

Still Imperfect Church; Still Perfect Saviour (1)

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[0 : 0 0] If you're anything like me, the hardest part of a letter or an email you intend to write is the introduction.! Sometimes the first paragraph takes longer than the rest of the letter put together.

I don't know how long the Apostle Paul took in writing the first chapter of his letters, but short or long, perhaps because he was inspired by the Holy Spirit, he always seemed to say exactly the right things in exactly the right way.

If the introduction to a letter is like the front door of a house, Paul's introductions always make us want to open the door and explore the house.

Last year, if you remember, through the winter and the spring, we made our way through the letter of 1 Corinthians. We called our studies last year, Imperfect Church, Perfect Savior.

Well, time has passed and many of the instructions Paul had given to the Corinthian church in that letter had been implemented. The Corinthian church is not as much of a mess as it had been, but it was still very far short of what it should have been. So for that reason, I'm calling our studies into the letter of 2 Corinthians, still imperfect church, still perfect Savior. No church is the finished article. No Christian is the finished article. We've all got opportunities to grow.

[1 : 4 0] Well, by way of introduction to this remarkable letter this evening, I want us to consider these verses, 2 Corinthians 1-1 to 2-4 under four headings, church, comfort, credentials, and controversy, or controversy depending on what side of the Atlantic you're from.

As we study together, we'll see that the Holy Spirit, through Paul, is giving us this evening new opportunities to grow in our faith, both as individual Christians and as a church.

It's up to us whether we choose to grasp them or not. First of all then, from verse 1 and 2, church, church. The Apostle Paul couldn't have begun this letter in higher terms. There are still many problems to address in the church in Corinth.

It is far from being a perfect church. It never would be. But for all that, God's Apostle, Paul, holds up to them the reality of who they are. He calls them the church of God that is in Corinth.

First, for all their problems, he calls them the church of God. The word church literally means those called from Ecclesia. My favorite commentator on 2 Corinthians defines the church in this way.

[3 : 0 9] The church is that group of human beings which is called out of the world by God. The church is that group of human beings which is called out of the world by God.

For all of our imperfections here, God has called us out of the world for himself. The church is an embassy of heaven on earth. Each local church is an expression of the universal church of God, not just on earth, but in heaven. But they'd notice also, it's not the church of God, it's the church of God rather, located in a particular setting, in Corinth. Corinth was located in south-central Greece and was a prominent Roman city of the day. It was a very different city from Rome or Jerusalem, and so the problems of the church in Corinth were very different from those faced by other churches. And we too must remember that we are the church of God on Crow Road. We're not in North America, we're not in the highlands of Scotland, we're not in England, and we're in the 21st century, not in the 17th.

And as such, the situation we find ourselves in and the potential solution to these challenges must be tailored to our situation. But then, it is almost impossible to believe what Paul calls these Christians in Corinth. He calls them saints, holy ones. These are the same people who were tolerating immoral behavior in the church, the same people who were divided among themselves, and among whom there was doubt as to the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. They were deeply flawed, and yet Paul calls them, in verse 1, saints. Now, when we look around each other in this church, we see people, each with their own flaws, weaknesses, and imperfections. But for all that, we're saints. We're saints because God has made us holy through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus, on the cross for us.

We're not saints because we're better than anyone else out there. We're saints because of what God's done for us. This church is filled with ordinary people who are saints of God in the church of God.

Then we might ask ourselves the question, well, how can I be a saint? How can I live like a saint? And how can this church be an embassy of heaven and earth? Given our great limitations, there are many, how can we be the church of God today on Crow Road? How can we be in practice what we are in principle, saints of God? Well, surely not in our own strength and according to our own abilities, for we know ourselves to be flawed and to be foolish. That's why Paul says, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Far from being a formal greeting that, like we might start a letter with, dear so-and-so, Paul extends to them the grace and peace of God as the answer to their weakness and imperfections. How can we be the saints of God? By depending upon God's grace and God's peace. How can we be an embassy of heaven on earth? By depending upon God's grace and peace.

[6 : 56] How can we be the church of God in today's Glasgow? By depending upon God's grace and God's peace. Given all the imperfections of the church in Corinth, see what a high premium Paul sets on the church there.

