

## 2 Corinthians 8. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 24 June 2015.

As you know, our reading for this evening consists of the eighth chapter of 2 Corinthians ...

Now we make known to you, brethren, the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that, in a great trial of affliction, the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty have abounded in the riches of their generosity.<sup>1</sup>

For I bear witness that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they were willing of their own accord, begging us with many appeals for the favour of sharing in the ministry to the saints – and this, not as we hoped, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by the will of God.

In view of that, we appealed to Titus that, just as he had previously begun, so he would also complete among you this work of grace.

But as you abound in everything – in faith, and word, and knowledge, and in all earnestness,<sup>2</sup> and in your love for us – see that you abound in this work of grace also.

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others the genuineness of your love.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, in order that you by His poverty might become rich.

And in this I give my advice: for this is beneficial for you, who last year not only began to do this work but also to desire to do it. But now complete the doing also; that, as there was the readiness to desire, so there may be the completion out of what you have.

For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what someone has, not according to what he does not have.

For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but by way of equality, that at the present time your abundance may supply their need, that their abundance may supply your need, that there should be equality. As it is written, 'He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack'.

But thanks be to God,<sup>3</sup> who puts the same earnest care for you in the heart of Titus. For he has not only accepted my appeal, but being himself very earnest he is coming to you of his own accord.<sup>4</sup>

And with him<sup>5</sup> we are sending<sup>6</sup> the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches. And not only that, but who was also appointed<sup>7</sup> by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this work of grace,<sup>8</sup> which is ministered by us for the glory of the Lord Himself and to show our readiness to help.

We take this course to avoid anyone blaming us in connection with this liberal gift which is ministered by us. For we plan to do that which is honourable not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.

And with them we are sending<sup>9</sup> our brother whom we have often proved to be earnest in many ways, but who is now the more earnest because of his great confidence in you.

As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker on your behalf; and as for our brethren, they are messengers<sup>10</sup> of the churches, the glory of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Show therefore to them, before the churches, the proof<sup>12</sup> of your love, and of our boasting about you.

In the time available, I want us to concentrate this evening on the opening section of the chapter – down to verse 9 or so. But before we do even that, you will need a few words of introduction.

Probably one of the first things to strike the reader of 2 Corinthians is the relatively large amount of space devoted to the subject of the gift<sup>13</sup> for the poor saints at Jerusalem. On the face of it, it is amazing that such a seemingly mundane subject should occupy all of two whole chapters, well over one seventh of the apostle's letter.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, if we add in other references to the offering – one verse from Acts 24,<sup>15</sup> four verses from 1 Corinthians 16<sup>16</sup> and seven verses from Romans 15,<sup>17</sup> we shall find that this topic occupies over 50 verses in our New Testament.

And we know that the apostle expended considerable time and effort on the project during his third – and last – recorded missionary journey. Although the collection is not mentioned explicitly in Luke's account of that journey, it is clear from the letters which Paul wrote during that period that it always lay in the background – to eventually

surface in Acts 24, when Paul explained to Felix, the then Roman Governor, that ‘after several years I came (to Jerusalem, that is) to bring alms to my nation’.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, it is hard to imagine any project ever occupying more of Paul’s time and attention than did this collection for the poor believers at Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup>

And his action appears all the more surprising because it ran counter to the practice of the other apostles. We read that, when a matter of financial support for certain widows in the church surfaced at Jerusalem, the apostles refused to get involved personally, and delegated the task to the so-called seven deacons who they appointed.<sup>20</sup>

And it is clear that the Jerusalem apostles continued to operate in the same way, because in Acts 11, when the need for relief in Judea was triggered by the prophecy of Agabus following the great famine in the days of the Emperor Claudius, and when the church at Antioch sent a monetary gift by the hand of Paul and Barnabas, who, we read, delivered it – not to the apostles – but to the elders at Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup>

And yet is obvious that the apostle Paul attached so much importance to his fund-raising project that he threw himself, heart and soul, into personally inspiring, organising, promoting and even conveying the collection. And, what is more, in one of his letters, he made it clear that he was willing to risk life itself to deliver the gift to Jerusalem, asking prayer for himself that he might be ‘delivered from’ the unbelieving Jews there.<sup>22</sup> Nor, as events proved, were his fears groundless.<sup>23</sup>

As I see it, the reason that Paul gave such high priority to the gift for the believers at Jerusalem was that he regarded it in at least four different ways.

