

## **SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS FOR 12/6/09 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-15**

Chapters 8 and 9 now take a seemingly odd turn in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Previously in Ch. 7, Paul expressed his joy in light of the report brought back by Titus that they responded well to his previous harsh letter. Paul ends with a statement of his overflowing confidence in the Corinthians' and his confidence that they will be true to their word and live reflecting their reconciled state. Based on this renewed confidence and restored relationship, Paul now turns to the subject of the collection for the church in Jerusalem, a subject which will occupy chapters 8 and 9. Although some commentators have suggested that these chapters do not fit with the rest of the letter, Paul has laid the groundwork well for his discussion. He has asserted his apostolic authority, he has worked through the theology of reconciliation (on both a spiritual and a human level), he has expressed his concern regarding various ethical issues, and he has shown his deep love, relief, and gratitude that the Corinthians have had a change of heart toward him, but more importantly toward his ministry. They have an affectionate relationship with Titus and now Paul reminds them of their previous dealings with him and his role in the gathering of the collection on behalf of the Jerusalem church. In 1 Cor. 16:1-4, Paul tells the Corinthians to set aside some money every week (just as he has asked the Galatian churches to do) for the collection for the "saints in Jerusalem." In 2 Cor. 8:10-11 we learn that although the Corinthians had initially begun the effort, at some point they had abandoned it. Paul writes these two chapters in order to remind them of their original intent, to revive their desire to care for those in Jerusalem, and to encourage them again to open wide their hearts in response to the gracious gift that has been given to them in Christ. Although these next two chapters have much to teach regarding the benefits of giving financially and caring for others who have less than we do, Paul has other motivations behind his call for the Gentile churches to help support the Jerusalem church. As we have seen, Paul has unduly defended his integrity to the Corinthians, so even in the face of accusations that Paul may be mishandling finances, he continues forward in the plan for the Gentile churches to participate in caring for those brothers and sisters who have made it possible for the Gospel to come to them.

A note about the state of the Jerusalem church and the origination of the collection is relevant at this point. When Paul initially embarked upon his mission to take the Gospel beyond Jerusalem, everywhere he went a faction of Jews opposed him. Paul went with Barnabas (who had been sent by the leaders in Jerusalem to check up on Paul, Acts 11:19-26) to Jerusalem following his first missionary journey, which was primarily in Jewish territory but large numbers of Gentiles turned to Christ. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem in order to submit Paul's teaching to the Jerusalem elders and to share the miracles and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles. The elders of the Jerusalem church concluded that Paul's ministry was valid and he was sent on his way with letters of recommendation and a list of items they thought were necessary to share with the Gentile world (Acts 15). Paul summarizes this meeting in Gal. 2:10, where he writes that the elders and apostles in Jerusalem only desired that he remember the poor, something which Paul was eager to do. It is not entirely clear

what the situation was in Jerusalem, but even in the very nascent stages of the church, there were issues over the Hellenist widows who were not receiving the care that they should have (Acts 6). Whether it was due to persecution, famine, or simply because there were too many people for the church to care for, the Jerusalem church was in a dire situation. Paul had collected and delivered one offering already which came from the church in Antioch (Acts 11:27-30). This second offering is taken up among the churches in Macedonia, Galatia, Asia, and Achaia and would be significantly large. Many commentators believe that Paul was about to conclude his missionary activity to this part of the world and would soon embark upon new territory in Spain. Before doing this however, Paul wanted to foster unity and support between the Jerusalem mother church and the Gentile churches by bringing a large offering to Jerusalem. In Rom. 15:22-29 Paul writes of his intent to go to Spain, but not before delivering the collection to Jerusalem. He describes the Gentiles as being in debt to the Jewish Christians because of the spiritual blessings they have bestowed upon them and he views it as the Gentiles duty to minister to the Jewish Christians through their abundant material blessings. Throughout Paul's ministry he worked tirelessly to draw the Gentiles into the Jewish church and to open the eyes of the Jews to the plan of God that always had the inclusion of the Gentiles at its heart. It was Paul's great heartache that the cross was a stumbling block to the Jews and in Rom. 11:14 Paul writes that it is his desire to provoke the Jews to jealousy by the great numbers of Gentile converts with the hope that their jealousy will lead them to Christ. This could be what lies behind Paul's plan to have a large group of Gentile delegates accompany him to Jerusalem to deliver the collection. Although Paul ultimately did deliver the collection to Jerusalem (which would have amounted to \$XXX), it did not serve to unite Jew and Gentile. It was in Jerusalem that Paul was arrested and he turned himself over to the hands of Rome.

