

From the Apostle to the Church of God: Grace and Peace

2 Corinthians 1:1-2

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Introduction

Last week we had the distinct privilege of beginning a series in the Book of 2 Corinthians. And we spent our time together last week trying to get a thirty thousand-foot view of the entire book—acquainting ourselves with the historical context and the major themes found in the letter. And we did that so that we might be properly equipped to understand the text in its context.

And we spoke about how understanding the text in its context, while necessary for all faithful biblical interpretation, is especially necessary in the case of understanding 2 Corinthians. And that's because there is so much history between Paul and the church in Corinth that the letter of 2 Corinthians rests on. We mentioned that it is a very historically situated letter. Among all of the letters that Paul wrote, 2 Corinthians is the most closely tied to the events of historical circumstances (cf. Harris, 1). And so because we can't hope to properly understand 2 Corinthians without understanding the history of the relationship between Paul and this church, we spent a large portion of our time together last week in New Testament history class, re-tracing the steps of Paul's interaction with the Corinthian church. And so if you weren't here last week, let me encourage you to get that introductory message on CD or download it from the website, because it really does lay the necessary groundwork for our study of this great letter.

And I don't want to reiterate all of that history, but I do want to remind you of the basic context for our study this morning. We mentioned last time that 2 Corinthians is written in the midst of an intense spiritual conflict for Paul. The Corinthian church has been infiltrated by false teachers from Jerusalem, falsely claiming for themselves the title of "apostles." And because they knew that they weren't going to get anyone to believe their *false* message without sowing seeds of doubt about *Paul's* message, these false apostles launched a full-scale assault against the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship. They accused him of suffering too much to have divine approval; of being a sort of Johnny-come-lately Apostle—he wasn't part of the original twelve; they accused him of not being skilled in speech, and not enough people believing his message; and a number of other accusations.

Well the Corinthians were being duped by these slanderous, baseless accusations. Paul's own spiritual children!—Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:15: You've had many tutors in Christ, but you haven't had many *fathers*. But in Christ *I* became your father through the gospel. And so Paul's own spiritual children—men and women who owed whatever acquaintance they had with Christ

and the Gospel to Paul's ministry among them—now began to doubt the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship. "Gee, I don't know. Maybe they're right. He *does* get beaten and stoned everywhere he goes. He *wasn't* part of the original twelve. He really *isn't* all that great of a preacher. And *these* guys! Boy, *these* preachers can really turn a phrase! It's obvious they've been trained in the top flight schools. And they're from the church in Jerusalem, the flagship church! They've got the letters of commendation to prove it! And people really listen to them; look at the following they have! Maybe they're on to something...."

But you see, it wasn't just that they began to doubt *Paul*, it was that they began to doubt the *Gospel* that Paul preached. Once you start questioning whether Paul is a legitimate apostle, well then you have to start questioning whether the apostolic message that he preached was true or not. And it's out of *that* concern for the souls of the Corinthians—out of a desire to defend the Gospel—that he sets out to defend himself. And so Paul's main point in writing the book of 2 Corinthians is to defend the legitimacy of his own apostleship in the face of this assault from these pseudo-apostles. But he undertakes this self-defense not because of his ego, but because to reject *Paul's* legitimacy is to reject the *Gospel's* legitimacy.

Commentator Philip Edgcumbe Hughes puts it this way. He says, 2 Corinthians "is a defense by Paul of the integrity of his personal character and apostleship and an exposure of the intruders as impostors—dictated not by self-interest but by the necessity for protecting the church God had founded through him from forces and doctrines which were essentially inimical to the gospel...and to the spiritual welfare of those whose lives, through response to that gospel, had been transformed and set free" (xvi–xvii). And so, you see, the Gospel is at stake here. The very lives of the Corinthians are at stake here. And so Paul fights for his authority as an apostle not for his own sake, but for the sake of the purity of the Gospel and for the sake of the spiritual welfare of his dear spiritual children, the Corinthians.

