

Love-driven Ministry



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *2 Cor. 1:3–14, 2 Cor. 2:17, 2 Cor. 4:2, 1 Cor. 16:5–7, 2 Cor. 7:5–13, 2 Cor. 2:5–17.*

Memory Text: “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you” (*2 Corinthians 2:4, NKJV*).

The apostle Paul didn’t always have it so easy. Besides jail and the life-threatening situations he faced, Paul also wrote: “From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches” (*2 Cor. 11:24–28, NKJV*).

What we see in his letters to the Corinthians is some of the “deep concern” that Paul had for this church. Yet, amid it all, his love for them never failed, just as Christ’s love for us never fails us. In fact, it was from Jesus that Paul learned to love the churches in a way that reflects the love that Jesus has for us (*2 Cor. 5:14; see 1 Cor. 11:1*).

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 29.

Thanksgiving

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–7. What is the reason for Paul’s attitude of thanksgiving here?

Paul’s thankfulness focuses on the comfort that God provides for those who are suffering. In this passage, the verb *parakaleō* (to comfort) and the noun *paraklēsis* (comfort) occur together ten times. This represents one third of all occurrences of these words in 2 Corinthians (29 times). God is portrayed as the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation” (2 Cor. 1:3, 4, NKJV).

The comfort one receives from God is not to be kept for oneself (2 Cor. 1:4, 5). Only the afflicted heart that became the recipient of God’s consolation is able to impart comfort effectively to those in affliction, too.

Paul could comfort others because he himself, in his sufferings, received comfort from God. “If we are afflicted, it is for *your* consolation and salvation. . . . Or if we are comforted, it is for *your* consolation and salvation” (2 Cor. 1:6, NKJV; *emphasis supplied*). This is love!

What is Paul expressing thanks for in 2 Corinthians 1:8–11?

Paul speaks of trouble “beyond measure, above strength” that made him and his fellow workers fear that the end had come to them (2 Cor. 1:8). For a moment, they thought the resurrection was their only hope. However, God delivered them, and the scenario changed (2 Cor. 1:10). From the fear of death (2 Cor. 1:8), they rise to an implicit hope that God would deliver them once again (2 Cor. 1:10). God’s victories in the past give us confidence that He will do the same in the future. God uses afflictions to teach us to trust in Him. Hardships can lead us to spiritual maturity, at least to the extent that we allow them to draw us closer to God. Paul’s thanksgiving also displays the power of intercessory prayer and the gratitude we experience because of God’s deliverance (2 Cor. 1:11).

What have you found helpful in dealing with the suffering that, one way or another, we all face?

Simplicity and Sincerity

Yesterday, we learned that Paul's love for the Corinthians was made manifest in that he comforted them in their hardships, just as he received comfort from God in his (*2 Cor. 1:1–11*). Today, we will see that his love for them was also displayed through the integrity that he and his fellow workers manifested toward the church members in Corinth.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:12–14 in the light of 2 Corinthians 2:17 and 2 Corinthians 4:2. How does Paul's sincerity reveal his love for the Corinthians?

Second Corinthians 1:12–14 introduces the thesis Paul will develop in the rest of the letter. His integrity and apostleship have been questioned by some in Corinth. They thought Paul had a vacillating and indecisive character, which was not fitting for the apostolic ministry. In response, Paul stresses that he and his colleagues behaved with the utmost integrity toward them.

Two words portray the conduct of Paul and his associates: simplicity and sincerity (*2 Cor. 1:12*). The term “simplicity” comes from the Greek word *haplotēs*. It is applied here to express personal integrity in speech or behavior; in short, it reveals the purity of motives (*Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22*). In turn, the term “sincerity” (from the Greek *eilikrineia*) also points to integrity and purity of motives.

The Corinthians should not have doubted the clarity of Paul's intentions. He makes it clear that his simplicity and sincerity have their origin in God. This idea is well captured by the New English Translation Bible, which mentions “pure motives and sincerity *which are from God*” (*2 Cor. 1:12, emphasis supplied*). In the same verse, Paul further asserts that these ministerial qualities are given to us “by the grace of God.”

It seems Paul's opponents misinterpreted his words, in previous written communications (*2 Cor. 1:13, 14*). Paul guarantees that his intentions were clear and understandable. He was sure that the uprightness of his words, intentions, and actions would be made clear “in the day of the Lord Jesus” (*2 Cor. 1:14, NKJV*).

What has been your own experience with having your motives or intentions, however well-meaning and sincere, questioned or challenged? What should that tell you about how careful you should be when questioning someone else's motives?

