

# Authentic Christian Ministry



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** 2 Cor. 3:1–9, 2 Cor. 4:7–18, 2 Cor. 5:11–15, Col. 1:19–23, Eph. 2:13–16, 2 Cor. 6:11–7:1, 2 Corinthians 7.

**Memory Text:** “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Corinthians 4:8–10, *ESV*).

Last week, we saw that Paul, by affirming his simplicity and sincerity, defended himself from the accusations of inconstancy and lack of love toward the Corinthians. He always worked for the best interests of his spiritual children. He began a line of thought in 2 Corinthians 2:12–17 that goes to 2 Corinthians 7. While doing so, he reflects on what an authentic ministry for Christ looks like. We can draw so many lessons from Paul's thoughts in that regard.

This week, we will look into 2 Corinthians 3–7, where Paul speaks of his ministry of gaining souls for Christ. Ellen G. White says, “The conversion of sinners and their sanctification through the truth is the strongest proof a minister can have that God has called him to the ministry. The evidence of his apostleship is written upon the hearts of those converted, and is witnessed to by their renewed lives. Christ is formed within, the hope of glory. A minister is greatly strengthened by these seals of his ministry.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 328.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 5.

## Fruits of an Authentic Ministry

**Read** 2 Corinthians 3:1–9. In what sense can we be an epistle of Christ?

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Letters of recommendation were common in the Greco-Roman world. However, Paul did not bear such letters. The Spirit's transformative power in the lives of the Corinthians was proof of his authentic ministry. Yet, Paul was sure that it was not through his intelligence or efforts that the church in Corinth came into being (2 Cor. 3:4–6). He was not involved in self-promotion (2 Cor. 3:5, 1 Cor. 2:2).

Paul speaks about his ministry by briefly discussing the two covenants: the old one represented by Moses and the new one represented by Paul and his colleagues. A hasty reader may think that the old covenant gave no hope of salvation, but this is untrue. Salvation was available in the old as in the new covenant. The old covenant was the gospel in advance. "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed' " (Gal. 3:8, NKJV).

In 2 Corinthians 3:1–4:6, we can see that the old covenant is used to symbolize the legalistic experience of those who depended upon their own works of obedience as the means of pleasing God. The new covenant, however, represents the experience of those who rely completely on God's grace to do all that God has promised to do for them and in them.

Paul is talking about two different responses, by believers and unbelievers, to the gospel. He is not talking about different gospels, one in the Old Testament and a different one in the New—for there is only one gospel, offered by God, "who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (2 Tim. 1:9, NKJV).

"This is not to deny that 2 Corinthians 2:14–4:6 contains some historical elements."—Skip MacCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained?: What the Old and New Covenants Reveal about the Gospel, the Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007), p. 120. But Paul is using that history to make the point that some among them "are being saved" and some "are perishing" (2 Cor. 2:15, NKJV). Because of the reaction, that of unbelief and lack of faith toward Moses' ministry, his ministry can be viewed as a ministry of condemnation and death. Because the church at Corinth believed, Paul's ministry among them proved to be a ministry of righteousness, a ministry of the Spirit who gives life.

This experience of salvation of the church in Corinth is the evidence of Paul's authentic ministry.

## Suffering and Glory

**Read** 2 Corinthians 4:7–18. Make a list of Paul’s sufferings. How did he endure his sufferings?

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John Huss, the great reformer of the old Bohemia, once said about Jesus, “He is Master of the world, and we are contemptible mortals—yet He suffered! Why, then, should we not suffer also, particularly when suffering is for us a purification?”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 105.

The apostle Paul manifested centuries earlier the same willingness to suffer for Christ. He knew that he was nothing more than a fragile pot made of clay (2 Cor. 4:7). He constantly felt hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, and yet he was not crushed, in despair, forsaken, or destroyed (2 Cor. 4:8, 9). He was willing to carry “in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus” would be manifested in him (2 Cor. 4:10, 11, *ESV*).

By “death of Jesus,” Paul probably meant the sufferings that he mentioned in the previous verses. In turn, in an immediate sense, the phrase “life of Jesus” likely refers to the deliverances from death or the spiritual power for the present life. But, ultimately, this is a reference to the resurrection (2 Cor. 4:12).

Interestingly, the phrase “death and life” occurs three times in 2 Corinthians 4:10–12. This is a reminder that, in the present age, life is mingled with death. However, in the future glory, we will experience life in the absence of death (*Rev. 20:14, Rev. 21:4*).

Most important, 2 Corinthians 4:7–18 shows that the gospel is preached through fragile human beings so that the glory goes to God alone (2 Cor. 4:15). Not infrequently, missionaries suffer in the course of their missionary work. However, our affliction here is light and momentary when compared to that eternal weight of glory waiting for us (2 Cor. 4:17). The believer lives by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 4:18, 2 Cor. 5:7).

This hope in the future life captured the mind of Paul so much that he keeps talking about it in the flow of the passage (2 Cor. 5:1–10). He refers to his mortal body by the metaphor of an earthly house. Conversely, the “building from God” is a metaphor for the resurrected body (2 Cor. 5:1), the great hope for believers of all ages.