And really the chief accusation against Paul's apostleship was the first one that we mentioned: he suffered too much. He just suffered too much to have any sort of divine approval. "Servants of Christ—people that God is blessing—sure they may have a few tough times, but they surely won't endure the kind of non-stop conflict that Paul's experienced! After all, God wants you to be peaceful, and prosperous, and conflict-free! Jesus wants to *solve* your problems, not *give* you problems!" They had a sort of *emotional* prosperity gospel ideology. (And friends, we will see throughout our study of this great letter that the kind of ministerial pragmatism that dominates so much of so-called evangelicalism today is not in the least bit a novel philosophy.)

But because the chief accusation against Paul was that he simply suffered too much to be a true Apostle, the central theological theme of Paul's defense of his apostleship is the theme of **divine strength displayed in human weakness**. More than any other epistle, Paul goes out of his way to showcase all of the trials and afflictions he has experienced in the course of his ministry of the

Gospel. And his point is that—so far from *discrediting* his genuineness as an Apostle, his suffering for Christ’s sake is a mark of his *authenticity*. Because it’s in human weakness that you see the Spirit’s power; it’s in human dishonor that you see God’s glory; and it’s in human suffering that you see the sufficiency of the cross of Christ.” And so he says in chapter 4 verse 10 that we are “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” And in chapter 12, verses 9 and 10, the Lord Jesus tells Paul that Christ’s divine power is perfected in human weakness, and so Paul concludes that when he is weak, then he is strong, because it is *by* his suffering for Christ’s sake and for the Gospel’s sake that he can put the power of God on display. Above all things, 2 Corinthians teaches us about how to faithfully carry out a **joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction**.

And we spoke last time about how it is precisely at that point that 2 Corinthians intersects with all of our lives—because we are all called to joyful, enduring *ministry* in the midst of affliction. You’ll give me no argument that we all live in a world of conflict and affliction. In a Genesis 3 world, a world cursed by the stain of sin and ruled by the prince of the power of the air (Eph 2:2; cf. 1 John 5:19), we should expect nothing less than out-and-out hostility against those of us who are called to storm the very gates of hell itself with the Gospel of rescue and deliverance through Jesus Christ. And *called* we are. 2 Corinthians 3:5 calls us ministers of the New Covenant. 1 Peter 2:9 says that the church is a royal priesthood—that every true Christian is a priest of God Almighty, set apart to bless the world through the preaching of the Gospel. 2 Corinthians 5:18 says God has entrusted to believers *the ministry* of reconciliation—that we are ambassadors for Christ who plead with sinners to be reconciled to God through the preaching of the Gospel.

We have been commissioned, by our Master, to live our lives in such a way that we *will* experience opposition for our *ministry* for Christ. And following the example of the Apostle Paul—who himself followed the example of the Lord Jesus—we are to showcase the all-powerful, all-glorious strength of God in and through our own manifest weakness. And that is our goal as we study this great letter—to grow in our capacity for living a life of **joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction**.

Now then, being freshly reminded of that overarching message of the Book of 2 Corinthians, we come this morning to the opening two verses of the letter: Paul’s greeting. And this greeting is familiar to us, not least because it follows the same pattern in all 13 of Paul’s inspired letters. And in fact, it also follows the same basic pattern of normal letter-writing in the Greco-Roman world: the name of the author, the name of the recipient, and then a brief greeting. But—and we’ve noted this before in our study of Philippians—Paul doesn’t just follow the standard epistolary format. His life is so dominated by the Lord Jesus Christ—his whole worldview is so colored by the realities of the Gospel—that even something as mundane and simple as the way he says, “Hello,” is transformed to reflect our true identity in Christ. Rather than just saying, “Paul, to the Corinthians: Greetings,” which is sort of the standard formula, even this opening

salutation is infused with Christian distinctives. Paul is an apostle *of Christ Jesus*, by the will of *God*. He writes along with Timothy *the brother* to the *church of God* together with all the *saints*, and wishes them *grace and peace* from God *our Father* and the *Lord, Jesus Christ*.