Changing Plans for Love

We saw that some in Corinth doubted Paul's intentions and love. Today, we will look into one particular reason: his changing travel plans (*2 Cor. 1:15–2:4*).

Read 1 Corinthians 16:5–7. What was Paul's original travel plan?

Paul had been in Corinth before. According to 1 Corinthians 16:5, 6, he planned to pass through Macedonia on his way back to Corinth and, perhaps, stay in Corinth for the winter. From Corinth, he would go to Judea with the offering collected for the poor in Jerusalem not only in Macedonia, but also in Achaia, Galatia, and Asia. However, he changed his plans because of a bad report brought by Timothy from Corinth (*1 Cor. 4:17, 1 Cor. 16:10, 2 Cor. 1:1*).

Paul intended to go straight from Ephesus to Corinth and there address the issues reported by Timothy. The new itinerary would be Ephesus—Corinth—Macedonia—Corinth—Judea (*2 Cor. 1:15, 16*). He went from Ephesus to Corinth, but then he returned to Ephesus. His plans changed. He didn't go back to Corinth as planned, at least not immediately, because his latest visit did not go well. So, he returned to Ephesus and wrote to them instead. He would rather send a letter than risk worsening things with another visit (*2 Cor. 2:1, 3*).

Paul's intentions on the last visit were misinterpreted. Some in Corinth said that he was unreliable and that he did not love them enough (*2 Cor. 1:17*). In his response to the accusations, he moved the Corinthians' eyes to the gospel of Christ. He was faithful to his intentions to visit the Corinthians at the best opportunity, just as God had been faithful in fulfilling His promises to them through Christ (*2 Cor. 1:18–22*).

"For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us" (*2 Cor. 1:20, NKJV*).

Thus, his response was not a confusing mixture of "yes" or "no" dependent on the circumstances, as they said, but was "always Yes," just as God's work in Christ is "always Yes" (*2 Cor. 1:19, ESV*).

Therefore, the reason Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians instead of visiting them was his sincere love for them, not the opposite (*2 Cor. 2:4*). Another visit right after the painful visit would bring them further pain, not the joy he intended to cause with his presence (*2 Cor. 1:24, 2 Cor. 2:3*). How easily his good intentions were misinterpreted.

Forgiveness and Reaffirmation of Love

Rather than visiting the Corinthians a second time, Paul, after returning to Ephesus, sent what became known as “the severe letter” (see *2 Cor. 2:3, 4; 2 Cor. 7:8, 12*).

Read 2 Corinthians 7:5–13. What was the result of what he wrote to them, and what was Paul’s reaction because of that result?

Paul and Titus met later in Macedonia, where Paul heard from Titus the excellent news that his strong words had caused positive results, which brought much joy to the apostle’s heart. If before, some in Corinth positioned themselves against Paul, now the church sided with him. How important it is to support our leaders. As church members, we can make their work much easier than it is.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:5–11. What is the central idea here?

This passage has to do with a case of church discipline. Scholars debate whether the offender here is the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5:1–5 or someone else, a person who influenced others in the church in their accusation that Paul had been inconsistent and inconsiderate of them in his traveling decisions. The context seems to favor the second option. In any case, the most important teaching of the passage regards how the church should deal with a person in sin.

This passage teaches that the purpose of church discipline is restoration through forgiveness and through reaffirmation of love for the sinner (*2 Cor. 2:6–8, 10*). The passage also hints that church discipline may be painful, but it is necessary. That is, however well-intentioned they may be, and wanting to be “grace”-oriented, some churches might never confront or deal with blatant or even public sin. On the other hand, others can be very rigid, unforgiving, and harsh. Sin needs to be dealt with, but in love. Thus, Paul could exhort the church to reaffirm its love for the offender (*2 Cor. 2:8*) because he himself loved the church (*2 Cor. 2:4*)!

The church in Corinth could love the offender (*2 Cor. 2:8*) because it was itself the object of God’s love through Paul’s love. What does this teach us about love?

Triumph in Christ

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12, 13. Where did Paul go after writing “the severe letter” to them? What did he do there?

Paul’s heart was uneasy while waiting for Titus (2 Cor. 7:5, 6). Despite that uneasiness, he couldn’t stop talking about Jesus (2 Cor. 2:12). He loved Jesus so much. At that point, he didn’t yet know the results of his letter. He was anxious to see Titus and hear about the reaction of the Corinthians.