First – and most obviously – it represented an act of Christian charity ... a case, as he wrote a little while later, of ‘contributing (‘of distributing’) to the needs of the saints’.<sup>24</sup>

Second, to Paul, it represented the fulfilment of an undertaking he had once given to the three most prominent Jerusalem apostles – that he would, and I quote, ‘remember the poor’, which, as he had said at the time, he ‘was eager to do’.<sup>25</sup>

Third, he saw the gift as a part-payment of a debt which the Gentile Christians owed to the Jewish Christians. For, in that they, the Gentiles, had received a share in the spiritual blessings of the gospel through the early Jewish Christians at Jerusalem, it was only right that they paid off at least some of their debt in the form of material blessings.<sup>26</sup>

But in Paul’s eyes there was still more to the collection than these three strands.

For, fourthly – and most importantly – he viewed it as a tangible expression of the bond of fellowship<sup>27</sup> which existed between the Gentile and the Jewish believers – serving to unite together in practice the mainly Jewish church at Jerusalem with the mainly Gentile churches outside of Judea, demonstrating that there was in truth ‘one body’,<sup>28</sup> composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

And finally by way of introduction, we should note that, although in one sense dealing with an entirely fresh topic, our chapter does link directly to the closing section of chapter 7.<sup>29</sup> You may remember that there Paul had told the Corinthians of how he had earlier boasted of them to Titus, voicing his confidence that, whatever their shortcomings, the Corinthians would come through alright in the end. And he had been proved right, and therefore, as he said, had been saved from any embarrassment.<sup>30</sup> And in the very closing verse of that chapter the apostle had expressed his joy that he now had complete confidence in them.<sup>31</sup>

Ah but ... he had also boasted to Titus and to the other two gift-custodians about the Corinthians’ eagerness to have a part in his fund-raising project.<sup>32</sup> And, as we will discover in two weeks’ time, God willing, even more potentially embarrassing, he had also boasted of their generosity to the churches in Macedonia,<sup>33</sup> from where he was now writing.

And so he devotes both our chapter and that following to motivating the Corinthians to vindicate his stated confidence in them. As one of the so-called Early Church Fathers<sup>34</sup> once put it: ‘He purposes to discourse of alms-giving; wherefore he says beforehand, “I rejoice that in everything I am of good courage concerning you” ... making them the more ready to this duty also’.<sup>35</sup>

And so, to our passage.

Before confronting the Corinthians directly with his appeal for money,<sup>36</sup> Paul draws attention to the example set by ‘the churches of Macedonia’ (notably the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea), and in particular to the extremely *grave circumstances* they faced, and to the extremely *generous contribution* they made.

From the apostle's description of them, it seems that *nothing* about these churches was small! Their trial of affliction was *great* ... their joy was *abundant* ('overflowing')... their poverty was abysmally *deep* (the word 'deep' indicating, literally, 'down to the depths' – 'down to the abyss') ... and their generosity<sup>37</sup> was *extravagantly rich*.<sup>38</sup>

That they gave liberally out of their poverty reminds me of the curious translation in the Greek Old Testament of a verse in the First Book of Chronicles. The context (in chapter 22) is concerned with King David's advance preparation for the building of Israel's first Temple by his son Solomon – and verse 14 reads properly 'in my affliction' (meaning 'with great pains' or 'with great effort'), I have prepared for the house of the Lord a hundred thousand talents of gold, and a million talents of silver'. But for some inexplicable reason the Greek translation of the Old Testament renders this, 'I *according to my poverty* have prepared for the house of the Lord a hundred thousand talents of gold, and a million talents of silver'<sup>39</sup> And it's difficult not to smile when you realise that that quantity of gold alone would be worth well over £90 billion at today's prices!<sup>40</sup> Now *that* would be some poverty!