It's plain that this opening greeting is so much more significant than Paul's just saying, "Hello." In fact, Paul packs some serious theology into this greeting. In just these two short verses, he presents in miniature the major themes of the entire letter. He captures the whole substance of his message right at the outset, and sets the tone for the rest of the book. Let's read it together. 2 Corinthians 1, verses 1 and 2: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

And as Paul *packs* this opening greeting chock full of theology, and encapsulates the main thrust of his letter in these two opening verses, he touches on **three themes** that lay the groundwork for what he hopes to accomplish in this letter—that give us a sort of preview of coming attractions in 2 Corinthians. And we're going to look into those **three themes** this morning. We have, first, **Paul's exalted authority**. Secondly, we have **the Corinthians' exalted position**. And finally we have **God's exalted message**.

I. Paul's Exalted Authority

Well first, then, let us examine that **first theme: Paul's exalted authority**. Look with me again at verse 1: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother."

Now, Paul begins at the outset by identifying himself as the author of this letter. And the Corinthians know Paul well. As we've mentioned already this morning, Paul was the Corinthians' spiritual father. Their genesis in the Christian life stemmed from Paul's labors in Corinth during his second missionary journey, as detailed in Acts 18. There Luke tells us that Paul founded the church of Corinth amidst much opposition and affliction—so much so that Paul needed to be comforted by a vision of the Lord Jesus Himself, assuring him that the Lord would protect him from harm and would bless his ministerial labors in Corinth, "for," Jesus said, "I have many people in this city" (Ac 18:10). And the Lord did protect him, and he enjoyed a fruitful ministry over a period of 18 months (Ac 18:11). And of course, besides that founding visit, we know that Paul and the Corinthians corresponded numerous times by letters back and forth to one another; like we learned last time, the letter we call 2 Corinthians is actually at least the fourth letter that Paul had written to the Corinthians. So Paul and the Corinthians knew each other well.

Paul

But there's one detail of Paul's biography that I think is worth highlighting at the outset of our study on 2 Corinthians. And that is his former life as a *persecutor* of Christ's Church. There are numerous mentions of this in Scripture, from Paul's own lips. In Galatians 1:13–14, he tells the churches of Galatia: "For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions." In Acts chapter 22 verse 4, as he makes his defense before the Jews, he says, "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons." And of course, from our study of Philippians, we remember his remark in Philippians 3:6, that as far as religious zeal was concerned, he was a persecutor of the church.

But because of the meeting he had with the Lord Jesus on the Damascus road—when the Risen Christ appeared in a blazing light from Heaven, blinded Paul's physical eyes but opened his *spiritual* eyes to treasure the glory of Jesus, and called him into ministry—the proud Pharisee who used to persecute the church now takes his stand with the persecuted (Hughes, 1)—so much so that he becomes the archetype for suffering on behalf of Christ—so much so that he will actually appeal to his being persecuted as the *seal* of his apostleship. After all, when Christ commissioned him in Acts 9, verses 15 and 16, He said, "He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

An Apostle by the Will of God

And it's precisely that apostleship that is under attack in this letter. And so Paul wastes no time. He immediately challenges any questions about his own apostleship by defiantly declaring, "Paul, an *apostle* of Christ Jesus by the will of God."

Now, in its most basic sense, the Greek word *apostolos* simply means "one who is sent." It describes "an emissary who is authorized and commissioned to carry out a personal mission on someone else's behalf" (Hafemann, 43). The apostle—the sent one—has absolutely no authority in and of himself; his entire significance is bound up in the one who sent him. Speaking of the term even in secular usage, one biblical scholar writes, "the one who is sent is of interest only to the degree that in some measure he embodies in his existence...the one who sends him" (Rengstorf, TDNT). "He embodies in his existence the one who sends him." *That* was the point. An apostle was a representative, a delegate, a messenger bringing the message of the one who sent him. He has no intrinsic authority; there is no interest in his originality; the only thing that mattered was that he was authorized by the one who sent him, and that he represented his sender's prerogative accurately. In fact, the Mishnah—which is the collection of the oral tradition of the rabbis—says about apostles that "the one sent by a man is as the man himself" (Berakoth 5:5).

