

The Comfort of Paul and Titus

2 Corinthians 7:12–16
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The apostle Paul found comfort in the ministry of the gospel, but he wasn't the only one who did. This evening's text shows that the Corinthians also took comfort in it. And so did Titus. But finding this comfort wasn't easy for any of them.

It wasn't easy for Paul because he had to face a lot of tough problems in the church at Corinth, which required him to step outside of his comfort zone. He had to write a harsh letter to the church that grieved its members. And this exacerbated Paul's grief because he didn't know how the church had received it. He sent Titus to find out, but Titus' trip took a lot longer than expected. This made Paul even more discouraged.

The Corinthians had their trials, too. Although the confidence Paul expressed concerning them in our text suggests that only a small part of the church was listening to the false teachers, the rest of the congregation still had to face not only its own sins but theirs as well. Paul made the church sorry, but he was thankful that the church's sorrow led to its repentance. Overall, the Corinthian church responded very well to Paul's admonitions.

Titus had different troubles. He was just as concerned for the Corinthians as Paul was, but verse 14 suggests that he may have been a lot less optimistic about it. He also had quite a challenge to face. Paul sent him to Corinth to address matters that he had been unable to fix. Apparently, not every minister or elder can deal with every church problem.

But in the end, Paul, Titus and the Corinthians found comfort in the Lord and rejoiced together.

Paul's Letter

In verse 12 of this evening's text, Paul mentioned his harsh letter again, this time explaining why he wrote it.

Paul hadn't written it for the sake of the person who had done wrong, whom most commentators believe was the incestuous man mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. Others think the wrongdoer was a different person who sinned against Paul personally since Paul mentioned earlier in 2 Corinthians that he had forgiven him. Either way, Paul didn't mean that he hadn't written for this person at all but that he hadn't written to him only, as if he alone mattered.

Nor had Paul written his harsh letter solely for the sake of the one who had suffered wrong from the offender. This would have been either the incestuous man's father or the apostle himself. If Paul was the injured party, he wasn't looking for a pound of flesh.

No, Paul wrote his harsh letter to the Corinthians to affirm his love and concern for the whole congregation. He did so *in the sight of God*, i.e., for the gospel ministry. He wanted the Word of God to flourish in Achaia and everywhere else. He also wanted the Corinthians to see his concern for themselves. This explains why he spent so much time in 2 Corinthians discussing the work he had done on behalf of the Corinthian congregation and how much he suffered for it.

Here we see the communion of saints at work. The communion of the saints is not just for church members. It's also for church leaders. Paul and his companions had to share their love and compassion and gifts to the entire congregation. The gifts God gives his saints are always for the benefit of others.

Titus' Joy

One point that stands out in this evening's text is the overwhelming joy of Titus, which then gave joy to others. This should be obvious just by the number of times Paul mentioned joy. It occurs twice in this chapter as a noun (vv. 4, 13) and five times as a verb (vv. 4, 7, 9, 13, 16). In fact, the verb to *rejoice* occurs forty-one times in 2 Corinthians. So, although Titus may not have been as optimistic toward the Corinthians as Paul was, his attitude had completely changed. He couldn't have been happier, and his joy was infectious. Verse 13 says, *And exceedingly the more joyed we for the joy of Titus, because his spirit was refreshed by you all.*

This verse also shows how God's grace works in the lives of his people. The Corinthians had refreshed Titus, i.e., they relieved his concerns and renewed his spirit. The Lord used them to encourage and minister to him. Titus' joy then spilled over to Paul and Timothy, increasing their joy. And they not only rejoiced with Titus, but Paul wrote that they joyed *exceedingly*. And thus, in this way, Paul and Timothy were comforted by the Corinthians, as verse 13 says. This is exactly how it should be, as Paul wrote at the beginning of this book. He said, *Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God* (ch. 1:3–4).

The sharing of comfort between the Corinthians and Titus and Paul reflected everything Paul had been saying. He had boasted about the Corinthians to Titus, and everything he said turned out to be true. He had no reason to be embarrassed by them. He wrote, *For if I have boasted any thing to*

him of you, I am not ashamed. And not only had he said good things about the Corinthians, he had also said good things to them. He continued: *But as we spake all things to you in truth, even so our boasting, which I made before Titus, is found a truth.*

It amazes me that Paul not only made a charitable judgment concerning the Corinthians but actually bragged about them. He was proud of them and gloried in them. He did so despite their sins. What was he really glorying in? It certainly wasn't their goodness. They had more problems than any other church, and some of their problems were enormous. It wasn't because the church had opened its heart to him. It hadn't, at least not completely. He had to plead with them to do this. Nor was it because Paul's ministry in Corinth produced impeccable fruit. His work produced some fruit, but it was badly bruised. No, Paul could boast in the Corinthians only because he could see God working in them despite all their sins and challenges and their coolness toward the apostle himself. The Lord had done a work of grace that made the apostle rejoice contrary to their inconsistencies.