The work of Paul at Troas was successful, but “he could not remain there long. ‘The care of all the churches,’ and particularly of the church at Corinth, rested heavily on his heart. He had hoped to meet Titus at Troas and to learn from him how the words of counsel and reproof sent to the Corinthian brethren had been received, but in this he was disappointed. ‘I had no rest in my spirit,’ he wrote concerning this experience, ‘because I found not Titus my brother.’ He therefore left Troas and crossed over to Macedonia, where, at Philippi he met Timothy.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 323.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14–17. What was Paul’s reaction upon meeting Titus in Macedonia and hearing about the positive response of the Corinthians?

In a burst of joy, Paul affirms that God “always leads us in triumph in Christ” (2 Cor. 2:14, *NKJV*). What a marvelous statement! A heart filled with the presence of Christ spreads “the fragrance of His knowledge in every place” (2 Cor. 2:14, *NKJV*).

Paul rejoices in Christ because the painful letter bore the fruit he intended to harvest (2 Cor. 7:5–9). This is a great victory. Meanwhile, in 2 Corinthians 2:17, Paul reaffirms his sincerity as an apostle of Christ (2 Cor. 2:17, 2 Cor. 1:12). According to this passage, what distinguishes a faithful servant of Christ from a false minister is that while the latter peddles the gospel for self-interest, the former preaches the Word of God in wholehearted love for Christ.

What motivates you in all that you do, especially when you do it in the name of Jesus?

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

“Those who have borne the greatest sorrows are frequently the ones who carry the greatest comfort to others, bringing sunshine wherever they go. Such ones have been chastened and sweetened by their afflictions; they did not lose confidence in God when trouble assailed them, but clung closer to His protecting love. Such ones are living proof of the tender care of God.”—Ellen G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 122.

“A consecrated Christian life is ever shedding light and comfort and peace. It is characterized by purity, tact, simplicity, and usefulness. It is controlled by that unselfish love that sanctifies the influence. It is full of Christ, and leaves a track of light wherever its possessor may go.”—*God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 122.

“The apostle Paul found it necessary to reprove wrong in the church, but he did not lose his self-control in reproving error. He anxiously explains the reason of his action. How carefully he wrought so as to leave the impression that he was a friend of the erring! He made them understand that it cost him pain to give them pain. He left the impression upon their minds that his interest was identified with theirs.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1094.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In 2 Corinthians 2:1–14, Paul affirms his integrity in ministry. Why is this ministerial quality so crucial?
- 2 What does the fact that Paul changed his traveling plan tell us about the necessity of flexibility in Christian ministry? Why is it important to be open to change when needed?
- 3 Paul faced anguish and anxiety in his ministry. This clearly shows that church leaders are human beings who are as exposed to distress as any other people. What can church members do in order to ease their work?
- 4 Paul refers to his restlessness (2 Cor. 2:13) right before mentioning his triumph in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14). How could he talk about his weakness and strength at the same time? How can we?

Mission Begins Young

By KATHIE LICHTENWALTER

“Even though as a boy I’d read all of Eric B. Hare’s* stories, I don’t think it ever occurred to me that I could be a missionary myself,” says Myron Iseminger, a missionary serving in Lebanon.

In the late 1970s, Myron’s sister declared she was taking a year off to volunteer as an English teacher in Japan. After a year in college as a theology major, Myron proposed his own volunteer experience to the Middle East. It was a decision that would steer the rest of his life.

“I thought it would be really neat to experience the Bible lands,” Myron says. “Besides, I thought it would give me some helpful ministerial experience. But I received much more. That year, my worldview began changing. I saw another culture, another way of thinking. I went to my students’ homes and listened to their stories, saw their personal grief. I began understanding life from another person’s perspective. I realized it’s easy to judge groups of people until you meet them one-on-one and come to love them.” Myron began sensing the call to long-term service for God overseas.

At the time, cross-cultural pastors didn’t appear to be in high demand, but Myron concluded if the world church budgeted funds for mission, finance officers would be needed to manage those funds. When he returned to college, he added a second major in business. It was another critical turn that would determine the direction of his life.

The advice a church leader shared with Myron also weighed on his mind: if you want to serve in a foreign country, make sure the woman you marry shares that same vision! Myron’s wife, Candace, had never been outside the United States when they married. “But she was willing,” Myron says. Together, they waited for a job opportunity overseas.

One day, a General Conference officer told Myron there was an opening in the Middle East for a treasurer. Soon, Myron and Candace were settling into an apartment in the Egypt Field office. It was hard work but rewarding. “I enjoyed being on the frontline of mission,” Myron says. “I liked contributing where there were limited resources. I enjoyed seeing the difference I could make, even though it was challenging.”

Myron would later serve in a variety of church offices.

It all seemed impossible to a little boy captivated by Eric B. Hare’s stories, but he can testify, “If we’re open to wherever God needs us, He works out our life direction much better than we could ever plan it.”