And Paul says: he is an apostle of Christ Jesus. Now, to be an apostle of Christ Jesus meant that you met three very important criteria (cf. *Strange Fire* 92). First, an apostle had to be a physical eyewitness of the resurrected Christ. In Acts chapter 1, when the eleven apostles are discussing the replacement of Judas, the preeminent qualification that they mention is having been a witness to the resurrection. Acts 1:21: Peter says, “Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us-- one of these must become *a witness with us of His resurrection.*” Secondly, an apostle had to be personally commissioned by Christ Himself. In the case of the original twelve, this is recorded in Luke 6:13, which says that after praying all night, Jesus “called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles.” Even in the case of choosing between Joseph and Matthias in Acts 1, the disciples pray to the Lord to reveal which of the two men He had *chosen* to be an apostle (Acts 1:24).

And third, an apostle had to be able to authenticate his ministry with miraculous signs. Later in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 12, Paul says of himself, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you...by signs and wonders and miracles.” Hebrews 2 verse 4 says that God testified to the validity of Christ’s apostles by working in them “signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit.” And so while we’re on the subject, let me say that it should be obvious that there are no apostles living today. I don’t care what C. Peter Wagner says. No one alive has witnessed the resurrected Christ in the flesh; no one has been personally commissioned *by* that resurrected Christ; and no one is performing the signs of an apostle as outlined by Scripture.

Now, not only did an apostle have to meet those criteria, but they also enjoyed a foundational role in the early church. Ephesians 2:20 says that the household of God, the Church, is built on the *foundation* of the apostles and prophets. The apostles were the agents of God’s revelation at the dawning of this New Covenant era. It was through His sovereignly appointed representatives that the Lord of the Church spoke to His Church. And so because they were especially commissioned and sent by Christ, the apostles bore the full weight of the authority of Christ Himself.

So when Paul identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus, he is declaring that the Lord Himself had sent him, and therefore, that he bears all the authority of Christ Himself. At the very outset of this letter, Paul is claiming divine authority derived immediately from the Lord of the Church Himself (cf. Hodge, 2).

And if that wasn’t enough, Paul adds the phrase, “by the will of God.” He is an apostle *sent* by Christ Jesus, bearing His full authority, and *according to* the will of Almighty God. Turn with

me to Galatians chapter 1. Paul makes the very same point in the opening verse of Galatians, but even more explicitly: “Paul, an apostle (not sent from man nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead).” You see, Paul didn’t seize the title of ‘apostle’ for himself; he wasn’t made an apostle by popular vote; he didn’t achieve it by some sort of educational accomplishment; the honor was not conferred upon him by those who were apostles before him in some kind of apostolic succession. Paul was appointed as an apostle by the Risen Christ, who Himself (according to Hebrews 3:1) was an Apostle sent from God; Hebrews 3:1 says that Jesus is the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. And so here in 2 Corinthians, Paul is saying that the very will of God that sent the Lord Jesus Himself is the same will that sent *him* as an apostle of Christ. The false apostles had been *self*-appointed; but right off the bat, Paul boldly and unhesitatingly states that he is an apostle by *divine* appointment. After all, as he’ll say in 2 Corinthians chapter 10 and verse 18: “It is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.”

Timothy Our Brother

Briefly, he also mentions Timothy here. He identifies himself as Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,” but then also adds, “and Timothy our brother.” And just a brief comment, here. It’s worth noting that as fond as Paul was of Timothy—as closely as they ministered together, as tightly as their hearts were knit to one another—Timothy is not identified as an apostle, but as a brother. And it’s also fairly plain that Timothy was not a co-author of this letter, because in chapter 1 verse 19, Paul refers to Timothy in the third person.