**Why is it so important that, amid whatever we are going through now, we always keep the hope of the resurrection, our resurrection (1 Cor. 15:52), before us?**

## Christ-focused Ministry of Reconciliation

**Read** 2 Corinthians 5:11–15. How does this passage demonstrate that Paul’s ministry is Christ-centered?

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Paul knew he was supposed to render an account of his ministry to Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). He knew “the fear of the LORD” and sought to persuade people about the gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 5:11, *ESV*). This fear is reverence and awe toward Christ and, hence, it is combined with Paul’s love for Christ and trust in Christ’s love for him. In the Old Testament, to fear the Lord means to walk in His ways, to love Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and soul (*Deut. 10:12*).

Paul’s ministry is not self-focused but Christ-focused. He did not commend himself. The reason for his boasting is Christ (2 Cor. 12:9). He said, “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Gal. 6:14, ESV*). Thus, the Corinthians’ opportunity to boast about him (2 Cor. 5:12) means to be proud of his Christ-focused ministry in contrast to the self-focused ministry of his opponents.

**Read** 2 Corinthians 5:16–21, Colossians 1:19–23, and Ephesians 2:13–16. What did Paul mean by “ministry of reconciliation”?

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Christ is the minister of reconciliation *par excellence*. As such, He “has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18, *NKJV*). The idea of reconciliation occurs over and over throughout 2 Corinthians 5:16–21. This is an essential concept for Paul, and so it must be for us, too.

God has reconciled humanity to Himself by means of the atoning death of His Son. Those who were reconciled to God are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Now, they are supposed to pass this “message of reconciliation” onward by proclaiming the gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 5:19, *ESV*). In this sense, “we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us” (2 Cor. 5:20, *NKJV*).

**Think about what Christ has done for you. Think about the guilt, the sin, the condemnation that would be yours but for what He did for you at the cross. How should this reality impact how you relate to others, especially those who don’t know the Lord?**

## Call to Holiness

In 2 Corinthians 6:3–10, Paul keeps encouraging the Corinthians to be reconciled to God. He presents a long list of hardships and triumphs to show what it means to be a follower of Christ and a minister of God. In short, he lists difficult situations (2 Cor. 6:4, 5), virtues of character (2 Cor. 6:6), equipment for ministry (2 Cor. 6:7), and vicissitudes of ministry (2 Cor. 6:8–10). After instructing the members in Corinth to be reconciled to God, Paul appeals for them to live a holy life, and to do so by separating themselves from the harmful influence of unbelievers and from unclean things (2 Cor. 6:14–17).

**Read 2 Corinthians 6:11–7:1. According to this passage, what does a holy life look like?**

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Paul emphasizes in this passage the importance of affection and love within the church (1 Cor. 6:11–13). The evidence that people have been reconciled to God is that they seek reconciliation with one another. Indeed, they become, as it were, agents of horizontal reconciliation.

Next, the call to holiness is given by means of six appeals, namely, (1) “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6:14, NKJV); (2) “Come out from among them” (2 Cor. 6:17, NKJV); (3) “Be separate” (2 Cor. 6:17, NKJV); (4) “Do not touch what is unclean” (2 Cor. 6:17, NKJV); (5) “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit” (2 Cor. 7:1, ESV); (6) “Make holiness perfect in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1, RSV; emphasis supplied). These exhortations show that a holy God requires a holy life and separation from idolatry.

On the other hand, the passage also brings seven promises that highlight the role of the Christian church as a holy temple: (1) “I will dwell in them”; (2) “[I will] walk among them”; (3) “I will be their God”; (4) “They shall be My people”; (5) “I will receive you”; (6) “I will be a Father to you”; (7) “You shall be My sons and daughters” (2 Cor. 6:16, 17, 18, NKJV).

Notice that the four promises in 2 Corinthians 6:16 are the basis for the three imperatives in 2 Corinthians 6:17 (see the word “therefore” at the beginning of 2 Corinthians 6:17). This demonstrates that holiness is not the result of one’s efforts but the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Although holiness results from God, believers must do their part and reject idolatry and every impure practice.

**What do God’s promises in 2 Corinthians 6:16–18 tell us about what holiness is?**

## Comfort and Joy

**Read** 2 Corinthians 7. What are Paul's feelings upon hearing that the Corinthians had repented?

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How much love flows from the words “You are in our hearts” (2 Cor. 7:3, *NKJV*; see also 2 Cor. 6:11). In his deep desire to have his love reciprocated, Paul also says, “Make room in your hearts for us” (2 Cor. 7:2, *ESV*). While the phrase “in your hearts” is not in the Greek text, most English versions supply it, which is correct because the context supports it.