* Eric B. Hare was a Seventh-day Adventist missionary and prolific author.

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Part I: Overview

Key Text: *2 Corinthians 2:4*

Study Focus: *2 Cor. 1:3–14, 2 Cor. 2:1–17.*

Introduction

In a small village, a woman named Anna ran a bakery. Every morning, her baking filled the air with the aroma of freshly baked goods and warm spices. The scent drifted through the streets, drawing people in. Some eagerly came to buy, while others simply enjoyed the comforting smells as they passed by.

However, not everyone appreciated it. A neighbor, Mr. Grayson, found the smell overwhelming and constantly complained. “This scent is everywhere! I can’t escape it!” he grumbled.

One day, during a harsh winter storm, the power went out in the village. Many were cold and hungry, but Anna’s bakery had a wood-fired oven. She opened her doors, offering warmth and food to anyone in need. People followed the familiar fragrance, knowing it led to a place of comfort and nourishment.

Even Mr. Grayson, who once complained, found himself drawn in. As he accepted a warm loaf of bread, he realized the same fragrance he once despised was now sustaining him.

Christianity is more than fundamental beliefs or theological reflection. It involves people, communities, and a God who is with us in our darkest moments or on our loftiest mountaintops of success. In the second epistle to the Corinthians, we can learn a lot about Paul’s life and ministry through his interaction with the church. We realize, once again, that more than our words, our attitudes and relationships communicate the fragrance of Christ and attract a world yearning for hope.

Lesson Themes

This week’s lesson highlights a number of important themes, including the following:

- 1. God’s Comfort in Suffering.** God comforts us in moments of suffering and enables us to comfort others (*2 Cor. 1:3–7*).
- 2. Relying on God, Not Ourselves.** Suffering teaches us dependence on God (*2 Cor. 1:8–11*).
- 3. Integrity and Faithfulness in Ministry.** Christian ministry must be sincere and reflect God’s faithfulness (*2 Cor. 1:12–14, 17–22*).
- 4. Forgiveness and Restoration.** Love-driven ministry seeks reconciliation, not condemnation (*2 Cor. 2:5–11*).

5. The Fragrance of Christ. Our lives should spread the message of Christ, much as a good-smelling fragrance, even if some reject it (*2 Cor. 2:14–17*).

Part II: Commentary

1. Historical Background of 2 Corinthians: The Pauline authorship of the second letter to the Corinthians has not been seriously questioned and has been recognized as such by early church fathers, including Polycarp (ca. A.D. 155), Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 185), Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 200), and Tertullian (ca. A.D. 210). But, as noted by some, 2 Corinthians “is surely the Pauline letter with the most complicated set of historical, social, and communal elements behind it.”—Philip Towner, “Corinthians, Second Letter To,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. K. Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), vol. 1, p. 744.

One of the reasons for these complications is the less-than-smooth transitions between topics and abrupt shifts in tone. The letter possibly was written over an extended period of time, as Paul traveled through Macedonia (*2 Cor. 2:1–12*), encountering changing conditions and perhaps even acquiring additional news from the church. These conditions and information may have resulted in additional topics that appear disconnected from the others already mentioned.

2. A Love-driven Ministry: In 2 Corinthians 1 and 2, Paul highlights several key characteristics of a love-driven ministry. His personal experiences, including suffering, forgiveness, and sincerity, demonstrate how true Christian ministry should be motivated by God’s love rather than by personal gain or status. The following subcategories can be found in the biblical text and could be discussed within your group Sabbath School setting:

(a) *Compassion and Comfort (2 Cor. 1:3–7):* Paul describes God as the “Father of mercies” and the “God of all comfort” (*2 Cor. 1:3, ESV*). Compassion (or mercies) and comfort are exactly what Paul received from God in his own trials. Thus, the apostle was able to extend this same mercy to the people around him, including his churches. A compassion-driven ministry provides comfort to others, just as God comforts us in our suffering (*2 Cor. 1:4*). Ministry isn’t about power or control but about sharing in people’s pain and pointing them to Christ. Paul reminds the Corinthians that his own sufferings allowed him better to understand and minister to others who suffer (*2 Cor. 1:6*).

(b) *Dependence on God, Not Self (2 Cor. 1:8–11):* In this second part

of the prologue (or greeting section), Paul recalls a time he was under extreme pressure, beyond his strength, even despairing of life (*2 Cor. 1:8*). Instead of relying on himself, he trusted in God, who has the ability to raise the dead (*2 Cor. 1:9*). The resurrection imagery is used here to show that God is able to do (and did do) the impossible when we rely on Him. A love-driven ministry depends on God's power, not on human ability. Paul invites his audience (and us as well) not to act as if they have all the answers but, rather, to point people to trust in God, who delivers His children from trials (*2 Cor. 1:10*).

