

The God Who Restores

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[0 : 0 0] Well now if you would turn up 2 Corinthians chapter 13 on page 971 that was read for us a little while ago. 2 Corinthians chapter 13 and as you're doing that on page 971 I just want you to know that Jeremy completely stole my introduction.

Even though the kids were sleepy and I'm hoping you're not so sleepy I'm just going to skip the introduction completely. So let's get into it.

We come to the end of this amazing letter to the most difficult divisive and self-focused congregation who had fallen in love with the contemporary Corinthian culture and had fallen out of love with Paul and were drifting away from Jesus and the gospel.

And you might think he would finish this letter with some threats and some warnings. I'm coming soon. But he does not. In fact he doesn't even finish by saying run faster, try harder, jump higher.

He finishes where he began and that is with prayer. A reminder of our own great weakness and of the power and grace of God that's at work in us.

[1 : 2 8] And as we go through this little section I hope you'll see that it's beautiful and warm and full of encouragement to the Corinthians and to us as well because it is in this section and in prayer that we can see more clearly how God has bound up his happiness with us and our welfare.

And I think the best way to understand this passage is three little prayers. A prayer for spiritual reality. A prayer for spiritual restoration. And then thirdly in the last verse a prayer for spiritual resources.

So firstly then verses 5 to 8 Paul prays for divine reality, for spiritual reality. Just look at the beginning of verse 5 please.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Test yourselves. When I was at seminary I took a year of judo. It was a rough seminary.

And I didn't learn a great deal but I did learn two things. I learned how to fall. I did a lot of falling over, rolling. And secondly you learn to use the force of the opponent against them.

[2 : 4 7] Well in verse 3 you remember last week the false teachers wanted to test the apostle. To see whether Christ was really speaking in him.

Whether he was the real article. He didn't look like a winner in the Corinthian sense. So in verse 5 the apostle flips this around.

Not like a cute judo trick. And not to defeat them. But for the opposite reason. To reassure them and to encourage them. Literally he says yourselves.

Examine yourself to see if you're in the faith. Yourselves. Test. Now some exams are just mean.

And I imagine some of you have set exams that are just mean. You know those exams that are designed to make you fail. I had a teacher at high school. His exams were just designed to show how much cleverer he was than the rest of us.

- [3 : 45] But some exams are vital and necessary. And they prove someone's genuineness. And how happy I am that in Canada. The doctors that we get to see have passed certain examinations and tests.
- Before we put our lives in their hands. How grateful I am that airline pilots pass their tests. And this test from the apostle Paul shows that Christianity is more like marriage than measles.
- You know it's more. It's a commitment. It's not like I've got a bit of a temperature. I've got some bumps. He turns to the entire congregation. And he commands them to do something.
- That every Christian should do from time to time. And that is to examine ourselves. To see if we're faking it. To see if our spiritual life is real.
- If it's real with God. Or are we holding God at the edge. At the periphery of things. And it's just a surface thing. A New Testament Christianity is not navel gazing.
- [4 : 50] It's not spiritual self-analysis. It's not introspection. But there are times all of us need to ask ourselves whether our faith is real or not. Are you in the faith is the question.
- It doesn't mean have you got your doctrine straight. That's important. But that's not really what it's about. It is. Is your faith a living and real faith that's making a difference in your life?
- Are you continually actively engaging in your faith? You know does the death and resurrection of Jesus. Does it make a daily difference in your thinking and in your acting?
- Is your faith alive? Would you know people around you say that person has a living faith that's changing you? Do you walk by faith or do you walk by sight?
- Is it real? Are your big hopes and dreams caught up with the person of Jesus Christ or something else? I mean if someone pressed you would you say I know him?
- [5 : 52] Or would you say I love him? And as you hear about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ does it melt your heart? Is it real? But it's very important that we hear the tone of the question.
- He's not blaming and shaming. He expects the way it's written in the original. He expects the answer to be yes, yes, yes. We are in the faith. So you look at the second half of verse 5.
- Do you not realize this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless indeed you fail to meet the test which of course some of the false teachers will hear this letter read.
- I mean you go through this letter. He's already said you are my spiritual children. You are the church of God in Corinth. The Holy Spirit has written on your hearts that you are genuine spiritually reborn.
- Yes, he wants them to test the reality so that they will see that Christ is in them and that they are in Christ. And not just to know it but to experience it.
- [7 : 01] And not just to experience it but to connect the dots so that faith intersects with daily life and they will see how Christ is changing their daily behaviors.
- You see what I mean? If you look down at verse 7, look at this prayer. This is so simple. We pray to God that you may not do wrong. Not that we may appear to have met the test.
- That is, it doesn't really matter what you think of me. But that you may do what is right. Though we may have seemed to fail the test. See we can't dodge this.
- Spiritual reality will show itself in ongoing and growing obedience to God. And Paul is far more concerned for the welfare of the congregation than for his own reputation.

