be tantamount to disobedience (6:2).



If the church were impeded in responding positively to the message Paul proclaimed, he insists his ministry is not to blame. Paul contends he had not placed an obstacle in anyone's path (6:3). To support his claim that he is a commendable servant of God, Paul emphasizes his "great endurance" in the face of undefined "afflictions, hardships and calamities" as well as external opposition ("beatings, imprisonments and riots") and personal exhaustion and deprivation ("labors, sleepless nights and hunger") (6:4-5).

Paul was intimately acquainted with the spiritual progression he would later articulate in his letter to the Romans—"affliction produces endurance" and "endurance produces character" (5:3-4). Having listed nine illustrative hardships in 6:4-5, Paul notes in 6:6-7 eight virtues that characterize and thus commend his ministry. His ministerial service was marked by moral purity or integrity, knowledge or understanding, patience or forbearance, and kindness.

Moreover, Paul's apostolic work was conducted "in the Holy Spirit" (or less likely, in my view, "in holiness of spirit"), "in sincere love," "in truthful speech" and "in the power of God." At the conclusion of 6:7, the apostle indicates he did not enter the "ministerial combat zone" unarmed; rather, he was fully armed by God's righteousness so that he might withstand

spiritual onslaughts and prevail in spiritual battle.

The contrast with which 6:7 concludes (right hand/left hand) is followed by two additional contrasting pairs in 6:8 and then by seven antithetical clauses in 6:8-10.

The end of verse 8 suggests that while some regarded Paul as honorable and reputable, others considered him to be dishonorable and without repute. Furthermore, people responded to the apostle as an obscure imposter and as a well-known, trustworthy messenger. The contrasts continue in 6:9-10, where Paul juxtaposes dying with living, punishment with being killed, sorrow with rejoicing, poverty with wealth and the possession of nothing with having everything. Such an incongruous existence would reduce most people to a confused, if not crazed, state, but not so with Paul. Ironically, he regarded the paradox and disparity that typified his ministry to be a seal of its authenticity. Paul knew well another who was a man of sorrows and well acquainted with grief.

On the heels of a riveting description of his apostolic ministry, Paul speaks directly to the Corinthians. He indicates he has opened his mouth and his heart to them (6:11). Moreover, he maintains there is no restriction in his affections toward them, only in theirs toward him (6:12). Like a parent pleading with children, Paul calls upon the church to reciprocate (6:13). Then in 7:2, he reiterates his desire for the Corinthians to make room in their hearts for him. Whatever his detractors might say to the contrary, Paul insists he and his colleagues have not wronged, corrupted or exploited anyone (7:2).

The apostle's motivation for making such assertions is not the condemnation of the congregation. He assures the Corinthians they are very dear to him. Paul's commitment to the assembly runs deep. They are not only in his heart; they also are people with and for whom he would live and die (7:3). Paul clearly possesses much more than a passing apostolic

interest in the Corinthian assembly.

Second Corinthians 7:4 serves as both a conclusion to what Paul has been saying and as an introduction to what he will go on to say in the letter. The apostle notes he has spoken with much boldness toward and with much boasting on behalf of the Corinthians. He also speaks again of the consolation with which he has been filled and of the joy with which he has been overcome in the face of his various afflictions. Paul's straight talk to the church signals his affection for the church; his personal hardships serve as a reminder of God's powerful presence in the midst of his human frailty.

Second Corinthians 6:1-12, 7:2-4 indicates that the apostle was intimately acquainted with the ideas that Robert Grant would later express so poignantly and poetically in the fourth stanza of "O Worship the King": "Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail, in thee do we trust, nor find thee to fail: thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end; our Maker, Defender, Redeemer and Friend."

Discussion question

- ◆ Have you seen hard times lead to character development?

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