(c) *Integrity and Sincerity (2 Cor. 1:12–14)*: Paul insists that his ministry was conducted with holiness, sincerity, and transparency, not by worldly wisdom but by God's grace (*2 Cor. 1:12*). Paul defends himself against accusations of not being reliable and of being inconsistent, assuring the Corinthians that he was not being deceptive when he changed his travel plans (*2 Cor. 1:15–18*). This integrity and sincerity are based on God's faithfulness and become obvious in Paul's Christ-centered preaching, as referenced in 2 Corinthians 1:20: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [i.e., Christ]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (*ESV*). A love-driven ministry does not manipulate or deceive, but acts with honesty and integrity.

(d) *Faithfulness to God's Promises (2 Cor. 1:18–22)*: Paul emphasizes that God's promises are always "Yes" in Christ (*2 Cor. 1:20*). A love-driven ministry focuses on God's faithfulness, not on human inconsistencies. The work of the Holy Spirit describes three main activities. It first "establishes" the believer (*2 Cor. 1:21*). The verb used here is in the present tense, which suggests an ongoing effect. Second, the believer has been "anointed" to be able to share the good news with the world, as a priest or Levite would have done in the Old Testament. Finally, the Spirit seals believers in their hearts as God's own (*2 Cor. 1:22*), assuring them of His commitment. Paul describes this seal as a "guarantee" (or down payment, Greek *arrabōn*) (*2 Cor. 1:22*), so that the believer can be assured of God's trustworthiness and His unchanging promises.

(e) *Forgiveness and Reconciliation (2 Cor. 2:5–11)*: Paul urges the Corinthians to forgive and restore a repentant church member who had caused pain (*2 Cor. 2:6, 7*). A church motivated by love seeks reconciliation, not punishment or revenge. Paul then continues by stating that an unforgiving spirit gives Satan a foothold in the church (*2 Cor. 2:11*). Instead of holding grudges, a love-driven ministry seeks to restore broken relationships with grace and mercy.

3. A Fragrance of Christ (2 Cor. 2:14–17): Smells communicate non-verbally. For example, bad smells drive us away. Conversely, good smells

are attractive and can tap deep into our emotions. The smell of a favorite food may evoke within us long-forgotten emotions, reminding us of home, family, or celebrations. Smells were important in the cultural context of the biblical world, as they often functioned as the extension of the personality of the bearer. Priest and kings (as well as the sanctuary) were anointed in the Old Testament, and the composition of the anointing oil suggests a strong-smelling fragrance (*compare with Exod. 30:22–33*), containing cinnamon, myrrh, cane, and cassia. Also commonplace was the rite of anointing specific people or locations as belonging to God, whose fragrance they now bore.

Paul uses the fragrance metaphor in connection with a triumphal procession (linking it in the minds of his audience to well-known Roman triumphal processions). During these triumphs, evidence of the victory was shown. For Paul, the Corinthian church—with all its frailties and internal challenges—was the evidence of the success of his proclamation in the face of trials (*2 Cor. 2:14*). Additionally for Paul, believers were “an incense offering whose fragrance, being diffused in every place, is the saving knowledge of Christ.”—“2 Corinthians,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez et al. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), p. 1665. Ministry should attract people to Christ, just as a sweet fragrance fills a room. However, to some, the gospel is an offense, like the smell of death (*2 Cor. 2:16*).

Part III: Life Application

Ministry driven by love can reach those who are yearning for hope. This type of ministry requires compassion, integrity, sincerity, and faithfulness to God’s promises. Ultimately, those who have encountered Jesus and been transformed by Him will be like a fragrance that attracts others looking for salvation. The initial chapters of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians introduce this type of ministry, as Paul makes the case for his own ministry. Based on 2 Corinthians 1 and 2, discuss the following questions in your Sabbath School group:

- 1. Why are compassion and grace essential for a love-driven ministry? What role models can we find in Scripture that illustrate these characteristics?**

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2. Many of us don't like to be dependent on others. Why is it important to learn dependence on one another in our churches?

3. Paul repeatedly highlights transparency and integrity in his dealings with churches and individuals. Why is integrity so important in our relationships?

4. What is the importance of God's promises in your life? How would you explain to a nonchurched friend that His promises are trustworthy?

5. Mahatma Gandhi is said to have stated, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." Why is forgiveness essential in our relationships, inside and outside the church?
