

THE MESSAGE OF 2 CORINTHIANS

a summary for Messianic teaching and preaching

While the tone, subject matter(s), and purpose of the Epistle of 1 Corinthians can elude many of today's Messianic Believers—in no small part due to the factionalism of the Corinthians and their significant confusion—the Epistle of 2 Corinthians does not largely demonstrate the difficulties of interpretation that 1 Corinthians has.¹ Unlike much of the emotion and stirring that the Apostle Paul demonstrates toward his audience in 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians does seem to indicate that his rather direct words, refutations, and rebukes have been heeded by many. There is a much calmer demeanor to 2 Corinthians. While there is certainly instruction and correction given to these people in this piece of correspondence—and they still have improvements to make to their spirituality—2 Corinthians is much easier to follow than 1 Corinthians.²

Paul extends greetings to the Corinthians (1:1-2), and he then notes how in God all comfort during times of distress can be found (1:3-7). Apparently, Paul and his ministry associates have undergone some difficult trials in their service in Asia, perhaps even regarding themselves as good as “dead” to some degree (1:8-9). He can only praise the Lord, who “has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many” (1:10-11). Paul is extremely grateful for the Corinthians, recognizing that they will support him by prayer, knowing that his service for the gospel is imperative for all of them together.

There is a conciliatory theme detectable in 2 Corinthians, as Paul expresses how in his relationship with the Corinthians he has acted sincerely according to God's grace (1:12), and they can “boast” of each other of the work He has done in their lives (1:13-14). Paul goes through how his previous travel plans always included the intention of visiting the Corinthians, so that they could benefit (1:15-22). Yet, because of various difficulties—perhaps some of the things detected in 1 Corinthians—Paul decided to withhold himself from what would have been a painful visit to Corinth (1:23-2:1). Instead, Paul decided to write a letter, detailing his various grievances (2:2-3), but written in a spirit of deep love and concern (2:4). The enemy might be at work among the Corinthians, but at the same time forgiveness and comfort are truly available in Messiah (2:5-11).

Paul went to Troas to declare the good news, but was not entirely at ease because he did not find his trusted associate Titus (2:12-13a), and so continued on to Macedonia (2:13b). He issues an acknowledgement of praise to the Lord in the gospel work he performs: “thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Messiah and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance and knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Messiah among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life” (2:14-16a). The task of being one who declares salvation in Yeshua is most serious: “who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Messiah we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God” (2:16b-17).

Paul, or for that matter any person chosen by the Lord to declare of His goodness to all, does not need any human person to specifically recommend him (3:1). On the contrary, people like the Corinthians themselves and the supernatural changes that have been enacted within them via the good news, serve as “our

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Biblical quotations in this article are from the New International Version (NIV).

² While this summary of 2 Corinthians will treat the text as a single composition, it needs to be noted that various expositors do sometimes think that 2 Corinthians is a composite of several pieces of correspondence.

For a review of the various opinions and related issues, consult Donald Guthrie, “The Corinthian Epistles,” in *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), pp 432-464.

letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody” (3:2). *Their examples of lives transformed by the gospel affirmed Paul’s ministry.* Using the analogy of the New Covenant, where God’s Instruction is to be inscribed upon the hearts of His people (cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34), Paul says, “You show that you are a letter from Messiah, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (3:3). The lives that Believers like the Corinthians are to demonstrate to others serve as a validation of Paul’s ministry. For, Paul—and any servant chosen to declare the good news—greatly desires to see that the power of the promised New Covenant be manifested forth by those enlivened by the Holy Spirit (3:4-5).

The Apostle Paul is a minister of the New Covenant, one which “gives life” (3:6). In contrast to this is “the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone” (3:7a). The “ministry of death” (NASU) or Old Covenant, contrasts the New Covenant where permanent forgiveness is available *and* God’s Instruction is supernaturally transcribed upon the hearts of His people. This prior ministry of death, though, is something that “came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though as it was” (3:7b). Recognizing that the ministry of death was something glorious, “will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?” (3:8). The ministry of death is regarded by Paul to be “the ministry that condemns men,” where all that the Torah or Law can do is execute punishment on sinners who violate its commandments, contrasted to what the gospel inaugurates in people’s lives as “the ministry that brings righteousness” (3:9), meaning renewed life and reconciliation with the Creator. While the ministry of death or Old Covenant has glory, as it came from God, even more so will the ministry of righteousness or the New Covenant have glory (3:11-12).