It's a very interesting thing sometimes to go through the Apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament and to see what he prayed for people. He doesn't pray for their comfort in the sense of ease. He doesn't pray they'll be happy and successful and feel loved.

[8 : 03] All those things are good to pray for. Here he prays for practical moral change in the lives of these men and women whom he loved. That they would stop doing wrong and that they would do what is good.

Not because God loves us more when we get our act together. You know, when we clean up. Nor because we make ourselves more acceptable to God the better we are.

The opposite is true. The mark of spiritual reality is ongoing repentance and forgiveness in our lives. And that will show itself in changed living.

Our spiritual welfare is caught up in repentance and faith. Repentance and faith. The way we came to faith in Christ. It's the same thing that goes on daily in our lives.

We should love repentance and faith. There are two sides of the one coin. You cannot have faith without repentance. You cannot believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior without turning away from certain things.

[9 : 05] And you can't repent unless you trust that he is willing to forgive you and wishes to forgive you. I think it's important. I say repentance is not grovelling.

You know, it's not proving to God how really sorry I am for my sins. It's not being sorry for the consequences of my sins.

That's self-pity. It's not being sorry that I've been caught. True repentance is a two-step process. It's admitting that what I've done is sin and it's rejecting it as sin.

John Stott says this, We begin by admitting the sin and secondly, we forsake it. We reject it. We repudiate it. We adopt an attitude towards both God and the sin itself.

Makes sense, doesn't it? Otherwise, there's no real change. We'll just go back to doing what we were doing before. You see, praying for spiritual reality means knowing God and knowing yourself.

[10 : 10] In fact, the Bible says that the only way to truly know yourself is to know God. When God comes and reveals himself to us, particularly through the gospel, when he makes himself real to us, we come to know ourselves in a whole new way.

The holiness of God makes us examine ourselves and see that deep down I'm perverse and that I love myself and I love all sorts of things above God and I need the strength to change.

And the love of God says, in Jesus Christ, you are utterly accepted. There's nothing you could do that could make you more acceptable to me and therefore it opens the space where I'm not afraid to face the truth.

But it's in prayer. It's in our life of prayer where we examine ourselves before God with honesty. Flannery O'Connor, wonderful writer from the last century.

She was a writer in the States and in 1946 she began keeping a prayer journal. And she begins it by saying, dear God, I cannot love thee the way I want to.

[11 : 20] You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon. What I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing.

I do not know you, God, because I am in the way. Isn't that wonderful honesty? Well, there are all sorts of ways to examine ourselves and throughout Christian history there have been all sorts of methods.

One of the best, I think, comes from Martin Luther, a great teacher of the church in the 16th century. Martin Luther would take a section of scripture and in prayer before God he would do four things with it.

Firstly, he would ask, what does it say? What does it teach? What is it actually saying? And he would turn that in prayer to God. Secondly, he would turn it around into thanksgiving. I thank you for this understanding and who you are.

He would trace the sunbeam back to the sun. Thirdly, he would confess his sin. What am I, where is it in my life that this is absent? What am I doing in disobedience to this?

[12 : 31] And then fourthly, he would pray that particular scripture for himself and for others. And you can do that with the Ten Commandments. That's what Luther used to do.

You can do it with the Lord's Prayer. You could do it with the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Take those things, work them through.

You could do it with the three phrases in verse 14 to test your spiritual genuineness. And self-examination in prayer should be a regular exercise for all of us to test the reality of our faith.

And it's the first thing the apostle prays for in this passage, which brings us to the second. The second thing he prays for is spiritual restoration, verses 9 to 13.

Just look with me down at verse 9, the words used. Now, in church land today, if you've been around churches much, you'll know we love this word brokenness.

[13 : 44] In fact, brokenness has almost completely replaced the idea of sin in modern church land. And you can understand that. It's more me focused than God focused. It shifts the blame away from me, makes me a bit of a victim.

We think of ourselves, you know, in terms of our circumstances, not in the presence of a holy God. But I also want to say that there is something profoundly right about the idea of brokenness.