Paul's discourse in 2 Corinthians regarding this collection serves several purposes. He writes 1) in order to remind them to follow through on their initial plan (8:10), 2) to test what is in their hearts (9:7), 3) to bring equality to Jew and Gentile, allowing each group to meet the need of the other (8:14), 4) to enable them to show their gratitude for the great gift of God's grace in Christ, and 5) to share the blessing and joy of giving that Paul describes as abundant grace (8:7).

## **2 Corinthians 8:1-7**

Paul opens this chapter by making reference both to the grace of God and the situation of the Macedonian churches. Grace is a theme that runs throughout these chapters. It always focuses on that which God gives and the response of gratitude that should result. The Corinthians have much to be grateful for both spiritually and materially and in light of this Paul calls them to be a blessing to others based on all that God has supplied them. Paul writes 2 Corinthians from Macedonia, possibly Philippi, and is a firsthand witness to the circumstances there. Paul established three churches in this area, Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea and he describes the situation among them as one of great affliction and deep (or rock-bottom) poverty.<sup>1</sup> The grace of God

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 393.

that Paul speaks of as bestowed upon the churches of Macedonia is that in their affliction and out of their poverty, a deep desire to support the church in Jerusalem led them to give sacrificially.

Despite their circumstances, their poverty, and their trials, the Macedonian churches identified with those in Jerusalem who were suffering even more. Out of compassion and gratitude, they not only responded with joy but they begged Paul to allow them to give—and they gave liberally. Paul makes it clear that he did not burden the Macedonians to give beyond their means. In fact it is not even clear that Paul asked them to give anything. They initiated contributions to the collection on their own behalf (an act which bears witness to the grace of God at work in their lives). Paul makes it clear that the Macedonians were freely willing and not coerced, it was an act of joy, it was an act of fellowship with the saints in Jerusalem, and that they gave first to the Lord. The Macedonians were so moved that they implored Paul, they begged him to allow them the privilege of sharing in this gift (grace). The Macedonians viewed their part as ministry to the Jerusalem saints, as an act of service. What stands out in these verses primarily is that giving is a direct result of the grace of God bestowed upon the Macedonians. God is at work in them, moving, prompting, and opening their hearts to desire to serve and love others in this way. Several points to note are 1) that their giving was out of joy, 2) their giving was generous, 3) they gave according to their ability (they were not asked to go into debt), 4) they gave beyond their ability—meaning they were willing to give up certain things in order to give, 5) they were freely willing, 6) they viewed giving as an act of fellowship and a ministry—they looked beyond the short term lack of funds in their accounts to the long term impact their donations could make in the lives of others, 7) this was a matter primarily between the Macedonians and God. With this as their overarching perspective, the Macedonians then entrusted Paul as an apostle appointed according to the will of God. The response of the Macedonians is amazing to see. They serve as Paul's example for the Corinthians to follow. Financial giving is a touchy subject in most churches, and yet Paul clearly shows that how we view our possessions has much to say about the state of our heart. With the Macedonians as our example, let all of us take this matter to God and ask Him how He wants us to respond.

In 2 Cor. 8:6-7, Paul turns his attention to the Corinthians. He writes that he urged Titus to complete this grace in them as well. Again the theme is grace and not coercion. It has to be God working in the hearts of the Corinthians to trust that He will supply their needs and that Paul will responsibly handle the finances. Paul acknowledges that the Corinthians already abound in many spiritual gifts—faith (likely in performing miracles and healing), speech (teaching and exhortation), and knowledge. They are very earnest in their expression of these gifts (or graces), yet Paul's desire is for them to also excel in the grace of giving. The gifts Paul mentions, although important in the life of the church, are limited in scope. They benefit the Corinthians but do not extend beyond Corinth. Paul encourages the Corinthians to look beyond themselves and to allow God to also work this grace into their lives. The people of Corinth were wealthy in comparison to those in Macedonia and Jerusalem and Paul

asks them to share out of their abundance and in so doing to experience the blessings of giving which he has already remarked upon in the lives of the Macedonians.

## **2 Corinthians 8:8-15**

In these verses Paul directly addresses the Corinthians regarding their intent to contribute to the collection. Paul is careful in how he addresses them. He has said previously that he does not lord his authority over them and here he is true to his word. He does not command them on the matter of the collection because it is not a word that has been handed down to him by Christ, it is not an issue that effects the state of their salvation. It is however a matter that reflects the condition of their hearts and as a pastor Paul now speaks to them regarding their behavior. In 8:8 Paul writes that although he does not command them (which would remove the element of willingness), he does test them in order to know the sincerity of their love (the word for “test” is one that assumes a positive outcome) and he does put the example of the Macedonians’ generosity before them. The diligence of these churches should serve as inspiration for the Corinthians to complete what they originally set out to do.

