

*Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / February 27, 2022 / Pastor Jeff Harrison*  
2 Corinthians 1-4: Jesus' Glorious New Way  
**Difficulties and Glories** (2 Corinthians 2:12-3:11)

**Relevance: With difficulties, it is hard to focus on serving**

Good morning. Let's ask for God's help in prayer... So I was recently with some people from our church and everyone was sharing prayer requests. It struck me how many of the requests had the same theme. People were sharing about a way they were seeking to serve others, but now a difficulty outside of their control was hindering their service.

When we're trying to do what's right and then difficulties get in the way, it's easy to get frustrated. And it's hard to stay focused on serving God and people, the difficulty of that only increasing as our difficulties multiply.

Difficulties could include a physical issue that's sapping your energy as you feel drained all the time, someone not following through on an important commitment they made to you, a spiritual attack, a close relationship that's falling apart, a mental challenge making everything heavier and harder, financial stress, bullying, gossip, a family member with chronic needs, an unfair ruling, and on and on we could go listing difficulties.

With enough difficulties we can be tempted to check out; to just put on our "give up on life pants" and no longer serve. Or with enough difficulties we may find ourselves so emotionally on edge that we end up afflicting rather than serving people in love.

So wouldn't it be great if there was a seasoned Christian to help us to keep going, serving God and people even with all the difficulties we face?

**Orienting to God's Word – Paul shares about glories that help us to serve**

We've got one in the Apostle Paul, a leader in the early church who went through it all. We'll hear from Paul as we continue our series in the New Testament letter of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to 2 Corinthians, chapter 2, or you can follow along with the verses on the screen. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

If you're not familiar with Paul's story, as he served God and people, Paul endured many difficulties. Paul endured public beatings (plural), spiritual attacks (plural), shipwrecks

(plural), imprisonments (plural), relational attacks (plural), an attempted stoning, a murder plot, going without food and water, inadequate clothing, a chronic thorn in the flesh, and pressure over his concern for all the churches he planted.

Last week Pastor Dave shared about a big sin and discipline issue here in the Corinthian church. Paul was so concerned about it that he had no peace of mind until he got an update on the situation (2:12-13).

Paul at times faced so many difficulties that he told the Corinthian church in chapter 1, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.”

So Paul experienced heavy difficulties. Yet by God’s grace, Paul somehow kept serving God and people. Having told us about his difficulties, Paul now shares with us the glories of serving God and people, glories that can empower us to keep serving with a godly resilience even amid difficulties.

**Teaching: Whatever the difficulties, we serve...**

*in Christ’s triumphal procession (2:14-17)* – We’ll see the first glory in verse 14 of chapter 2. Verse 14: **(14-17)**

<sup>14</sup> But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. <sup>15</sup> For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. <sup>16</sup> To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? <sup>17</sup> Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.

Paul shifts abruptly in these verses to a scene of thanksgiving and glory. Back in Paul’s time, a triumphal procession was a huge, festive Roman celebration after winning a war. The victorious Roman general would lead his army, in their dress uniforms, though the

streets of Rome and up a hill, showing off the spoils of war to the cheering Roman people lining the streets as incense was burnt in worship to the Roman gods.<sup>1</sup>

With this powerful image of victory and celebration, Paul helps us to remember that no matter what difficulties we face in life and ministry, Jesus is triumphal. He is victorious over sin and death.

Pastor Ray Stedman, in his book, *Authentic Christianity* (p.21) talks about how this can give Jesus' followers an "unquenchable optimism," knowing that sharing in Jesus' glorious victory makes service to Him always worth it.

Now if you're like me, your life is not so much characterized by "unquenchable optimism". It's more characterized by disappointment in your difficulties and in how your difficulties limit you. You see all these needs and opportunities around you and have these desires to bless people, but then your difficulties limit how much you can make a difference.

So we need to focus on how Jesus has won the victory, and how He lets His followers share in His glory. We are part of His triumphal procession, thanks be to God!

As incense was burnt in worship to the Roman gods at their triumphal procession, so we can worship God as we keep spreading His love and good news even amid our difficulties, being a pleasing aroma to Him, verse 15, with our service.

Even in difficulties, as verse 14 says, God still "uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him". Now that doesn't necessarily mean that you'll have some big ministry that everyone is impressed with, or that all your service desires will be fulfilled. Even Paul didn't get to reach as many of his fellow Jews as he hoped. But we can be confident that as we depend on God, God works through us to impact others, accomplishing His purposes, even amid our difficulties.

