

# A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

by  
BARBARA PAPPAS



## Chapter Two

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## CHAPTER TWO

### The Power of the Gospel

BACKGROUND: Chapter One closes with the reminder that God often chooses a common person to be an instrument of His will, to make it clear that the work accomplished takes place through divine—not human—power. Paul stresses that this is so in his case.

**2:1-2. And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.** Paul writes in a humble tone, reminding the Corinthians that he came to them without any power or glory of his own but with the simple truth about Christ: He accepted death to atone for the sins of mankind, then rose from the grave, proving that He is the Messiah of Old Testament prophecy (Isa 53:1-12, Rom 5:6,8).

**2:3. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling.** The message Paul brought was powerful, staggering and dangerous. It put him and those who listened to it at risk of angering the Jews, many of whom were as zealously anti-Christian as Paul had been. To be a Christian was to live in danger of persecution and death. Paul had no illusions about himself and the difficult job he had to do. He felt ill-equipped for his mission and had the same fears anyone would, dreading suffering and death, but did not flee from his calling or its consequences.

So that they who assert that he had no fear...not only do not honor him, but rather deprive him of his due praises. For if he feared not, what endurance or self-restraint was there in bearing the danger?  
CHRYSOSTOM<sup>1</sup>

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a) What fears does a modern Christian face? Using Paul as an example, how can we best deal with these fears?

**2:4. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power...** Paul was learned, but he had no worldly power. He was a common person bringing a dangerous message to common people, yet he was believed and lives were changed. This clearly points to heavenly assistance.

**2:5. that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.** The Apostles developed no new theories of their own. They just preached the Gospel and lived their lives by it as Christ had taught them. Yet, through the grace of God, they changed the course of the world.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). What is the message of this verse for us?

**2:6-8. However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.** To those who cannot read, the knowledge imparted in a book is hidden, the words being to them meaningless hieroglyphics, though they hold the open book in their hands. Likewise, when unbelievers encounter the word of God, its power eludes them. They hear not and see not because their hearts and minds are closed (Mt 11:15). Believers hear God's truths and see evidence of Him everywhere. It is for them that the Apostles unfolded God's plan for the salvation of all mankind.

God is all-wise, all-knowing. From the beginning, He gave man, His most beloved creation, the gift of free will (the ability to choose). Without free will, man would have been like a robot, able to do only that for which he had been programmed. With this gift, man is able to become like God, through love demonstrated by obedience (Gen 2), not for God's sake but for his own. However, with this gift comes the right to turn from God, in disobedience. God could foresee that man would not use the gift of free will wisely; he would succumb to Satan's deceptions and would disobey, making it necessary that God follow through with the stated consequences of sin: eviction from Paradise.

The perils outside the Garden of Eden were great: sorrow, sickness, tragedy. But for the ultimate good of man, it was necessary that he experience them, in much the same way a child must be allowed, in a controlled manner, to experience the consequences of his actions, so that he learns to make wise choices. Thus God gave mankind the painful but invaluable opportunity to see for himself that which is wrought by disobedience. It was part of His divine plan though, from the very beginning, to send His Son when the time was right, to offer man a chance to return to a state of grace. God revealed this divine plan to Adam and Eve in the first prophecy, after they had disobeyed, before He sent them out of Eden (Gen 3:24).

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:** (c). What were the specifics of the first prophecy (Gen 3:15)?

**2:9. But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him."** It is beyond man's ability to fathom the fullness of God's Kingdom. The grandest earthly experience in combination with the most fertile imagination can provide only hints as to the wonder and beauty that await God's people.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:** (d). What does Scripture indicate about the conditions that will prevail in Heaven?

**2:10-13. But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. God is Spirit...(Jn 4:24).** In order to understand Him we must be filled with His Holy Spirit, which is available to us through the Sacrament of Chrismation, our own personal Pentecost.

Only the Holy Spirit will transmit to us that which the Son and Word of God has offered to us.<sup>2</sup>

The grace that the Holy Spirit manifests in each person is commensurate with the extent to which, by faith, s/he invites and cooperates with that power.

When we hear of the Spirit, the mind may not imagine to itself an image of some limited circumscribed nature, liable to change, or alteration, or at all like a created thing, but must go on in its conception to the very highest notions, and form to itself an idea of an intelligent Being, infinite in power, of greatness without measure, bounded neither by time nor by ages, bountiful of its own goodness, to whom all turn who need sanctification, to whom all aspire who live in holiness, as though watered and assisted by Its breath to arrive at their due perfection. A Being who perfects others, Itself needing nothing; existing as not needing to be renewed, yet giving life abundantly; enlarging through no addition, but at once complete; at rest within itself, yet in all places; the source of holiness, the light of the mind, and *providing light from Itself to every faculty of the soul that searches for truth*; by nature inaccessible, yet yielding to goodness; filling every

need by Its power, but *given only to those who are worthy of It, to whom It is not given in the same measure, but in the measure of each man's faith (Rom 12:6).*