It expresses the need for our ongoing mending and restoration to God. And there's a realism about it because you don't get fixed all at once.

And when God puts you in a Christian community with other broken people, it means we're going to scratch and hurt one another. Which is why prayer for restoration is so important.

Because there are all sorts of different kinds of restoration, aren't there? There's dental restoration. And that never gets back to where you want it to get to, does it really?

[14 : 49] There's ecological restoration. That never gets back to where you want. But there are restorations where the restoration at the end is better than what it was originally.

So there is a highly exclusive and select club here at St. John's Vancouver. Those of us who have broken more than one rib at a time.

I did this a few years ago. And when I came back to church, people would come up to me and say, I've broken a few ribs. And then they'd just bow their heads and say, oh, there is a special fellowship in pain around the breaking of ribs.

And one of the amazing things is that for a while, bones heal more strongly than they were originally. That's what this word means.

The restoration Paul prays for comes from the mending of bones. And it's a word of progress and improvement. It involves change from a broken state to a stronger state.

[15 : 56] Restoring what is lost to a new strength, making it strong. And it has a note of joy about it. This is the restoration that is the sure sign of spiritual reality.

It's the second prayer of Paul here. And if you ask, what does restoration look like? Well, I think the answer comes in verses 11 and 12. Six commands.

And every single one of them are communal. They all have to do with our relationship with each other because the apostle expects that we're not going to mend on our own.

That the way he mends us is by putting us and our brokenness in a community of brokenness. And unless we trust God with our brokenness and unless we work for restoration, it's just going to get worse.

So in verse 11, he starts with the fact that brothers and sisters, there are no A grade and B grade Christians. We all have the same status. No one is special to God. And then there are six quick commands.

[16:56] And let me make a couple of comments about just a couple of them. The first one is rejoice. Very interesting. Is that where you would start with restoration? I think restoration begins, mending begins when we start to learn the language of thanksgiving and praise.

And this is something we do for each other. I think part of the subversive power of 2 Corinthians is that every chapter gives us more than enough reasons for rejoicing.

I found it very difficult to be grumpy, cold and self-focused as I'm studying 2 Corinthians. It's just I've managed it somehow. But I mean, you can pick just about any chapter.

You know, choose chapter 12. My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. Choose chapter 2. Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of God everywhere.

Well, how about chapter 4? We do not lose heart. Our outer self is wasting away. Our inner self is being renewed day by day. In the congregation at Corinth, there was still sin and there was still brokenness and there was still division.

[18:19] But Paul assumes that God's grace continues to pour into them and through them as it does to us. And in the middle of all the messiness, he says rejoice. That's part of restoration. Restoration. Restoration.

Let me make a couple other comments. Live in peace. The word literally means hunt for peace. It's elusive. Hunt it. Bring it home. Comfort each other.

That means strengthen. Strengthen each other. Come alongside. Literally come alongside each other and point each other to the truth that we've been working through here. And the last one I think is a bit surprising for us as 21st century Canadians.

It is greet one another with a holy kiss. I've never had to preach on this text and I'm not really sure what to do with it. Except to say that the Apostle Paul is the first teacher in the Greco-Roman world to instruct a socially mixed gathering to greet one another with a kiss.

It's absolutely radical. Just remember that in the congregation at Corinth there were wealthy and poor, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and slave owners.

[19:36] Imagine slaves and slave owners greeting each other. And the Corinthians were very good at fighting and biting. And I imagine Paul coming to Corinth in a couple of weeks after this letter and getting off the boat and greeting all the elders with a holy kiss.

And the false teachers, I don't think they'd be part of that. And as I say, I am not sure how to apply this. Because there are cultural sensitivities about it, aren't there?

Even in this congregation we come from a number of different cultures. I once heard John Stott on this. John Stott is a British commentator, was a British commentator. And he said that this translates today as greet one another with a warm handshake.

I said to Jim Packer this morning, I'm not going to greet you with a holy kiss. He said, just a holy smile will do, thank you. In Africa, if you greet someone, well in East Africa, it's a warm handshake where you take the other person's hand in two hands and you hold on to them until you finish the conversation.

It's great. And I should point out, it's a holy kiss. It's not an unholy kiss. It's not a Judas kiss.

[20 : 55] It's sincere. It's other person-centered. And I think in a highly sexualized culture like ours, we need to be sensitive around this. At the same time, it's got to be a way of expressing a genuine open affection for each other.

I said earlier, I think if I was writing this to an Australian church, what I would say is kiss one another on the feet. Because I think that captures something of the shock of this in the Corinthian context.