In 8:9, Paul uses another example, which is that of Christ’s incarnation. Paul again refers to grace, this time the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, taking it upon Himself to live life on earth with the limitations of a human body. Christ became poor in that he set aside his divine rights and privileges in order to identify with humanity and offer up his life for our sakes. It was this “poverty” of Christ, his willingness to limit himself, his willingness to suffer, that has brought indescribable riches to all those who trust in Him. Paul drives home the point that Christ is the ultimate example to imitate and out of the richness of what He has given the Corinthians there should be an overflowing generosity to share with others who are in need.

Following this Paul he advises the Corinthians to fulfill their promise. In 8:10 we read that they had the desire a year ago to participate in this collection. Titus was there in Corinth helping them to collect the funds and yet in the wake of their troubled relationship with Paul and the arrival of the false apostles, their earnestness has waned. Although Paul issues no formal commands, in 8:11 he does use the imperative to tell them to complete their intentions. Paul praises the Corinthians for their initial eager desire, their willingness of mind and yet encourages them to match this with the actual completion of the act. Paul Barnett writes, “Paul is a pastor, not a manipulator. He will be content when their present ‘doing’ matches their earlier ‘wanting.’”<sup>2</sup> In 8:12 Paul stresses that it is not his intent to prey on that willingness and stretch the Corinthians beyond their means. Rather they are merely to give out of what they have. There is no expectation that they have to take out loans or put undue hardship on themselves, simply that they give from their surplus in order to meet the needs of those in want.

In 8:13-15 Paul addresses the concern that he might be asking the Corinthians to suffer in order to ease the suffering of those in Jerusalem. He does so by appealing to

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 412.

an Old Testament principle of reciprocity. Throughout Old Testament history and certainly during the times in which Paul writes, there was no government assistance for those in need. In the Mosaic Law however, it was very clear that it was the responsibility for the more wealthy in Israel to care for the less fortunate. Ruth was allowed to glean from Boaz' field because he was commanded to set some grain aside. Orphans, widows, and foreigners were protected classes in Israel because they were the most vulnerable. Often when the prophets rebuke Israel, it is for their failure in upholding these responsibilities. When Paul appeals to Exodus 16, he draws upon this rich history. The Exodus story tells of God's care for the Israelites in providing manna for them in the wilderness. The account tells us that God provided manna on a daily basis. Each person was to gather according to their need so that those who gathered much shared with those who gathered little. Ultimately everyone had just as much as they needed. Paul appeals to this principle of equality, not as some form of karma or communism, but as a true understanding of God's gracious provision in all of our lives. As God generously gives to us, we are asked to share from our wealth. As we are found to be in need, there is the hopeful expectation that others will respond to our situation. Paul cares deeply for this congregation and it is his desire that they not only fulfill their promise and remain true to the desire that initially prompted them, but that they also experience the fullness of God's grace as they imitate that which Christ so willingly displayed in His own life.

## SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-15

### Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

#### 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

*Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup> that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. <sup>3</sup> For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, <sup>4</sup> begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, <sup>5</sup> and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. <sup>6</sup> So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. <sup>7</sup> But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also.*

1. How does this passage strike you?
2. What are some characteristics of the Macedonians' giving?
3. What are some characteristics of the Corinthians' giving?
4. Which group do you think better represents you and why?

### Read 2 Corinthians 8:8-15

#### 2 Corinthians 8:8-15

<sup>8</sup> I am not speaking *this* as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. <sup>9</sup> For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. <sup>10</sup> I give *my* opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do *this*, but also to desire *to do it*. <sup>11</sup> But now finish doing it also, so that just as *there was* the readiness to desire it, so *there may be* also the completion of it by your ability. <sup>12</sup> For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a *person* has, not according to what he does not have. <sup>13</sup> For *this* is not for the ease of others *and* for your affliction, but by way of equality-- <sup>14</sup> at this present time your abundance *being a supply* for their need, so that their abundance also may become *a supply* for your need, that there may be equality;

<sup>15</sup> as it is written, "HE WHO *gathered* MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO *gathered* LITTLE HAD NO LACK."

**5. According to 2 Cor. 8:9, understanding the depth of Christ's gracious act on our behalf is crucial to our gracious response. Do you think this is your motivation to be focused on others through giving?**

**6. Do you think Paul's explanation in 8:12-15 counters some of the reasons that people may not give?**

**7. In a society where there was abundant wealth, what do you think was the primary hindrance to giving for the Corinthians? What do you think is the primary hindrance in our culture?**

**8. What are some positive experiences you have had with giving financially?**