The challenge is recognizing how during the time of Moses, he had to veil himself to the Ancient Israelites so they would be unable to see the glory radiating from his face via his encounters with God (3:13; cf. Exodus 34:33). The veil Moses wore is rightly likened unto the curtain that separated out the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle/Temple, as sinful human beings have to tread very carefully toward the presence of a Perfect and Eternal Creator. Paul observes something very important for many of his Jewish contemporaries: “But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read” (3:14). Many of today’s Christian readers think that the Tanach or Old Testament Scriptures are in view, when what is intended by “Old Covenant” is the prior ministry of death or condemnation. *This is a function of God’s Law as meting punishment on sinners,* to be appropriately contrasted to the New Covenant of permanent forgiveness offered *and* God’s Law transcribed upon the heart by the Spirit.

Just as Moses once veiled himself from the Ancient Israelites, so is Moses’ Teaching veiled to those who suffer under the condemnation of the Old Covenant ministry of death (3:15). But, “whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (3:16)—the barrier separating the unredeemed from God—and the New Covenant can be made manifest. When the condemning aspects of the Torah are declared to people, they either have the option of falling on their faces in repentance before the Almighty, *or* continuing to be stubborn and obstinate toward Him. When redeemed persons in Yeshua have the veil removed from their hearts, they can see who He truly is, and thus allow the intimate presence of the Lord change them from within (3:17-18).

When read carefully and in context, Paul’s words comparing and contrasting the Old Covenant ministry of death with the New Covenant ministry of righteousness/the Spirit, **do not at all speak of nullifying the Torah’s instruction.** It actually relates to a function of God’s Torah: one for the unredeemed/unsaved, and one for the redeemed/saved who know Messiah Yeshua.³ Those, who have yet to recognize Yeshua as Messiah, can largely only be condemned by God’s Torah, having it point out their sins and meting out various penalties. Only by the power of the gospel can one find a permanent sacrifice for sin, offered by Yeshua in Himself, and eternal forgiveness. A clear result of this is the supernatural transcription of God’s commandments onto the heart, manifesting itself in sanctified lives of holiness.

The ministry that the Apostle Paul was commissioned by God to perform, and consequently all Messiah followers, is something from which he did “not lose heart” (4:1). He informs the Corinthians, “we have

³ For a more detailed discussion, consult the author’s article “What is the New Covenant?”

renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing" (4:2-3), a confirmation that the "veil" indeed serves as a barrier that is placed between people and their Creator as a result of sin. It is only in Yeshua the Messiah that true light can shine into darkness, releasing people from the god of the world (Satan), and allowing true knowledge and glory to be known (4:4-6).

For someone like Paul, to serve the Lord in a capacity of ministry, declaring to others the message of salvation and redemption in Yeshua, is something grand but also something not easy. He explains this to his Corinthian friends as follows:

"But we have this treasure [of the Messiah] in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Yeshua, so that the life of Yeshua may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Yeshua's sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you" (4:7-12).

The experience of serving the Lord Yeshua, in some ways requires those like Paul to always keep His death and sacrificial work in mind. It also keeps them reminded of the ultimate future of resurrection and His Kingdom to come on Earth (4:13-15). Paul expresses how even "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but what is unseen. For what is seen is in temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (4:16-18). In spite of any challenges that the present life may dish up for Paul, and the toll it takes on his physical body—internally in mind and spirit he is quite strengthened and enlivened!

Paul takes a brief moment in his letter to further discuss the topic of death, the afterlife, and eventual resurrection—one which the Corinthians previously had needed some significant correction about (cf. 1 Corinthians 15). Paul in no uncertain terms affirms that the preference he has is "to put on our heavenly dwelling" (5:2, RSV), a permanent non-dying immortal body originating from Heaven (5:1). Paul is not too enthusiastic about the idea of a period of nakedness or disembodiment (5:3), instead wanting to be "further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (5:4, RSV). *And who can blame Paul?* At the resurrection and Second Coming, not only will *all* of the righteous be united together (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:17), but Yeshua the Messiah will return to Planet Earth, inaugurate His Millennial Kingdom, and Israel will finally be restored! Every Believer should desire "to have our heavenly habitation put on over this one...to have the new body put on over [this one]" (5:2, 4, NEB). The ultimate aim of a person's redemption is to be permanently embodied in immortality (5:5).