The Corinthians' Obedience

So, what exactly had Paul seen in the Corinthians that Titus, and perhaps others, missed at first? The apostle answered this in verse 15, where he wrote, *And his inward affection is more abundant toward you, whilst he remembereth the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling ye received him.*

What I want you to consider here is the last part of this verse. Titus, having returned to Paul, remembered the church's obedience, specifically how it had received him. It received him *with fear and trembling*.

Fear and trembling. At first, this doesn't sound very good. Had the Corinthians gone so far down the rabbit trail of sin that they thought Titus had come only to reprimand them with a severe tongue-lashing? Was this why they were afraid? If so, how could Titus remember their welcome of him with joy and count it as obedience? This can't possibly be what Paul meant.

The phrase *fear and trembling* occurs three times in the New Testament, and once more in a slightly altered form. Besides our text, we find it in Ephesians 6:5 and Philippians 2:12 (cf. 1 Cor. 2:3). I believe these passages help us understand what Paul really meant.

Ephesians 6:5 says, *Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.* Here Paul instructed Christian servants to obey their masters *with fear and trembling*. Did he mean they were to live in constant dread of punishment, that this was their highest motivation for obedience? How would this have encouraged them? Everything else Paul said to them was positive. Servants were to devote

themselves single-mindedly to their masters, just as if they were serving Christ, because they were really more Jesus' servants than the servants of men. He further assured them that Jesus himself would reward them for their obedience.

Philippians 2:12 is even broader. In it, Paul described the obedience he wanted to see, and in fact had seen, among the whole Philippian congregation. He wrote, *Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.* Would Paul have told such a faithful church, one whose chief characteristic was joy, to toss its joy in the trash can and tremble in terror of judgment? Again, this isn't likely. Rather, he reminded them that it's *God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.* The Lord builds his church. He accomplishes *his good pleasure* in his people. This isn't a reason to fear. It's exactly the opposite: a comforting reassurance that should soothe our fears and fill our hearts with joy.

Perhaps the point I'm making here is best summarized in Question 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which encourages us to focus on gratitude and joy and productivity. The catechism says, "Since then we are redeemed from our misery by grace through Christ, without any merit of ours, why should we do good works? Ans. Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we show ourselves thankful to God for His blessing, and that He be glorified through us; then also, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by the fruits thereof; and by our godly walk win also others to Christ."

Last week, we talked about *the fear of God* in verse 1 and concluded that Paul didn't mean that we should live in terror. The fear of God is a love for God that makes us afraid to disappoint him, just as little boys despise the thought of disappointing their earthly fathers. We have to understand the *fear and trembling* in today's text the same way. Simon Kistemaker explained it like this:

The words *fear and trembling* occur four times in the New Testament and all are in Paul's epistles (1 Cor. 2:3; 2 Cor. 7:15; Eph. 6:5; Phil. 2:12). They convey not the fear and trembling of alarm but rather the apprehension of attempting to do the best one is able to accomplish. When Paul entered Corinth the first time, he was filled with anxiety about whether he would be able to establish a church (1 Cor. 2:3). He instructed the Philippians to exert themselves exceedingly with respect to their salvation (Phil. 2:12). And he told slaves to obey their masters as they would obey Christ (Eph. 6:5). In every case, the phrase *fear and trembling* describes the believer's attitude in God's sacred presence. The Christians in Corinth received Titus as God's ambassador who spoke the words God had given him. Their repentance, then, exhibited fear and trembling in the presence of the Almighty and a desire to do his will.¹

¹ *In loc.*

Paul's confidence in the Corinthians didn't rest in a false expectation that the church was perfect or that anyone in the church was free of blemish. Rather, he saw their effort, feeble though it was, and concluded that it was an actual work of God's grace.

It's easy to get caught up in particulars, isn't it? You follow Cephas instead of Paul, so I can't fellowship with you. You sued your brother in a pagan court, therefore I can't regard you as a sincere follower of Christ. Your celebration of the Lord's Supper is deficient, so you must not be a true church. Problems like these need to be corrected, and Paul did just that. But he didn't dismiss the church because of them. Rather, he looked for evidence of God's grace. Interestingly, the ability to see God's grace in others is evidence of God's grace in us. Paul first removed the log from his own eye before plucking the splinter from the eyes of the Corinthians.

I'll conclude today by highlighting the last verse of our text, which says, *I rejoice therefore that I have confidence in you in all things*. What a beautiful summary of Paul's response to the news Titus brought from Corinth!

I — Paul himself. *Rejoice* — celebrate God's goodness to his people. *I have confidence* — trust the Lord is doing everything he said he would do. *In you* — Paul longed to see God's grace in the Corinthians, a congregation that had been plagued with countless sins and failures. *In all things* — God's grace addresses every issue in our lives, not just our worst sins.

Do you have this confidence about our church? What about other churches you know? Can you set aside differences in understanding and practice, as long as they're not fundamental denials of the gospel, and rejoice in whatever grace God has given them?

It's all God's work. Let's give him all the praise and glory, as he builds the church of his dear Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.