This is not flattery on his part. This is reality. You know, we might depress ourselves by focusing on all that's wrong with our church. But when we focus on what God thinks of our church, we're very far from being depressed. Rather, we feel deeply privileged to be saints in his church. So we have church, first of all.

Then from verse 3 to 11, second, we have comfort. Comfort. Relatively speaking, it's very easy to be a Christian today. Far easier than it was in the first century AD. The church, and especially its leaders, were under great pressure. Persecution was to be expected both from non-Christian Jews and from Romans.

Between verses 8 and 11, Paul describes one such period of persecution that he personally suffered. It was so severe that he writes, We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. To what precise event in Paul's life he was referring, we don't know.

It could have been one of many. Few Christians have ever suffered as much for their faith as the apostle Paul. In verse 6, Paul describes his experiences as sharing abundantly in the sufferings of Christ.

[8 : 58] Verse 5, rather. Sharing abundantly in the sufferings of Christ. On the 11th of May, 1685, two Christian women were put to death by drowning for their faith in Jesus Christ.

Margaret MacLachlan was an older lady, and Margaret Wilson was a teenager. Both were covenanters who insisted that King Jesus, not King James, was head of the Scottish Church.

The older Margaret was tied to a stake further down the shore of the Solway Firth in Wickton, and the younger Margaret tied to a stake further up. As the incoming tide swiftly rolled over the older Margaret's head, the soldiers, the executioners, asked young Margaret what she thought of her old friend.

Young Margaret Wilson, 18 at the time, soon to die, replied, I see Christ wrestling there. I see Christ wrestling there.

Whenever we suffer for being Christians, and in whatever form we're suffering, we are sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Christ is wrestling there in us and through us.

[10 : 17] We may feel rather like Paul, utterly burdened beyond our strength. Some of the Corinthian Christians were enduring such sufferings. Just because you're a Christian, it doesn't hurt any the less to have a fist driven into your face, or to have your home burned down.

But because Paul doesn't specify exactly what kind of suffering he endured, we can fit any way in which we suffer into Paul's discussion between verses 3 and 11.

Any kind of suffering. Suffering on account of being a Christian, but also suffering on account of being a human being. We may not today be suffering persecution for being Christians, but probably we're all suffering in one way or another, on account of being human beings.

Lonely, guilty, anxious, depressed, grieving, sick, hurt, broken. If that's where we are, these are verses just for us. I don't presume to give easy answers to life's most difficult questions, but from these verses, Paul gives us four opportunities for how we are to think as Christians about those things we suffer.

Four opportunities for how we're to think as Christians about our sufferings. First, our sufferings for Christ give us an opportunity to experience the comfort of Christ.

[11 : 49] Our sufferings for Christ give us an opportunity to experience the comfort of Christ. This comfort may be better experienced than explained, but it seems to me that the highest comfort of Christ is His deepest presence with us.

And that not in measure, but abundantly in overflowing. The highest comfort of Christ is the deepest presence of Christ. When we're suffering, let's not turn away from Jesus, but turn toward Jesus, pleading for a deeper experience of His comforting presence with us.

Second, we have the opportunity to share the comfort we receive from Christ when we suffer with other Christians who are also suffering.

The Christ who comforted us can also comfort them. One of the most powerful marks of this I saw recently when a newly widowed lady in our congregation was being comforted after church by other new widows in our congregation.

They were going through grief together and extending to each other the comfort of Christ. Have you been through a tough time? Maybe God wants you to extend the comfort you received during that time to others going through the same kind of suffering you were.

[13 : 26] Third, we have the opportunity to depend more on God and less on ourselves. To depend more on God and less on ourselves.

In verse 9 we read, Indeed in ourselves we have the sentence of death in order to make us not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

The Christian hymn writer Annie Flint, in her famous hymn, He Giveth More Grace, we'll sing this in October I think, she wrote these words, When we have exhausted our stores of endurance, when our strength has failed, ere the day is half done, when we reach the end of our hoarded resources, our Father's full giving has only begun.

It's amazing how suffering with Christ sharpens our focus to depend on Christ.

Fourthly, we have the opportunity to ask for the prayers of other Christians. We have the opportunity to ask for the prayers of other Christians.