Now for the victorious general, his army, and the Roman people, aroma from the incense was the sweet smell of victory. But for the defeated captives of war forced to join in the procession, the same smell was of impending slavery or death.

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) in the section on 2:14-17.

So as God works through us, for some this will be a pleasing aroma that brings life. While for others who reject God and the gospel it will smell more like death. Either way, responsibility for the response as you represent Jesus rests with the recipients, not with you.

Whatever response you receive, you have the glory of displaying Jesus' love and inviting people into a life-changing relationship with Him.

If you don't yet identify as a Jesus-follower, please don't leave here without Him. He came and lived a perfect life, in your place, on your behalf, and in love took your sin and your shame upon Himself on the cross, dying for your sins and rising from the dead. Jesus did it so that He can share with you forgiveness, love, life purpose, and His triumphal glory.

Now being part of such a glorious ministry comes with great responsibility. So as verse 17 says, we are not to peddle God's word for profit, like some huckster salesperson looking to make a quick buck off others. Rather we speak sincerely, as those sent from God.

*In the power of God's Spirit (3:1-6)* – Even as we speak and serve sincerely, we may still face the difficulty of unfair criticism, which Paul addresses in verse 1 of chapter 3. **(1-3)**

3 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? <sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. <sup>3</sup> You show that you are a letter from Christ, 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.

So there were some false teachers who came to the Corinthian church armed with letters of recommendation. These false teachers sought to undermine Paul's ministry by saying something to the Corinthians like, "Oh, Paul didn't provide your church with recommendation letters. Hmmm, I bet he lacks credibility, why wouldn't anyone affirm him? I wonder what really happened where Paul previously served."

Now Paul was not against letters of recommendation, which are kind of like ministry job references today. Paul wrote some of those rec letters himself.

But since Paul was the founding pastor of that Corinthian church, the church already knew what Paul was about, and so they shouldn't need a reference from an outsider. So Paul defends himself by saying that the ways God's Spirit worked through Paul's ministry to start

and grow the Corinthian church and to change people's hearts was the only letter Paul needed. A letter from Christ written not with ink but with the Spirit. That was quite the mic drop on those critics. ☺

Like Paul, as we serve Jesus, whether facing unfair criticism or other difficulties, we also serve in the power of God's Spirit. This is an amazing glory, which Paul describes further starting in verse 4. **(4-6)**

<sup>4</sup>Such confidence we have through Christ before God. <sup>5</sup>Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. <sup>6</sup>He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Back in chapter 2, having described our glorious ministry in Jesus, Paul asked, “And who is equal to such a task?”

Here's our answer in these verses: our confidence and competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a New Covenant, serving in the power of God's Spirit Who gives life, as verse 6 says.

Because serving Jesus is about depending on God's power, our confidence and competence in serving do not need to decrease when we feel incapable, weak, or overwhelmed amid our difficulties. And our confidence and competence in serving do not need to decrease when something like covid makes it harder to serve in as many ways and with as many people.

Because it's not about us, it's about what comes from God. Since God's Spirit provides our confidence and competence, our weaknesses in difficulties can even be to our advantage, as it pulls us away from the temptation to depend on our talents, hard work, relational network, finances, and so on, and return to the source of confidence and competence, God's Spirit. He dwells within you!

As Christian author Douglas Mckelvey invites us, “Be liberated now from this burden of believing that anything depends upon you – and so be liberated at last to give yourself to his joyful service in grateful response for the grace he has lavished upon you!”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Every Moment Holy*, Volume 1, p. 207 in the Pocket Edition.

With the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, we can share about Jesus, serve people, and model Jesus' good alternative for our world, even in "such a time as this". For the power of God Himself that brings life is working through us, what a glory!

*In an abundantly glorious ministry (3:7-11)* – Now in verse 6 Paul compares an old way of serving God, by the letter, with a new way that is by the Spirit. The old way is what we call the Old (or Mosaic) Covenant.

About 1,500 years before Jesus' earthly ministry, God freed Moses and the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt. God chose the Israelite people as His special people to represent Him to the world, and gave the Israelites the Old Testament Law.

At Mount Sinai, a covenant was made between God and His chosen people, what we call the Old Covenant. The Israelites covenanted, or committed, to obey God's Law and represent God to the other peoples of the world. If Israel obeyed the covenant, God would provide abundant blessings, while disobedience would lead to discipline.

