

# Day of Salvation

## 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As usual, I totally misunderstood this scripture when asked about the sermon title for today – reading the first two verses led in a different direction from which I initially thought. One of the built-in hazards of using a lectionary is the temptation to treat Scripture as a collection of self-enclosed modules, each of which can be read, understood, interpreted, and proclaimed as though it stood alone. This passage is a prime example of the necessity to look beyond the specific reading to see it in its proper literary and theological context. As I studied I realized that we must back up to the previous chapter. The primary clue is the word "ambassadors" in 5:20, which introduces a chain of diplomatic metaphors that extends to the conclusion of our passage in 6:13. 5:20 introduces Paul's climactic appeal to the Corinthian church after having described in detail the "message of reconciliation" (5:19) in the preceding chapters. That message is concentrated in a pithy summary in the verse that immediately precedes our passage: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (5:21).

Our reading opens with the appeal that follows from this message: God's ambassadors, having delivered their communiqué, now make their entreaty on behalf of their sovereign Lord. Following upon Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, the apostles are bringing that message of grace to the Corinthians by means of a direct appeal—like the appeal brought by an envoy on behalf of his king—not to receive it "in vain." In other words, Paul was begging them not to respond in such a way that God's grace in Christ would have no meaningful effect on them.

Paul introduced his main point by citing Isaiah 49:8 in the exact language of the Septuagint, which begins, "At a favorable time" or at the appointed time for God's purpose; see, *now* is the day of salvation!" (6:2b). God's time is now—in the atoning death of Jesus and in the apostolic proclamation of the gospel. God's *now*, takes place at the intersection of two worlds, two realities. These worlds are discontinuous and incommensurable, yet they meet in the event of the cross. All of Paul's familiar dualities presuppose this central truth: old creation/new creation, first Adam/last Adam, "according to the flesh" (*kata sarka*) "according to the Spirit" (*kata pneuma*), sin/righteousness. That is the meaning of the apocalypse that he has just proclaimed to the Corinthians: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (5:17, RSV). The church lives at the intersection of two realities, and whenever the gospel is preached and heard, that is the *now* of God's salvation, foretold by the prophets and proclaimed by the apostles. The free grace of God in Christ Jesus may bring our day of salvation at any point in "chronological" time.

In 6:3-10 Paul gave his resume, as God's emissary, having delivered the message and made his appeal, he presented his credentials. Paul defended his apostolic vocation and message from those who had called them into question. In essence, Paul was writing his own letter of recommendation to a church he planted, loved, and felt betrayed by. The issue concerned Paul's own apostolic credentials. He opened (vv. 3-4a) by saying that the apostles "commend" or "recommend" themselves, and proceeds to unroll a catalog of specifics, arranged in four groups. The first (vv. 4b-5) stresses endurance in the face of hardships;

**2 Corinthians 4:8-9 (NRSV)**

<sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

<sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

**2 Corinthians 11:22-30 (NRSV)**

<sup>22</sup> Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.

<sup>23</sup> Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death.

<sup>24</sup> Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

<sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea;

<sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters;

<sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

<sup>28</sup> And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.

<sup>29</sup> Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?

<sup>30</sup> If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

The second (vv. 6-7a) lists eight qualities or gifts of apostolic ministry; the third (vv. 7b-8a) is harder to categorize. The fourth and final group (vv. 8b-10), composed of seven pairs of contrasting terms, showing the radical difference between the old aeon and the new: from the false perspective of this world, the apostles appeared as impostors and nobodies who were dying, punished, sorrowful, poor, and possessed nothing; but the apocalyptic light of the gospel revealed them in fact to be truthful and well-known, ones who were living, rejoicing, bestowing riches, and possessing everything.

In the final verses of our passage (vv. 11-13), Paul appealed directly and intimately to the Corinthians—addressing them by name and calling them his

"children"—pleading with them to open their hearts to the gospel and be reconciled to God. **Garrett Green**

So, what do we learn from this passage? The Christian community in Corinth appears to have bickered over almost everything. Paul's letters to the Corinthians portray a congregation whose members were far more interested in the pursuit of personal spiritual "knowledge" than the greater good of the community. Paul may have defused a crisis in the Corinthian church through his "severe letter," but it remained a community that was divided, distracted, and self-preoccupied, reconciled with neither God nor one another.

In the midst of this narcissism, competition, and conflict, Paul proclaimed that far more was at stake than the "spirituality of the week." The radical new way of life offered in the gospel of Christ, he insisted, demanded total allegiance, even if the cost of that allegiance was the kind of suffering he himself had willingly endured: "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments" (vv. 4-5).

Paul's pastoral message to the self-preoccupied Corinthian congregation was, in effect, "Get over yourselves!" In Christ we are a new creation, a new community: the former things, including competitive social hierarchies, have passed away. The message of the good news is that each person has been declared infinitely precious in God's eyes; that a life's value and worth grow not from the status attained through wealth or position in the community but from being one for whom our Redeemer died upon the cross; and that true joy grows not from the absence of hardship but from knowing God's grace even within that hardship.

Christian community is not formed or maintained through holding tastes and interests in common, and authority within Christian community is not to be confused with popularity. Paul sought to make of the Corinthian church a community defined by mutual charity rather than by competition for spiritual "knowledge," and he demonstrated a model of authority based not upon superior

personal wisdom, but rather upon willingness to surrender comfort, safety, and personal ego in service to the gospel. Paul, however imperfectly, sought to embody "servant leadership." Servant leadership does not claim personal power, but rather seeks to give itself away in Christian love for others. It does not employ threats or manipulation, but only the proper tools of charity: "patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. (v. 6)" We build a genuine Christian community, fully reconciled with God and with one another by loving that community unconditionally with a love that will risk speaking the unpopular truth that the community needs to hear. **John T. Mcfadden**

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