But, alas for the Macedonians, there is no such mistranslation in 2 Corinthians 8. The poverty of the Macedonian believers was real, and it was abject.<sup>41</sup> And it seems likely that their severe poverty resulted from their 'affliction' (a word which carries the idea of pressure, and which probably points to their persecution at the hands of their own countrymen<sup>42</sup>).

And it is simply astonishing that the welling up of their joy, combined with their abject poverty, flowed out in a wealth of generosity. Clearly these remarkable people were not going to allow their appalling circumstances either to *repress* their joy or to *restrain* their giving. It seems rather that, far from suppressing their liberality, their suffering and deprivation actually encouraged it.

That desperate poverty should encourage generosity certainly appears something of a paradox, but, in this case at least, those who had experienced hardship and rock-bottom destitution themselves were far more ready to share what very little they had with those who had even less than were those who lived in relative luxury.<sup>43</sup> Ouch!

But there is more. For these splendid Macedonian Christians gave, Paul testifies (and we remember that, writing from Macedonia, he witnessed first-hand what had taken place there) ... he testifies that they gave, not only '*according to their ability*', but '*beyond their ability*' – 'beyond their means', that is.<sup>44</sup> One Roman historian, who wrote over 60 years before Paul did,<sup>45</sup> noted that the 'poor, out of fear of being despised, tend to extend themselves beyond their means'.<sup>46</sup> But it was not 'fear of being despised' which prompted the churches of Macedonia to part with their meagre resources – it was 'the grace of God' which they had experienced.<sup>47</sup> It is certainly true that some people are determined 'to live' beyond their means; but Paul was prepared to vouch for the fact that the Macedonian believers were determined, not to *live* beyond their means, but to '*give*' beyond their means!<sup>48</sup> To give, that is, unstintingly out of their very limited resources, and not out of some funds they happened to have spare! Ouch again.

But there is more. That which they gave was not only more than they could *afford*; it was given, Paul insists, 'of their own *accord*'.<sup>49</sup> He didn't have to twist anyone's arm. The Macedonians did not wait to be asked, prodded or shamed into giving. Their contribution to the fund was entirely voluntary and spontaneous.

But there is more again. For, far from waiting to be asked to give, on the contrary, they did all the asking! They actually begged Paul to give them the opportunity to give to the collection. Determined to overcome any reluctance on Paul's part to accept money from them in their poverty-stricken state, they implored him<sup>50</sup> that he would grant them 'the favour' – the privilege (literally the 'grace'<sup>51</sup>) – of having a share in ministering to the poor saints at Jerusalem.<sup>52</sup>

We normally think of the fundraiser as 'begging' any potential donors for a contribution. But here it is the donors, who could ill afford it (to say the least), who 'begged' the fund-raiser for the privilege of contributing – and that handsomely!

But, believe it or not, there is still more. For if the *contribution* of the Macedonians far exceeded the apostle's expectation, the *motivation* of the Macedonians far exceeded the apostle's hope. For they didn't only give *of their substance*, but, as he says, 'they gave *themselves* first (above everything else, that is) to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God'. By which, Paul means that they had placed themselves utterly at the Lord's disposal, and then at His servant's.

R. C. Chapman of Barnstaple – a close friend of George Müller – was once asked, "Would you not advise young Christians to do something for the Lord?" "No," was the reply, "I should advise them to do *everything* for the Lord".<sup>53</sup> And the Macedonian Christians were made of just that stuff.

And here we discover the secret of their extravagant generosity; that, having once laid '*everything*' on the altar for the Lord, they were more than ready to part with *some* of their scanty earthly possessions. They found it easy, Paul is implying, to yield up *some things* willingly, for the simple reason that they had first yielded up *everything*,

and therefore no longer regarded their goods as their own.<sup>54</sup> As a result of which, they looked for opportunities to give, rather than excuses *not to*.