So why mention him? I think there a couple of reasons. First, it teaches the Corinthians that not everyone had to be an apostle to be a legitimate servant of Christ. Not everyone had to have the special title. Timothy was simply, “our brother”—the most equalizing term of affection that Paul could have chosen. Unlike these false teachers, true ministers of the Gospel didn’t need to seize titles of authority in order to legitimize themselves. Their legitimacy is in the message—not in the apostolic *title*, but in the apostolic *doctrine*. Secondly, I think Paul mentioned Timothy here to show solidarity with him, and to legitimize his ministry along with his own before the Corinthians. Timothy was also there at the founding of the church in Corinth; he had visited them and labored among them on numerous occasions (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10). And it’s interesting that though Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to bear the letter of 1 Corinthians that he sent Titus to deliver the severe letter. Perhaps on one of his visits in between the sending of First and Second Corinthians, it could have been that Timothy’s legitimacy had been questioned in a manner similar to Paul’s. Mentioning him here assured the Corinthians of Timothy’s ongoing pastoral concern for them, as well as of his solidarity with Paul in everything that would follow in the letter.

But the take-away from this first point is that Paul understands that the authority he possessed doesn't reside within himself. He brings a word that is not his own. He is irrelevant. Whatever authority he has comes from the Lord Jesus Himself. And by way of application let me remind you that the same is true today. We don't have apostles today who bear, in principle, the very authority of the Lord Jesus. But we do have the apostolic *doctrine*. We do have the apostolic *message*, preserved for us in the pages of Holy Scripture. And so when it comes to the watershed issue of *authority* in Christ's Church, we must recognize that the Lord has spoken authoritatively to His Church through His appointed apostles. And He continues speaking today through the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Scriptures. And if there is anyone who puts himself forward as a teacher of the Church, it doesn't matter what title he has, what degree he has—no matter what seminary or what denomination or what council of elders has laid their hands on him—the touchstone test of the legitimacy of his authority is: is it apostolic? Does that teaching accord with the teaching of the apostles as it has been preserved for us in Scripture? Does that teaching accord with the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints?

The teaching of the false apostles in Corinth did not. Paul calls them pseudo-apostles (11:13)—phonies, who preached a different Jesus and a different gospel (11:4). But Paul—he was an apostle sent by Christ Jesus according to the will of God. And all of his authority rested in the One who had sent him.

II. The Corinthians' Exalted Position

So much, then for Paul's exalted authority, which is really *Christ's* authority. The **second theme** of the letter that Paul addresses in his opening greeting is **the Corinthians' exalted position**. Look again with me at verse 1: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia."

Now in addressing the Corinthians, Paul uses two interchangeable terms that are just different ways of designating God's people.

The Church of God

In the first place, he calls them "the church of God which is at Corinth." And the Greek word that is translated "church" is a word I'm sure you've heard before: it's *ekklesia*, from which we get the word ecclesiology or ecclesiastical. Its basic meaning is that of a summoned assembly (Harris, 132). It is the assembly of God's people gathered in unity for praise, worship, instruction, edification, and fellowship. And the word *ekklesia* is made up of the preposition *ek-*, which means "out of," and the cognate noun of the verb *kaléo*, which means to call. So the church is the assembly, literally, of the *called-out ones*—those people whom God has graciously

called out of the world to be set apart unto Him and to be His people (Rom 1:6; 1 Cor 1:24; cf. John 15:19).

And note that while this church is *at* Corinth, it is not the church *of* Corinth. Neither is it the church of *Paul*, or the church of Timothy or Titus which is at Corinth; it is the church *of God* which is at Corinth. The church belongs to God Himself. He (a) has called the church into being through His own electing love and through the redemptive work of Christ; (b) He sustains the church during her time in the world through the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit; and (c) He will be the One to perfect the church, to sanctify her entirely and bring her to glory at the end of time. We hear some measure of how precious the church is to God in Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, where he exhorts them to "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

Saints

He also calls the people of God "saints." Now unfortunately, in our day, a world of confusion surrounds the word *saint*. The Roman Catholic Church has co-opted this biblical term and uses it to refer to (a) a select group of spiritually elite people, (b) to be applied to them only after they've died, (c) on the basis of their own merits. I don't know if you could get further from the truth about what a saint really is according to Scripture. Rather than the spiritually elite, this title properly belongs to all believers. Rather than being bestowed after death, it is conferred at the moment of the new birth. And far from being based on a believer's own merits, it is applied to a believer on the merit of Christ alone.