The likelihood of redeemed saints being alive at the moment of the Second Coming is rather small, though. And so Paul has to inform the Corinthians, "we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord" (5:6). Existence in one's mortal body on Earth means being in a condition of separation or exile from the Lord. Even though Paul's afterlife preference is Yeshua returning and being given a permanent, immortal body, this is probably not going to happen for too many. So, Paul says "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (5:8). If a season of nakedness or disembodiment should come to Paul, or to any Believer for that matter, all it can mean **is being present with the Lord in Heaven**. Yet, even with death for the saints bringing them into such a close fellowship with the Messiah, they must make it their aim to please Him in their actions—as all will eventually see Him and have to answer for their good deeds *or* bad deeds (5:9-10).⁴ The reality of life is that none of us knows precisely what is going to happen in terms of either the Second Coming taking place *or* death and disembodiment (to later be attended by the resurrection)—requiring great faith on the part of the redeemed (5:7).

⁴ Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website "2 Corinthians 5:8," for a further explanation of this passage, and how this verse details the reality of an intermediate, disembodied afterlife before the resurrection.

The motivation for those like the Apostle Paul, to steadfastly serve, is simply a fear of the Lord and the love of Yeshua the Messiah filling the heart and mind (5:11-14). The death of Yeshua the Messiah on behalf of sinners is something that is to guide faithful Believers as *living for Him* (5:15). The power of Yeshua has brought His followers into a new life, contrary to the ways of the world (5:16). Paul testifies, “Therefore, if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Messiah and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Messiah, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Messiah’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Messiah’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (5:17-20). The focus of eternal salvation, redemption, reconciliation, and well being for the people of God is found in Messiah Yeshua, as “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:21). The time to receive the reconciliation available in Messiah Yeshua *is now* (6:1-2; cf. Isaiah 49:8).

Paul’s dedication to the cause of the Messiah is one which is most selfless, as he is not only fully focused in all of his actions in seeing people redeemed – but the difficulties he must endure are to be viewed as a kind of honor:

“We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as imposters; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything” (6:3-10).

I know myself that I can identify with many of the observations that Paul had just made to the Corinthians. No one who is called into gospel ministry, in a position of leadership, Bible teaching, and service – is guaranteed “great things.” In serving the Lord selflessly, one has to be fully aware of how he or she may never receive any kind of “recognition” for the hard work and dedication made on behalf of Him. *The calling is simply too high to expect human accolades.*

For some reason or another, Paul and the Corinthians had patched up some of their differences for him to feel at ease enough to speak too candidly to them with a few thoughts about his ministry service (6:11-13). Yet one of the most important things for Paul to speak about to them is, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Messiah and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” (6:14-16a). The Corinthians’ associations, and the people they interact with, are to be carefully and discernibly considered. God’s people together make up His Temple (6:16b), with His presence among them. The Tanach Scriptures stress how God’s people are to be different, being sons and daughters who are separate from impure and sinful things (6:16b; cf. Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 32:38; Ezekiel 37:27; Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 20:34, 41; 2 Samuel 7:8, 14; Isaiah 43:6; Jeremiah 31:9).⁵ Paul stresses to them, “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (7:1).

While there is a concern for the Corinthians’ behavior detected in this letter, just like Paul’s previous correspondence, there is also much more of an appreciation for the Corinthians seen. Paul discusses some of the past experiences he has had in association with the Corinthians, and how when Titus came to Paul in Macedonia he brought a good report to him (7:2-7). Paul comments about the previous letter he had written, and that it caused a godly sorrow leading to (at least some level of) repentance on the Corinthians’ behalf (7:8-12). Paul’s confidence in many of the Corinthians has been restored, as they treated Titus well, and a great

⁵ Cf. Kurt Aland, et. al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1998), 622.

number had apparently returned to a path of faithful obedience (7:13-16). Paul is excited so much about what God is doing with the Corinthians, that he relays to them what Titus had been doing, and how the Corinthians had been significantly generous in giving to Paul's collection for the Jerusalem Believers (8:1-9:15). The key statement to be aware of, in indicating how much the Corinthians had changed, is how Paul can say of them: **"But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving"** (8:7), with him further noting **"men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Messiah, and for your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else"** (9:13).

Giving generously to others in need is something that is to come naturally and sincerely from the heart:

"Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: 'He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever'" (9:6-9; cf. Psalm 112:9).

While it is evident that since his last interaction with the Corinthians by his previous letter, the Corinthians have made some considerable strides in their spirituality—they do still have a way to go. Paul observes how when in person he can sometimes be a bit timid, whereas when he writes he can be rather bold (10:1-2). The reason that he operates this way is because he does not conduct himself as those of the world (10:3). He informs the Corinthians how "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Messiah" (10:4-5). There are still some things lacking in the Corinthians' obedience (10:6), with Paul actually saying, "You are looking only on the surface of things" (10:7). While some significant and positive changes can be seen in the Corinthians' actions and behavior, *more is required*. And Paul is certain to direct his readers not to think that he will not be strict in person:

"For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it. I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, 'His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.' Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present" (10:8-11).