This Old Covenant and its Law had a glory to it, good things given by a good God. But if you read the rest of the Old Testament, most of the time the Israelites were breaking the covenant they made with God. God's Law did not stop human sin or establish a right standing before God. Instead, God's Law kept pronouncing God's judgment on the people who kept breaking it. God's Law brought death because of everyone's disobedience.

So later in the Old Testament, God's messengers like Jeremiah and Ezekiel began to speak about God making a New Covenant to replace the Old. A New Covenant where sins are forgiven and God's Law is written not on stone, but on people's hearts and minds.

Verses 7-11 describe the glory of the Old Covenant and the abundant glory of the New Covenant, which was established by Jesus through His death and resurrection. So let's see the glory, starting in verse 7 **(7-9)**.

<sup>7</sup> Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, <sup>8</sup> will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? <sup>9</sup> If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!

When God came to Mount Sinai and gave His Law to Moses, there was thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, violent quaking and a deafening trumpet blast that grew louder and louder, and all the Israelites trembled. When Moses came down from the mount after meeting with God, his face intently shone with God's glory, as verse 7 says. So you could say the Old Covenant came in glory.

And if this Old Covenant, where God's Law was engraved on stone, unable to help people to fulfill its demands, was glorious... then, is not the ministry of the Spirit, engraving God's Law on our hearts, even more glorious?

And if this Old Covenant, which in the end brought condemnation and death because of everyone's disobedience, had glory... then how much more glorious is the ministry of grace that brings forgiveness, righteousness, and life! It's why Paul says in verse 10: **(10-11)**

<sup>10</sup>For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory.

<sup>11</sup>And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

The role of God's Law given under the Old Covenant was only transitory, as verse 11 says, meaning that it no longer operates with the coming of Jesus, though we can still learn from it. In contrast, the New Covenant in the power of God's Spirit is permanent, and "how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!"

Now that we understand something of the abundant glory of New Covenant ministry by the Spirit, I'm going to read verses 7-11 again, which are on the screen. As I read, let's get participatory. Every time I get to a place where the verses say "glory" or "glorious" say that word out loud with me. The "glory" and "glorious" in white text have to do with the Old Covenant, so you can say those words in a normal volume.

But the "glory" and "glorious" in gold text have to do with the New Covenant, so let's make sure we don't say those gold ones meekly, let's really say them out loud together. Ready?

<sup>7</sup>Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with GLORY, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its GLORY, transitory though it was, <sup>8</sup>will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more GLORIOUS? <sup>9</sup>If the ministry that brought condemnation was GLORIOUS, how much more

**GLORIOUS** is the ministry that brings righteousness! <sup>10</sup> For what was **GLORIOUS** has no **GLORY** now in comparison with the surpassing **GLORY**. <sup>11</sup> And if what was transitory came with **GLORY**, how much greater is the **GLORY** of that which lasts!

### **Next Step**

Amen, that's a lot of glories right there! Now Paul faced heavy difficulties in his life and ministry, but Paul focused on the glories, knowing that he was privileged to serve in Christ's triumphal procession, in the power of God's Spirit, under an abundantly glorious New Covenant.

So despite his difficulties and even times when Paul despaired of life itself, he kept serving God and people as he focused on the glories. And God has worked through Paul's service in difficulties to bless the world for nearly 2,000 years and counting. How might God use our service?

So let's join Paul in taking a next step this morning: in difficulties, focus on the glories. If you know Jesus, you are privileged to serve in His triumphal procession, sharing in His victory! Can you imagine what it'll be like when we celebrate Jesus' triumph with Him face to face?

In the meantime, our service to Jesus is in the power of God's Spirit. Do you realize that we are dynamically connected to God Himself as we serve?

Serving under the New Covenant, a groundbreaking, abundantly glorious kind of ministry. Is New Covenant ministry what you're investing your life in? We'll talk more about what New Covenant ministry looks like next Sunday.

Difficulties and glories. I see my difficulties, they are painful and right in front of my face and I have no trouble focusing on them. As one of your pastors, I carry in my heart many of your difficulties too... difficulties.

So with the help of God and His people, I also need to focus on the glories so that I can be energized by the Spirit to serve God and people in love.

Difficulties and glories. That's where I'm living, and that's why this passage matters to me, and matters for us all.

Because we need God to live this out, let's ask for His help now in prayer...