The word itself means "holy," or "set apart." Those who are called "saints" are to be understood as those who are set apart *by* God, and set apart *for* God. In fact, God's people are called "saints" on the basis of the holiness of *God*. This was true as far back as the Levitical Law. In Leviticus 11:44, the Lord proclaimed to Israel: "For I am Yahweh your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy." And so even in the Old Testament, believers in Yahweh were called "saints." Psalm 16:3 says, "As for the saints who are in the earth, they are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight." And Psalm 34:9 says, "O fear Yahweh, you His saints!"

And just as Israel was set apart for God, to be a people for His own possession, and to serve Him in holiness, so is the Church. The New Testament everywhere applies the term "saints" to all believers in Christ, set apart by God to be a possession for Himself. For example, in Acts 9:32 Luke records that as Peter was traveling "he came down also to the *saints* who lived at Lydda." Now he's not saying that Peter visited only with an elite group of especially holy people at Lydda. It's simply a way of speaking about all the believers who were at Lydda. Similarly, Paul addresses his letters to the *saints* who are at Ephesus (Eph 1:1) and the *saints* who are at Colosse

(Col 1:2). He wasn't writing only to a specific group of people, but to all the believers in those cities.

You see, Christians don't earn the title of "saint" by achieving some milestone of personal holiness. All true saints *will* pursue holiness, without a doubt. But what makes us saints is not our *practical* righteousness, but our *positional* righteousness. We are saints because we have been set apart by a holy God and have been united to a holy Lord. We are not holy based upon our own merits; we are hopelessly sinful and totally depraved. But Christ did in fact achieve holiness by His own merits; He did live the righteous life that God requires. And because we trust in Him for our righteousness, we are set apart from the world, reckoned righteous, sanctified, and consecrated to the service of the God of the Universe. We're saints because we're united to the perfectly holy One!

The Significance

Now, I want you to grasp the significance of Paul's applying these two **exalted** terms—"the church of God" and "saints"—to the *Corinthians*. This was the problem church! This was the church who was splitting into factions—picking their favorite preacher and despising others who chose a different one (1 Cor 1:11–13)! This was the church whose people were embroiled in such conflict with one another that they were *suing* one another—professing Christians, taking one another to court before unbelievers because they were so proud they couldn't humbly settle disputes for themselves (1 Cor 6:1–7). These were the people who were fighting to get the first seat at the *communion* table so they could glut themselves on the bread and get drunk on the wine (1 Cor 11:20–22)! This was the church that abused the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and used them as a badge of their own pride, thinking that the "showier" gift of tongues made them more spiritual than others in the body (1 Cor 12–14). This was the church that tolerated a kind of sexual immorality within its ranks that wasn't even named among the pagans (1 Cor 5:1 ff)! And this was the church, who, though they had been brought to Christ through Paul's own ministry, had been led astray by the false apostles into questioning Paul's apostleship, judging him to be a fleshly man, without integrity, and accursed of God because of his sufferings; and thus, to doubt the very Gospel that he preached.

And it was *this* motley crew that Paul called "the church of God." It was *this* rag-tag group of sinners that he called "saints." If there was ever a church that taught us that being saints depended not on our own doing but on God's doing, it was the Corinthians. One commentator explains it this way: "Despite all the reprehensible excesses and aberrations which had been tolerated within their ranks, he does not hesitate to call the Corinthian Christians by the name of saints and to assign to them the noble title of Church of God. The divine act in choosing and calling them cannot be undone by human frailty or reversed by satanic forces at work within the very ranks of believers" (Hughes, 5–6). The ugliness of their sin could not blot out the holiness

and the grace of their Savior. Though they were much-troubled—though Paul feared for their fidelity to the Gospel—we learn in 2 Corinthians 2 and especially in chapter 7 that the majority of the church had repented of these evils. And just as they could not *become* the church of God by their *good* performance, neither could they fall from their exalted position by their evil deeds. Praise God, friends, that the grace of Christ is a *sustaining* grace! Praise God that, as we've been learning from John's Gospel in the main service, that nothing and no one can snatch us from the Father's hand (John 10:28–29)!