In other words, the Macedonians' lavish giving was simply the outward expression of their inward devotion. For once the heart was surrendered, the hand (and, dare I say, wallet!) was opened.

They lived on a different planet to the hypocrites of whom we heard on Sunday morning, who gave their alms – who gave to the poor and needy – to secure for themselves the praise of men.<sup>55</sup> The noble Macedonians sought no commendation from man. They gave on account of genuine submission to the Lord and to his servant, and not because they were looking over their shoulders to see who was watching.

I don't know how the Corinthians felt when *they* first read what the apostle had said about the Macedonians' 'sacrificial giving', but I can tell you – before God – that it makes *me* feel terribly small. And, frankly, my own very comfortable circumstances make me feel all the more uncomfortable when reading about it!

And it is at this point (verse 6), that Paul turns to speak directly to the Corinthians. In view, he says, of the generous gift given by the Macedonian churches, he had encouraged Titus, the brother who had earlier initiated the collection project at Corinth, now to bring that project to a successful conclusion<sup>56</sup> by spurring them on to finalize their contribution for the poor saints at Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup>

I have read that the people of ancient Miletus once gave an award to a benefactor of a pagan temple that thereby they might stimulate others to do the same.<sup>58</sup> And in our passage the apostle is employing much the same tactic. And what was implicit in verse 6 is now made explicit in verse 7 – namely, that, 'in view of' the generosity of the Macedonian churches, the apostle now exhorts the Corinthians to follow suit by contributing generously to this gracious ministry.

It has been well said that Paul 'commends the Macedonians, but it is with the design of stimulating the Corinthians by their example ... for the former had no need of commendation, but the latter had need of a stimulus'.<sup>59</sup>

Early in his *first* epistle, the apostle had acknowledged with gratitude to God that in the Corinthian church, as those who had been enriched in the Lord Jesus, there was no shortage of spiritual gifts.<sup>60</sup>

But now he pleads that they excel in gracious service – in generosity – just as they already excelled in those spiritual gifts. For there was the real danger, as Paul saw it, that the Corinthians would concentrate exclusively on activities which were local and which centred on themselves (in particular on miracle-working faith, charismatic speech, and theological understanding), and would play down any practical activity which was directed at meeting the needs of others, in this case, the needs of the poor saints of Jerusalem.

'That you abound (that you overflow) in this work of grace also', he says. And I think we can assume that the church at Corinth included some fairly wealthy members<sup>61</sup> and therefore had sufficient resources to make a substantial contribution to the collection.

At the close of the opening chapter of *this* epistle, Paul had made it clear that he wrote then, not as one who lorded it over them and their faith, but as one who worked alongside them.<sup>62</sup> And now, in the context of soliciting financial help for others, he again makes it clear that he isn't in the business of issuing commands,<sup>63</sup> but that, rather, he is exploiting the diligent concern and liberality of the Macedonians to test the reality and genuineness of the Corinthians' love – in all probability, their love to the Lord, to him, and to the poor.<sup>64</sup>

The 'For' with which Paul begins verse 9 underscores why it was altogether unnecessary for him to demand that the Corinthians gave.

In our opening verse, he had *told* them of that which he wanted them to '*know*'. But now he directs their attention to that which they do *not* need to be told – to that which they *already* '*know*' – 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

They may not have heard before of the impressive example set by the Macedonians, but they had certainly heard of an example which wholly overshadowed even that – of the supreme (the all-surpassing) example of giving, and of sacrifice – namely, that of our Lord's self-improvement for the enrichment of others. Who needs, Paul is asking in effect, a command in the light of such a model of sacrificial giving?

And, whereas, in the case of the Macedonians, Paul had spoken of 'the grace' shown *towards* them, in the case of the Lord Jesus, he speaks of 'the grace' shown *by* Him. That is, whereas the Macedonians had *received* grace, He had *demonstrated* grace.<sup>65</sup>

They, the Macedonians, who had been extremely poor, gave *some* of their few possessions that they might cause those who were even poorer than themselves to become less poor. But, in contrast, He, the Lord Jesus, who had

been immeasurably rich, gave *all* of His vast – of His fabulous – wealth that He might cause those who were utterly bankrupt to become immensely rich.