Paul prays for spiritual reality and spiritual restoration and finally for spiritual resources because you can't have, we can't begin the journey of reality and restoration without the resources that are contained there in verse 14, this radioactive verse.

This is rightly one of the best known, best loved verses in all the Bible. You've heard it three times already in the service. You've said it once. It is a prayer to God and a blessing at the same time.

And it includes all three persons of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But it does not, Paul does not take the usual order of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

[22 : 12] He begins with the Son, then goes to the Father and then goes to the Spirit. Why would he do that? And I think there are two reasons. One is the grace, this prayer is spoken from our perspective.

The way we come to know God and the way we come to experience God. So he prays along our experience because firstly we come to know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with death and resurrection.

And when we enter into fellowship with God, then we come to know the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And secondly, I think because grace is the key note of this letter.

Grace, grace, grace from beginning to end. It's the initial experience by which we come to faith. It's the daily sufficiency for us as God pours out his grace through us.

And it's three simple requests. Firstly, he says, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. He's not just talking about the external grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in the cross.

[23 : 22] He's talking about grace as a power that is at work in us. That continues to strengthen us. Continues to assure us of spiritual reality and restoration and flow through us to others.

Grace, brothers and sisters, grace, the spontaneous, undeserved, free goodness of God where he takes us and binds him to himself.

And it's not an impersonal energy that sort of charges our spiritual batteries. It's Christ himself in our hearts, bringing freedom, bringing forgiveness, bringing hope. And when we pray the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us, we're praying we would be gripped by the grace of God.

The love of God. The love of the Father, the love of God be with you. Again, not a vague, general good feeling, but a deeply personal fire of holy goodness.

The love of God means that he chooses to delight and desire our friendship and our best. This is from Jim Packer's book, Knowing God.

[24 : 32] God was happy without humans before they were made. He would have continued happy had he simply destroyed them after they had sinned.

But as it is, he has set his love upon particular sinners. And this means that out of his own free voluntary choice, he will not know perfect and unmixed happiness again till he has brought every one of them to heaven.

He has in effect resolved that henceforth for all eternity, his happiness shall be conditional upon ours. Isn't that wonderful?

That's the love of the Father that's poured into our hearts. And finally, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Again, fellowship is, it's not warm feelings that we have toward each other.

It's not even a love and respect that two good friends have for each other. In fellowship, fellowship between two parties, there's always a third thing involved.

[25 : 35] It's very important. So let's say Jordan and I form a company, go together into a company. We participate together in a third thing. We have fellowship. And the astonishing thing that the New Testament says is that because of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of the Father, we have fellowship together in the Holy Spirit, in God himself.

God draws us into friendship with himself. And by doing that, we have fellowship together with one another. I know it doesn't feel like it. I know it doesn't look like it.

But what you and I have in common, what we have together in common as a congregation, is beyond any human comparison. This is the basis of spiritual reality.

It's the engine for spiritual restoration. Grace, love, fellowship. We grow in spiritual reality as we come to know God's grace and his love, as we work out the fellowship amongst his people.

And I think this final prayer is a brilliant prayer to end 2 Corinthians because it shows us where the resources for all this life comes from. And I don't want to leave 2 Corinthians.

[26 : 53] Part of me wants to, for the next six months, when you come to church, divide us into groups of five or six and to work through the implications of what 2 Corinthians has been teaching for our different cultural contexts.

I mean, throughout 2 Corinthians, grace has been overturning things. The cultural things that were blocking the grace of God. Paul doesn't say, oh, they're bad and wrong and naughty.

He turns them upside down with the grace of God. And I wish we had the time to reflect on how that happens for us. However, I think the best thing we can do is to pray for each other, to pray for ourselves, to pray for each other, for spiritual reality, for ongoing restoration, and that we would know these resources of God himself, of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the love of the Father, and of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Might it be with us today and always. Might it be with us today and always. corners down in the ice want it be with us today and always. We will know these for joy. Now, in the final six weeks forolis■■■■f, we will talk in the peace together and ■■■et messages of God's service. in the life of God's service. Amen GORDON And now, you know thank you for joining us.

In the final five weeks.■■■nehmer, you know, for ■■■■■ifie who used this year so far, there was going to be crisis of death variables. would be great. Why isn't it so far, who believed means patientself, are in Since then a year now, a hallucin a■■■ movement, and you know good. Mm last 13th month Just right up to the work of this staff people by boat.