Simple in nature, manifold in powers, wholly present in each single one, and whole and entire in all places. Impassively divided, yet wholly bestowed, like the rays of the sun whose favor each enjoys as though it shone for him alone; yet it shines on land and sea and fills the air. So the Spirit, to each one who receives It, as though given to him alone, pours forth sufficient and perfect grace to each one, is *enjoyed by each one, not in the measure of Its power, but of their capacity.*

Now the Spirit is not united to the soul by drawing near to it in place (for how may what is corporeal draw near to what is incorporeal?) but through the withdrawal of the passions, which, drawing close to the soul through its affection for the flesh, have drawn it away from its friendship with God. When a man becomes clean of the stain he received through sin, and has returned to his natural beauty, restoring to its former resemblance the royal image within him, only then may he draw near to the Paraclete. And He, like the sun, will show you, your eye now made pure, the Image of the Invisible in Himself. And in the blessed contemplation of this Image you shall see the unspeakable beauty of the Archetype.

Through His aid hearts are lifted up, the weak led by the hand, those going forward are perfected. Shining upon those who have been purified of every stain, He makes them spiritual in heart, through union with Himself. For just as when the sunlight falls on clear transparent bodies, they too become resplendent and begin to shine from another light within themselves, so the souls that contain the Spirit within them become themselves spiritual, and their brightness shines forth on others.

From this comes knowledge of the future, the understanding of mysteries, the seeing of things hidden, the apportioning of gifts, heavenly association with the angelic choirs, joy without end, abiding with God, being made like to God, and highest of all, that you are made God (partaker of the divine nature, (2 Pet 1:4).  
BASIL<sup>3</sup>

“...that you are made God” is to be understood as ultimate union with our Creator in that we become one with Him but are still what we are—and not God. At the Second Coming of Christ and Judgment, those whose lives on earth showed love and faith will live on in the fullness of the Kingdom (which begins in this life) where they will continue to grow in His image.

If it is true of our experience in this life that holiness is not monotonous but always different, must this not be true also, and to an incomparably higher degree, of the future life? *To him that overcomes will I give...a white stone, and on the stone a new name written, which no man knows except the one who receives it (Rev 2:17).* Even in the age to come, the inner meaning of my unique personhood will continue to be eternally a secret between God and me. In God's Kingdom each is one with all the others, yet each is distinctively himself, bearing the same delineaments as he had in this life, yet with these characteristics healed, renewed and glorified...We move constantly onwards. And it is forward that we go, not back. The Age to come is not simply a return to the beginning, a restoration of the original state of perfection in Paradise, but it is a fresh departure. There is to be a *new* heaven and a *new* earth; and the last things will be greater than the first...*Gregory of Nyssa* believed that even in Heaven perfection is growth. In a fine paradox he says that the essence of perfection consists precisely in never becoming perfect, but in always reaching forward to some higher perfection that lies beyond. Because God is infinite, this constant “reaching forward” or *epektasis*, as the Greek Fathers termed it, proves limitless. The soul possesses God, and yet still seeks Him; her joy is full, and yet grows always more intense. God grows ever nearer to us, yet He still remains the Other; we behold Him face to face, yet we still continue to advance further and further into the divine mystery. Although strangers no longer, we do not cease to be pilgrims. We go forward *from glory to glory* (2 Cor 3: 18), and then to

a glory that is greater still. Never in all eternity, shall we reach a point where we have accomplished all that there is to do, or discovered all that there is to know.<sup>4</sup>

**2:14. *But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*** A person who is led to the road to the Kingdom through the Sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation, then begins spiritual growth by receiving regular spiritual nourishment as he is able (Eucharist, Scripture reading, prayer, fasting, etc.), and tries concurrently to become Christ-like as a result of love and faith, sincerely repenting when he falls short, will begin to understand spiritual things. The Holy Spirit will remain active and growing in influence within him. But this is not automatic. The person who never begins—or at a point ceases—upward movement toward God remains a natural man, a man of the world, with no capacity to understand spiritual things.

...when the upward movement toward God—which is activated by repentance—ceases, it reveals the insensitivity of a hardened heart. This is the chief symptom of spiritual death. It is at this point that there is no spiritual life. Death reigns. Truly, sin deadens the life of the spirit. That is why St. John of the Ladder says that repentance is a renewal of our Baptism, a new birth, that is, a new resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

The Holy Spirit received through Baptism and Chrismation does not depart in the absence of spiritual striving, but neither does He force Himself upon anyone. With the great gift of free will God has given man, each of us have the privilege and the power to cooperate with, or to refuse to cooperate with the Spirit of God. Indifference is the same as refusal (Mt 12:30).