[14 : 46] In verse 11, Paul talks about helping us by prayer and then refers to the prayers of many. Let's not keep our sufferings to ourselves, but wisely share them with a group of trusted Christian friends.

They can then pray for us. And when God gets us through our troubles, we can all give thanks for answered prayer. Paul didn't suffer in silence.

He enlisted the help of others in praying for him. Jesus did exactly the same when in Gethsemane he said to his disciples, watch and pray.

The comfort we receive as Christians as a function of suffering for and with Christ is far more than the sufferings we endure.

We may suffer in different ways from first century Christians, but we still suffer. But in these verses, God gives us a new way to view our sufferings as opportunities for growth, not barriers to growth.

[16 : 03] Third, credentials. Credentials from verse 12 to 14. Credentials. One of the chief problems the church in Corinth faced was that it was infected by impressive, charismatic, false teachers.

They were persuasive auditors. They very much looked the part of apostles. For this reason, they're often referred to as the super apostles. By contrast, Paul, according to tradition, was a small man.

He was bandy-legged and he was bald. The word Paul actually is a slang word for little. He was a wee man.

He wasn't nearly as impressive, a figure, or as powerful an auditor as these super apostles. However, it was Paul, not them, who had been commissioned as an apostle by God.

However, Paul faced the challenge of trying to prove his credentials as an apostle. All the way through 2 Corinthians, he's going to be doing that very thing, proving that he, not the false teachers, had been commissioned by God and is preaching the true gospel.

[17 : 23] Over the course of the letter, he'll be presenting us with his CV, proving his credentials. But it will be a very different kind of CV from those we are used to presenting.

It will focus on Paul's weaknesses, not his strengths. His constant need of the grace of God, Christ's presence, the Spirit's strength.

Another way in which the apostle Paul will prove his apostolic credentials to the Corinthians is by stating his commitment to them. He is not interested in building up his own reputation.

He's only interested in them and building them up in their spiritual lives. In verses 12 through 24, he boasts not in himself and in his achievements, but in them and their spiritual progress.

Unlike the false teachers, he doesn't flatter them. He tells them that they have not understood all that he's been trying to teach them, but he wants to help them in their journey so that on the day Christ returns, they'll be able to boast in him just as he will in them.

[18 : 44] He is fully committed to them. Furthermore, Paul wants them to look back on their interactions with him. He refers to how he and his missionary companions worked among the Corinthians with simplicity, godly sincerity.

There was no sleaze. There was no secrecy. It was just simple. It was sincere. Compare that to the false teachers. Like a counterfeit vase being passed off as a genuine, there were things about them that didn't look right, sound right, feel right.

By contrast, whatever this small, bandy-legged, bald man did, he did openly. Now, this might not seem like such a big deal for us given that we no longer have apostles among us, but it's a very big deal indeed.

For a start, the apostles wrote the Spirit-inspired New Testament. To what extent can we trust the New Testament if the apostles who wrote it were sleazy, secretive, and had skeletons in their cupboards if their actions didn't match up to their words?

Why not introduce other writings from so-called modern apostles just like Joseph Smith from the Jehovah Witnesses or Brigham Young from the Mormons?

[20 : 11] The authority of the New Testament is at stake. The very credentials of Scripture in Paul's credentials. But on a more practical level, Christian TV is full of false teachers peddling health and wealth prosperity teaching.

Examples include Joel Osteen, Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar. These men look far more impressive and are far better orators than the Apostle Paul ever was.

For that reason, it's so easy to be taken in by their teaching your best life now. But they are super apostles. They're not committed to you.

They haven't suffered for you. They haven't been called by God to pastor you. Be discerning as to who you listen to online or watch on the telly lest you go down dangerous rabbit holes.

As an apostle, Paul is not boasting about himself. He establishes his credentials so that he can help the Corinthian Christians make progress in their lives and be presented as spiritually mature on the last day.

[21 : 30] For that reason, they and we need to close our ears to false teachers. Listen to the New Testament instead.

Well, lastly, we have controversy from verse 15 down through chapter 2, verse 4. Controversy. The Corinthians had a gripe with Paul.

After his first letter, he hadn't come to visit them in person. Did this indicate that he didn't care about them or want to have anything more to do with them?