This ought to make us patient with the Church, friends. Oh, she is precious, but she is not yet perfect. We can tend to be very critical of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We come to church and we expect that everything we read in the Bible and everything we hear preached from the pulpit is lived out with perfect consistency among all the people we come in contact with. Oh, how quick we are to take offense when someone sins against us! How quick we are to point out, “She’s speaking about me behind my back, and that’s just not right!” “He spoke to others about my sin before coming to me with it first, so I don’t have to worry about asking for forgiveness; he needs to ask *me* for forgiveness!” “I can’t believe the inconsiderate way that couple just treated me after I went out of my way to be polite to them! These are supposed to be *Christians!*” Dear friends, the Church is full of *sinner*s! The Church is not a showroom; it’s a hospital! We’re not here on Sunday mornings because we’ve got it all together! We’re here precisely because we don’t have it all together, and we need the presence of Christ, the preaching of His Word, and the fellowship of His saints to aid us in mortifying the flesh and putting on the deeds of righteousness!

I absolutely love what Calvin says about this. He writes, “This is a passage that ought to be carefully observed, that we may not require that the Church, while in this world, should be free from every wrinkle and stain, or forthwith pronounce unworthy of such a title every society in which everything is not as we would wish it. For it is a dangerous temptation to think that there is no Church at all where perfect purity is not to be seen. For the man that is prepossessed with this notion, must necessarily in the end withdraw from all others, and look upon himself as the only saint in the world, or set up a peculiar sect in company with a few hypocrites” (Calvin, 51). Oh friends, if Christ can forbear the sins of your own heart and yet not strip from you the exalted designation of “church of God”—and not cast you off from Himself—surely you can be patient with your brothers and sisters who have not sinned nearly so greatly against you as you have against Christ.

Now it’s that very patience and longsuffering that I’m speaking about that the Apostle Paul is manifesting to Corinthians by calling them the church of God and saints. In doing so, he is reminding them of their **exalted position** as those set apart *by* God and *for* God through the work of Christ. He is pressing upon them the reality of their *identity*, and in so doing he’s subtly exhorting them to become in their practice what they are, by grace, in position. He is laying the

foundation—even in these opening verses—for his later appeals throughout the letter: his appeal to open their hearts to him again (6:13; 7:2–3), his appeal to maintain purity and holiness in a world of immorality (6:14–7:1), and his appeal to finally repudiate the teaching of the false apostles and to return to their loyalty to Christ, to His Gospel, and to His Apostles (13:1–10). Those who are truly saints—those who are the true church of God which is at Corinth—will demonstrate themselves to be such by heeding the appeals he makes in his letter (cf. Hafemann, 47).

I just love the grace-saturated, Gospel-logic of the Apostle Paul here. “I’m writing to the church of God. I’m writing to the saints. This is who you are in Christ, dear Corinthians. This is who you have been re-created to be. Now: *walk* in the reality of that identity. Bring your practice in line with your position. Demonstrate yourselves to be saints by your obedience to the Word of God.”

III. God’s Exalted Message

Well, then, we’ve seen Paul’s exalted authority confirmed in that he is an apostle sent by Christ Jesus by the will of God. And we’ve seen the Corinthians’ exalted position in that they are the church of God and saints set apart for holiness to God. We come now, to the **third theme** of Paul’s opening greeting which lays the foundation for the rest of the letter. And that is, **number three: God’s exalted message**. Paul’s exalted authority, the Corinthians’ exalted position, and now **God’s exalted message**. Look again with me at our passage, this time in verse 2. Paul writes: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Now, this greeting is very familiar to us, as it occurs in some form in all 13 of Paul’s epistles to the churches. But even though it is so common, it is anything but an empty cliché for Paul. What we have in this short, familiar sentence, is the Gospel in miniature: the very essence of the Gospel—of **God’s exalted message**—condensed and packed into one succinct sentence.