However careless and indifferent the baptized may be in their subsequent life, this indwelling presence of the Spirit is never totally withdrawn. But unless we cooperate with God's grace—unless, through the exercise of our free will, we struggle to perform the commandments—it is likely that the Spirit's presence within us will remain hidden and unconscious. As pilgrims on the Way, then, it is our purpose to advance from the stage where the grace of the Spirit is present and active within us in a hidden way, to the point of conscious awareness, when we know the Spirit's power openly, directly, with the full perception of our heart. *I am come to cast fire on the earth, Christ said, and how I wish it were already kindled!* (Lk 12:49). The Pentecostal spark of the Spirit, existing in each one of us from Baptism, is to be kindled into a living flame. We are to become what we are.<sup>6</sup>

Some Church Fathers have taught, however, that under instances of grave sin, the Holy Spirit *may* depart.

For now oftentimes the abundant grace of the Holy Ghost flies away when men commit great sins; and even when the Spirit does not leave them, vitality leaves the body. CHRYSTOSTOM<sup>7</sup>

When a man falls from the Spirit for any wickedness, if he repents, the grace remains irrevocably; otherwise he who has fallen is no longer in God (because that Holy Spirit and Paraclete which is in God has deserted him), but the sinner shall be in him to whom he has subjected himself, as took place in Saul's instance; for the Spirit of God departed from him and an evil spirit was afflicting him (1Sam16:14). ATHANASIUS<sup>8</sup>

**2:15-16. *But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For "who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*** As man progresses spiritually, God gives him the gift of discernment (1Cor 12:4-11). This gift enables him to correctly evaluate the things of the world because he sees them as Christ did. The worldly man, however, has no means by which to judge the spiritual man and cannot correctly evaluate

the things of the world. One must be growing *in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ* (2 Peter 3:18) to truly understand life's purpose.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:** (e) What is life's purpose? (Read Acts 17:26-27.)

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

**(a). What fears does a modern Christian face? Using Paul as an example, how can we best deal with these fears?** Most people fear the unknown: those things that might unexpectedly present themselves, like difficulties, illness, pain, death. It is easy also, in this world, to fear being seen as different from those around us. People of all ages seek comfort in numbers and often succumb to peer pressure to conform to the norms of the world rather than to the Christ-like lifestyle to which we are called. If we learn to turn to God with these fears, He will comfort us (Ps 34:4) and help us to understand that if we put our trust in Him and His promises we will live with Him eternally in a place where there will be nothing to fear. Those who press on in every circumstance, even though they may be trembling inside, demonstrate the power that comes from God.

**(b). What is the significance of putting our faith in “the power of God” rather than in the “wisdom of men” (2:5)?** The only real and enduring power in this world comes from making God's truths the center and backbone of our existence because when we do so, He responds with His grace.

**(c). What were the specifics of the first prophecy (Gen 3:15)?** Speaking to the Devil in the serpent, God foretold that Satan and his seed (his followers) and the Woman (the Theotokos) and her seed (Jesus Christ and His followers) would be enemies. The Devil would wage war against Jesus to try to prevent Him from fulfilling His mission to save mankind but would succeed only in slowing Him down through Crucifixion (the bruise to the heel, which is annoying but not life-threatening). Jesus would win with a devastating blow to the head of Satan (with His Resurrection, which trampled down death, wresting the adversary's original victory from him).

This prophecy also speaks to the existence of evil in a world created by God. God created everything, visible and invisible, and everything He created was “good” (Gen 1:31). He also decreed that which is necessary to maintain that state of goodness. Evil comes about when and to the degree that the gift of free will is used to ignore, thwart, or flout (scornfully disobey) those decrees.

God also continually works toward turning everything back to “good,” as in using the death of Christ (a consequence of sin, brought about by Satan's influence) to return eternal life to man.

Satan does just the opposite. He uses that which was created good to bring about evil, as he did in tempting man to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The fruit of that tree was good—evil came about when man disobeyed God's decree by eating it.

**(d). What does Scripture indicate about the conditions that will prevail in Heaven?** Life in God's Eternal Kingdom will consist of:

Fellowship with Christ (1 Cor 13:12, 1 Jn 3:2, Jn 14:3, Rev 22:4).

Rest (Rev 14:13).

Holiness (Rev 21:27).

Joy (Rev 21:4).

Service (Rev 22:3).

Abundance (Rev 21:6).

Glory (II Cor 4:17, Col 3:4).

Worship—Rev 5:13, 19:1

Community of Saints (Rev 7:9-17).

**(e). What is life's purpose?** Life on earth affords each of us the opportunity to return to the assurance of union with God, in His eternal Kingdom. This is possible only through the Holy Spirit (Acts 17:26-27).

The true purpose of the Christian life is that we receive the Holy Spirit as our own, which in turn divinizes our existence.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Schaff, "Homily VI," Vol. XII, p.30.

<sup>2</sup> Archimandrite Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature*, p.29.

<sup>3</sup> Toal, Vol. Three, p.8-10.

<sup>4</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 137-8.

<sup>5</sup> Stavropoulos, p.52.

<sup>6</sup> Ware, *Way*, p.133.

<sup>7</sup> Schaff, "Homily XLI," p.252.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace, ed., "*Discourse III Against the Arians*," NPNF, Vol. IV, p.407.

<sup>9</sup> Stavropoulos, p.33.