After all, they'd received a stinging letter from him in 1 Corinthians. They, not he, had admitted false teachers into their fellowship.

They, not he, had tolerated immoral behavior in the church. church. So, there was this double whammy, as it were, whereby the false teachers, the so-called super apostles, were sowing division in the church by criticizing Paul, and then the genuine Corinthian Christians felt as though Paul was ignoring them, neglecting them, and not supporting them.

[22 : 46] And what was at stake, of course, wasn't just Paul's reputation, but the gospel. Well, because if Paul can't be trusted, neither could the gospel he preached.

Well, after sending the letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul waited a while. Then he sent one of his companions to the church in Corinth to find out the effect his letter had had.

It would seem that when Paul's companion returned, he brought back news that the church in Corinth had not responded the right way to the letter they had received.

There had not been genuine repentance, and even though things had improved, the church was still very imperfect. For that reason, we read in chapter 2, verse 1, I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you.

I made up my mind not to make another visit to you, painful visit to you. Antibiotics are a wonderful invention, but it takes days, sometimes weeks, for them to take effect.

[23 : 54] No point in interfering with the process of antibiotics until they take effect. In the same way, it's clear that the antibiotic of 1 Corinthians needed more time to take effect among the Christians in Corinth.

Only then, once it had taken full effect, would Paul return to them and give to them, as we read in verse 15, a second experience of grace. Paul clearly felt it would have been counterproductive for him to return to Corinth before the message he had delivered to them in 1 Corinthians had taken full effect.

But that doesn't mean to say he can't be trusted. If anything, his wisdom in the decision proves that he loves them more than they appreciated. After all, in chapter 2, verse 4, he talks about the abundant love he has for them.

That's why he wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians, the stinging rebuke, not because he'd had enough of them, but because he wants what's best for them, their repentance, their renewed commitment to follow Jesus in faith and holiness.

Now, there was another reason he didn't come directly to Corinth, namely that he'd been urging them to take up a collection for the struggling church in Jerusalem, and he wanted to give them more time for that collection.

[25 : 19] But the main issue for him was the instructions he had given them for repentance and recommitment had not yet been fully obeyed. The Corinthians shouldn't doubt Paul's commitment to them.

After all, not only does he state his love for them, but he also reminds them in verse 18 that he, Silvanus, Silas, and Timothy had preached the gospel to them in the first place.

Rebukes from apostles must be heeded and obeyed. Future joy lies in present repentance and redevotion, not in stubbornness and disobedience.

There are no dark intentions in Christ's purposes and promises for the Corinthians. As Paul says, all the promises of God find their yes in him.

The living Christ through Paul wants to do them good. So swallow down that bitter medicine of repentance and recommitment. It will in time lead to joy and fulfillment.

[26 : 30] As an apostle, Paul had reasons for doing what he did and saying what he said. It may not have been entirely to the liking of the Corinthians, but it was for their progress in the faith and their joy in the faith.

In the same way, there are many times when in our reading of the apostolic writings of the New Testament, we read things that are not entirely to our liking. Things which challenge us.

things which bring us to repentance. Things which demand change. For example, in Ephesians 5.32, the apostle Paul commands us saying, be kind and compassionate to each other, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.

And when I read those words, I think to myself, I don't want to be kind and compassionate to that person who has hurt me. I want them to suffer. I don't want to forgive them.

I want to keep on holding a grudge against them. The reality is, however, that though we may not want to be kind and compassionate toward those who have hurt us, and though we may not want to forgive them, if we are to make any kind of spiritual progress and have our spiritual joy restored to us, we must.

[28 : 00] It may take us time to forgive, but we must. So, we've established four principles in Paul's introduction.

Church, comfort, credentials, controversy. The remainder of 2 Corinthians will expand and build on those principles, extending the horizons of what it means to be a spirit-led Christian in today's church and world.

My prayer is that over the next couple of months, over the fall and winter sessions, as we go through this book together, we may all understand and experience new depths in growing in the grace of peace of God, God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And if there are any here this evening who are not yet members of Christ's church, because you see yourself as being too imperfect for us, you'll also see that what our perfect Savior Jesus did on the cross, covers all our imperfections and frees us to be the saints God has made us to be.

Amen.