And the first element of that greeting is grace. It’s the term *charis* in the Greek, which is significant because of what it stands in place of. In a normal greeting that stands at the beginning of first-century Greek letters, one expects to find the word, *chairein*, which is simply the word for “greetings.” But instead of this normal greeting, Paul employs a play on words and adapts the familiar *chairein* to the distinctively Christian, highly theological *charis*: grace, grace. One commentator says of this switch, “One of the constant joys of the Christian life is the discovery that even common every-day things are transformed by the Master’s touch” (Hughes, 7). Another writes, “Here is a marvelous example of Paul’s ‘turning into gospel’ everything he sets his hand to” (Fee, *Philippians*, 70).

And it's certainly legitimate to see "Gospel" in Paul's mention of grace, here, because grace is the very foundation of the Gospel, and of all Christian experience. Later in this very letter, in 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul describes the Gospel itself as "the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ," who left the blessing of heaven to live a perfect life of righteousness as a man on the earth, and to bear the penalty of our sins in His body on the cross, so that through faith in Him we might be rescued from our sins. You see, everything that we are, we are by the grace of God that has come to us in Christ. We are so destitute of goodness and moral sufficiency that, in every way we relate to God, we can accomplish nothing of ourselves. Everything must be provided as an undeserved gift. And that is precisely what grace is: unmerited favor of God freely bestowed upon unworthy sinners as an overflow of God's abounding sufficiency.

And the result of that grace is peace. The grace of God that is brought to us in the Gospel of Christ brings us peace *with* God through justification by faith (Rom 5:1). And as we said not long ago in our study of Philippians 4, the result of peace *with* God is experiencing the peace *of* God (Phil 4:7). This stands in the place of the traditional Hebrew greeting, *shalom*, which speaks of well-being, salvation, deliverance, wholeness, and tranquility.

And where does this grace and peace come from? Look again at verse 2: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." God Himself is the source of peace, through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ, our sin, which provokes God to holy wrath, is paid for. And peace with God, along with peace with each other, is Christ's to freely give.

This is the Gospel in miniature, friends. And as Paul is about to undertake this apostolic search and rescue mission for his dear spiritual children who have been led astray by false teachers—as he prepares to call them back to the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ (11:3), to call them back to faithfulness to the Gospel itself—he lays the groundwork for that mission by reminding the Corinthians—not only of his own exalted authority as an apostle of Christ, and not only of their exalted position as the church of God, His saints—but also of **God's exalted message**: the Gospel itself, even if in shorthand. It is the Gospel of the grace of God our Father, which brings peace through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Have you trusted that Gospel, friends? Do you know that grace and that peace that Paul speaks of? Have you turned from your sin and abandoned all hope in your good works to commend yourself to God? Have you beheld the glory of God shining in the face of the crucified and risen Christ? And have you trusted in Him? Have you fixed all your hope for the forgiveness of sins and acceptance with the Father squarely upon His righteousness?

If you haven't, you need to do that today. You could sit through every single exposition of all 13 chapters of 2 Corinthians. And you could applaud Paul's valiant efforts at rescuing his dear spiritual children from the clutches of false teaching. And your heart can melt as you behold the Christlike pastoral affection of the Apostle Paul. And you can marvel at the theological intricacies of the New Covenant, of the intermediate state, and of the resurrection of the believer. You can intellectually apprehend all of the content of this inspired letter. But none of it will profit you if you remain a stranger to the grace and peace of God that comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.

Turn from your sin. Submit your thinking, your behavior, your *entire life* to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Trust in Him for the perfect righteousness that is necessary to enjoy eternal fellowship with God, and know this grace and peace.