The guiding focus of Paul and his ministry associates is one not where they would spend their time comparing and contrasting themselves to others (10:12), *but rather* where their attention and energies might be focused on boasting in the Messiah and seeing the work of the good news expand to places where it has yet to be heard (10:13-17; cf. Jeremiah 9:24).

Even though the Corinthians have improved in their spiritual condition, Paul is still concerned for them, and so he issues them some instruction on their state as relative simpletons in faith. He urges them to act like an espoused bride waiting in purity for her husband (11:1-2), he wants them to consider how Eve was craftily deceived by the serpent (11:3), he warns them about an imposter messiah and a false good news that might be declared to them by others (11:4). Paul might not have the slick words or impressive abilities as his opponents, but he is by no means an ignorant man with no skills who is to just be cast aside and ignored (11:5-6). The Corinthians can consider Paul's manner of service to them (11:7-12), and what any false apostles or deceivers have done (11:13-15). Concurrent with the Corinthians' need to still mature in many areas, is how Paul has to inform them how different he is from any potential troublemakers (11:16-21). Paul's own life, ministry service, and toils endured for the Lord as a Jewish Believer are quite different than any of those who might try to influence them (11:22-33).

While Paul having endured various beatings, stonings, and being shipwrecked are things that his opponents have not had to experience—there is surely another experience that such opponents are not to have had. Paul communicates to the Corinthians how "I must go on boasting...I know a man in Messiah who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not

know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that a man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses” (12:2-5). The one who was taken up into Heaven or Paradise, in a true *out of body* experience, was presumably Paul. Yet unlike many who have claimed to see this dimension, he does not report back on anything that he specifically saw. The very fact that Paul was *even allowed* to see anything, is itself a significant honor to which he can add nothing more (12:6). Paul also recognizes that he still has various weaknesses, one which he labels as “a thorn in my flesh” (12:7), to overcome (12:7-10). Any of Paul’s opponents in Corinth, in stark contrast, are likely not going to speak of themselves as having any limitations.

Paul has readied himself to visit the Corinthians for a third time, reminding his audience of what had occurred before when he had seen them (12:11-13). All he desires is *to help them*, and not see them exploited (12:14-18). Paul does not want his visit to erupt in any kind of outbursts, jealousy, or quarrels—and he most especially wants to see the Corinthians’ previous sins put in the past where they belong (12:19-21). Paul invokes the Torah principle “This will be my third visit to you. ‘Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’” (13:1; cf. Deuteronomy 19:15). Paul is going to be firm if he encounters any sinful behavior during his next visit to Corinth, and it will serve as proof that the Messiah works through him (13:2-4). And with this in mind, this letter to the Corinthians issues one final challenge:

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Yeshua the Messiah is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test” (13:5-6).

Paul has confidence that many of the Corinthians will be shown to truly be in the Messiah, and that not only will the prayers offered for them be answered, but that he will not have to exercise any harsh words or rebuke when he arrives (13:7-10). With such admonitions given to these people—still needing to move forward *and away* from sinfulness—all Paul can say in his closing salutation (13:11-14) is: **“Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind. Live in peace”** (13:11).

There is certainly teaching to be found in 2 Corinthians, but there is also a great deal of personal involvement between Paul and his audience. One gets the distinct impression when reviewing the letter that there are deliberative rhetorical points and statements made. Some of the things stated would have no doubt been based in conversations that Paul and the Corinthians shared together (i.e., remarks about boasting or being weak)—which would doubtless get them to think about who they were in relation to him and his gospel service. *Paul was to be taken seriously, and not be ignored.* The Apostle Paul wants to acknowledge the Corinthians’ significant improvements, in heeding much of what he has had to previously rebuke them for, **but** they still needed to mature ahead in many areas.

What does a letter like 2 Corinthians communicate to modern readers, and perhaps specifically to us as Messianic Believers? It might be really simple, yet complex. *The fight against sin is never over.* Even after a significant amount of progress has been made in resisting temptation, there is no reason to think that one can just stop being perseverant against the tactics of the Adversary. Believers in Yeshua need to be continually aware of their spiritual motives, they need to be aware of false voices in the assembly, **and** they will find that being committed to the high ministry calling of reconciliation can really help to keep them away from insidious influences. May we each receive some important piece of instruction from 2 Corinthians, and see that our own individual and corporate spiritual lives *ever* improve!