

The Grace of Giving

Second Corinthians 8 and 9

INTRODUCTION

The earliest Christian documents we possess are letters from Paul to some of his friends. They are invaluable because they reveal Paul's understanding of what Christ's coming means to the world. But there is a great mystery in the letters. Why should the Apostle Paul, the most influential interpreter of Christ in the early church, risk his life over a financial project, a collection for his friends in Jerusalem?

Saul of Tarsus had been a strict Jew, educated in the city of Jerusalem and zealous beyond all imagination to obey the sacred law. But he found no peace until the day he was confronted by a vision of Christ that so completely transformed his life he changed his name to symbolize his "new birth." Saul, the Pharisee, became Paul, the Christian. For the rest of his life he could not stop talking and writing about the God who made it possible and about the Christ through whom he experienced the immediate presence of God. His enthusiasm led him into a life of travel that took him all over the Mediterranean world, preaching, teaching, and founding churches in the chief cities along the way.

The letters he wrote during the course of his travels provide us with much of our knowledge about life in the early church. They also contain a theological interpretation of "the Christ

event" which has had a profound effect on the history of Christianity. Paul makes a lasting contribution to our understanding of the grace of God, the incarnation of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, the centrality of faith, the necessity of obedience, the possibility of hope, and the primacy of love. There is no doubt that Paul's life and thought had an incalculable influence on the development of the Christian faith. He was one of the most devout followers of Christ and one of the greatest leaders the church has ever produced.

Then why did he spend so much time and ultimately risk his life over a collection? Already in Galatians he expressed his eagerness to do something for the poor in Jerusalem. (Gal. 2:10) In the letter to the church in Rome he talked about how his travel plans for the future were built around "going to Jerusalem with aid for the saints." (Rom 15:22-28) In First Corinthians he follows his deeply moving discussion of life-after-death with instructions about how the offering is to be received. (1 Cor. 16:1-4) In Second Corinthians the collection becomes a major preoccupation. (2 Cor. 8 and 9)

Paul knew he faced certain danger and possible death by personally accompanying the offering to Jerusalem. The New Testament record shows that he was clearly aware of the danger. "Why am I in peril every hour?" (1 Cor. 15:30) When friends pleaded with him not to go, he replied, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 21:13) As matters turned out, it was while delivering this financial assistance that Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and sent to Rome where he was ultimately martyred. (Acts 24:17) Paul had a conviction that this collection mattered more than his own life. Why was it so important?

COMMENTARY

Paul's lengthy discussion of the collection in Second Corinthians (8-9) provides the best clues. The letters to his friends

in Corinth take us closer to the daily life of the early church than any other documents in our possession and reveal a great deal about Paul as a person. Corinth had long been one of the most important cities of the ancient world. Located on a narrow isthmus that connects the northern and southern halves of Greece, it was a natural center for ancient Mediterranean commerce. The classic city had been destroyed by the Romans, but Julius Caesar had built a new city on the site, which soon became a thriving center of paganism. In Paul's time it had a reputation all over the world as a city of pleasure, a fact that may account for the large number of problems raised by the Christians who lived there. Paul first visited Corinth "with fear and much trembling" after founding churches in northern Greece. He remained for nearly two years, converting many pagans and establishing a vigorous Christian community that ultimately gave him more trouble than any of his other churches. One of the things they resisted most was the offering for the "saints" (church members) in Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem congregation had run into financial difficulties for a number of reasons. Roman historians report recurring food shortages caused by several bad growing seasons during this period. Severe persecution also disrupted the economic life of Christians. Moreover, the Jerusalem church because of its history and location attracted large numbers of poor people. Paul was determined to do something about the situation with his "great collection," but apparently the Corinthians were not following through on their promise to support the project. In his impassioned appeal, Paul gives several reasons for generous giving.

The example of others. (8:1-6) Paul first challenges the Corinthians by using the churches in Macedonia as an example. In spite of severe persecution and their own extreme poverty, their giving "overflowed in a wealth of liberality."

Excellence in other areas of Christian faith. (8:7) "Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us—see that you excel in this gracious work also." It is interesting to note that the

offering is called a "gracious work" (*charis*) in this appeal.

The example of Christ (8:9) Again Paul uses the word "grace" in showing how Christ's example teaches generosity. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (cf. Phil. 2:5-8) Paul is referring to the humble and sacrificial ministry of Jesus. Such complete and costly self-giving should move the Corinthians to give liberally to the collection.

Finishing what has been started. (8:10-11) "And in this matter I give my advice: it is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began not only to do but to desire."

Reliability of the administrators. (8:16-23) The Corinthians had apparently questioned Paul's motives and the integrity of those who were administering the project. (2 Cor. 12:16-17) He assures them that the leaders can be trusted to use the money for its intended purpose.

Personal appeal. (8:8,24) Paul reminds the Corinthians of their love for him and asks them to give as "proof" of that love.

Fellowship among Christians. (8:12-15; 9:1-5) The word *koinonia* is an important word in Pauline theology. It refers to the special life-sharing fellowship which bound Christians together into the family of Christ. Paul believes that this offering will serve to demonstrate and strengthen this fellowship. On more than one occasion Paul even uses the word *koinonia* as a virtual synonym for the "collection." (Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4 and 9:13)

The rewards of giving. (9:6-10) One of the paradoxes of faith is that by giving to others we open up "channels" through which God's love can flow more freely in our lives. The more we give to others, the more we receive from God. "He who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully . . . God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance . . . He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness."

Thanksgiving to God. (9:11-12,15) One way to express

gratitude to God for his many blessings (including Jesus Christ) is to give generously to others. "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!"

Compassion for others. (8:4; 9:12) Paul appeals to the compassion of the Corinthians by referring to the wants of the saints in Jerusalem and their need for relief.

An expression of obedience. (9:13-14) Paul finally reaches the argument which more than any other accounts for his willingness to risk his life over this collection. The heart of Paul's "gospel" was the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ which provides salvation (wholeness of life) when we respond by faith. "For by grace you have been saved through faith." (Eph. 2:8) This is the essence of Christian experience for Paul. But obedience is very important, also, because obedience is the way we show that we are serious about our faith. The working out of faith in concrete acts of obedience is essential.

But some acts of obedience are more valuable than others, and for Paul, the "collection" was one of these! The generosity of the Corinthians' contribution was a "test," a way of proving that their faith was authentic. They glorified God by their "obedience." The collection was an effective way to do this because of the importance of money. Our wealth represents a valuable part of our being. It can be used to purchase pleasure, power, and security. Survival in this world depends on it. It is tangible and negotiable. Therefore when we give money we are literally giving ourselves, and it was this kind of giving which excited the Apostle Paul. More than anything else that could be done, the success of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem would confirm and validate his apostolic ministry. It would prove that his message had been heard and accepted. Therefore he was willing to risk his life for the collection.

It should be noted that the kind of obedience Paul is talking about is first of all *joyful obedience*. "God loves a cheerful giver." (9:7) The remarkable thing is that the word Paul uses here actually means "hilarious." The obedience that is most beneficial is not heavy and burdensome, offered with reluctance and resistance. It is free, spontaneous, and—hilarious!

Second, the kind of obedience Paul is talking about is *loving obedience*. We are motivated by our concern for others. Agape love, the kind of love that is "for" the other person, is the motivating factor for obedient service to others. In following Jesus, the "man for others," we become men and women for others, especially in their need. When Albert Schweitzer was asked why he had come to Africa to offer a ministry of compassion to the sick, he replied, "I came in obedience to Jesus."