Indeed, the Corinthians opened their hearts to Paul and his fellow workers. This is why verse 4 is a burst of joy. Paul's words express how positive his feelings are at this moment: “Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort. I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation” (2 Cor. 7:4, *NKJV*). Paul is filled with comfort and joy. How much comfort and joy our churches can bring to the hearts of their ministers by faithfully committing themselves to Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 7:5–16, Paul further explains the reason for his comfort and joy. These two concepts dominate the passage. The verb *parakaleō* (“to comfort”) or the noun *paraklesis* (“comfort”) occurs together a total of seven times in 2 Corinthians 7. This section of the letter ends the same way it began, namely, with much comfort in God (2 Cor. 1:3–7). Paul's comfort in 2 Corinthians 7 comes from the relief he experienced because the severe letter produced the effect he intended for it.

Although this relief is the result of Titus's positive report, ultimately, God is the agent of the comfort Paul experienced (2 Cor. 7:6). God is indeed the “God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation” (2 Cor. 1:3, 4, *NKJV*).

Interestingly, while Paul is “filled with comfort,” he is “exceedingly joyful” (2 Cor. 7:4, 7, 13). Although his painful letter had caused much sadness, that was a sadness according to God's will with repentance intended (2 Cor. 7:9–11, *NASB*). The Corinthians “sorrowed in a godly manner” (2 Cor. 7:11, *NKJV*), a sorrow producing “repentance leading to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10, *NKJV*). What else could bring more joy to the heart of an authentic minister of God?

**Have you ever experienced godly sorrow in your life? How did you know that it was sorrow according to God's will to lead you to repentance?**

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Message Heeded,” pp. 323–334, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Last week, we read the above cited passage in *The Acts of the Apostles*. It is worth rereading it. This time, dwell a little bit more on the parts referring to Paul’s severe letter, his feelings upon writing it, and his joy upon receiving the good news about the sincere repentance of the addressees. Then, reflect on what this tells us about the authenticity of Paul’s ministry and what lessons we can apply to our work for Christ.

“We are to reveal to the universe, to the world fallen and to worlds unfallen, that there is forgiveness with God, that through the love of God we may be reconciled to God. Man repents, becomes contrite in heart, believes in Christ as his atoning sacrifice, and realizes that God is reconciled to him.”—Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies On Education*, p. 223.

“As a church, we have received great light. This light the Lord has entrusted to us for the benefit and blessing of the world. To us has been given the ministry of reconciliation. With power from on high we are to beseech men to be reconciled to God.”—White, Letter 32, 1903.

Once reconciled to God, people must seek holiness. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 7:1, Ellen G. White hints at what Paul meant by “perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (*2 Cor. 7:1, NKJV*). She says Paul sought to help the new converts “to become self-reliant, growing Christians, strong in faith, ardent in zeal, and wholehearted in their consecration to God and to the work of advancing His kingdom.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 201.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Paul refers to us as “jars of clay” containing the gospel treasure (*2 Cor. 4:7, ESV*). How can the fact that the human condition is weak, frail, and filled with limitations enhance rather than undermine the proclamation of the gospel?
- 2 What does it mean to be a “new creation” (*2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV*)? How does this affect our daily lives? How has Christ made you a new creature?
- 3 In 2 Corinthians 6:4, 5, Paul provides a long list of hardships for the gospel’s sake. How did he respond to his sufferings (see *2 Cor. 6:6, 7*)? How does this help you respond to yours?
- 4 Paul contrasts godly sorrow with worldly sorrow (*2 Cor. 7:10*). In what manner may sorrow relate to repentance? How would you describe godly sorrow in contrast to worldly sorrow?

## Jake's Prayer Journey

*The name of the church planter has been changed, and the region where he works has been withheld to protect his ministry.*

Jake, a church planter, knew there was one thing he couldn't miss in his daily life now that he and his wife were living in a country where Christians were scarce: prayer. He decided to write down all his prayer requests each month and to see how God answered them.

Jake and a group of members at his church plant were each responsible for discipling one or two new attendees. The group gathered each day of the week to pray for these new believers and reserved one day for fasting.

During one house church meeting, a member introduced Jake to Omar, a cook who had discovered Jesus many years ago. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Jake started a conversation with Omar, and soon, the two men promised to meet.

A few days later, Omar visited Jake and shared his testimony of discovering Jesus through the Bible. For the past 15 years, he had followed his faith cautiously, avoiding too much contact with other believers to avoid risking his life. His family and friends didn't know about his beliefs. Jake listened intently as Omar expressed his desire to be baptized.

From that moment on, Jake and Omar met almost daily to study the Bible.

During that same month, Jake met Wassim, a young man who had lived as a refugee in a Western country for some years. Having left his homeland disillusioned, he had wrestled with questions that led him further away from his past beliefs. Wassim began exploring Christianity alone, finding a sense of peace he had never known. Upon returning to his country, he searched online for other local believers and was introduced to Jake's house church.

To Jake's delight, he learned that Wassim also desired baptism. Jake met weekly with Wassim, delving into subjects such as faith, Jesus Christ, and eternity.

As Jake completed the first month of his prayer journey, he was overcome with a profound admiration for God's responses. He had asked the Lord to help him give Bible studies, and now he had two eager students.

As Jake prepares to step into the second month of his prayer journey, his heart is filled with amazement and anticipation. He knows that his journey has only begun, and he feels the strength of God leading him forward.

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