And His ‘grace’ (His favour shown to the undeserving) is measured by Paul in terms of what He (the Lord Jesus) was before He came into the world and of what He became when He did.

He was, Paul says, ‘rich’. And who can begin to compute the wealth of divine power and possessions, of divine rank and dignity, of divine bliss and blessedness, which were, rightly and eternally, His?

And yet ‘He became poor’ ... as I understand it, referring not only to the fact of His coming into the world, not only to the comparatively lowly circumstances in which He lived when in the world,<sup>66</sup> not only to the manner in which He suffered and died, but to all of these. That is, His becoming poor embraced every stage from the moment the King of heaven stooped down, divesting Himself of all the insignia of His majesty (of all His celestial riches and glory) right on to the time when He experienced the extreme poverty of His sacrificial death on Calvary’s cross – spanning His incarnation, His life and ministry, and His passion.

His had been the untold wealth ... the indescribable glory ... the lofty throne ... the royal robe ... the worship of the seraphim.

But what, pray, did He do with all of these? Surely we bow in wonder that:

- the One who had all the angels of heaven as His ministers should willingly become dependent upon a small group of women who ministered to Him out of their possessions.<sup>67</sup>
- the One of whom it was said that heaven was His dwelling-place,<sup>68</sup> should gladly accept having nowhere to lay His head on earth.<sup>69</sup>
- the One who claimed all earth’s ‘silver’ and ‘gold’ as His,<sup>70</sup> should have occasion to illustrate one of His messages by referring to a coin supplied by His foes.<sup>71</sup>
- the One who claimed ‘every beast of the forest ... and the cattle on a thousand hills’ as His own,<sup>72</sup> should ‘need’ (His word, not mine) to borrow an ass’s colt on which to ride into Jerusalem.<sup>73</sup>
- that the One who shared His Father’s glory in heaven,<sup>74</sup> should willingly endure the shame<sup>75</sup> – and the ridicule and mockery of men on earth.<sup>76</sup>

But, yes, He exchanged His glory for humiliation; His bliss for suffering; His riches for poverty. And *what* poverty! And I note that the word Paul uses here, translated ‘poor’, differs from that which he uses in verse 9 of the following chapter. There the word ‘poor’ points to poverty in a broad sense – to having few possessions. But the word translated ‘poor’ here is closely related to that used by Jesus in Luke 16 to describe Lazarus, and which is accurately rendered there as the ‘beggar’.<sup>77</sup> That is, Paul is saying, our Lord Jesus became the poorest of the poor ... ending His life in the absolute poverty of death by crucifixion.

As C. H. Spurgeon once expressed it, ‘The difference between the richest and the poorest man is ... nothing compared with the difference between Christ in the glory of His Godhead and Christ in His humiliation. The stoop’, Mr Spurgeon continued, ‘was altogether immeasurable. You cannot describe His riches, and you cannot describe His poverty. You have never had any idea of how high He was as God; and you can never imagine how low He stooped when He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”’<sup>78</sup>

And please note that He ‘*became*’ poor. It was not that He was ‘made’ poor. Although this is the only time that this particular verb is found in the New Testament, it occurs several times in the Greek Old Testament – but only to describe those who were impoverished – either by others,<sup>79</sup> or as a result of their own sin and folly.<sup>80</sup> Only here in the entire Greek Bible is this verb used of poverty which was experienced voluntarily – which was self-inflicted. Paul clearly wants us to grasp that the Lord Jesus *chose* to *renounce* His heavenly glory ... that He *chose* to *relinquish* His inexhaustible riches!

And He did it that we, who were spiritually ‘poor’ and utterly bankrupt before God, might become rich. What a tremendous exchange. The Lord Jesus went, so to speak, from riches to rags that we might go from rags to riches. He became poor that we might become joint-heirs with Him.<sup>81</sup> Wonder of wonders ... in God’s sight, brothers and sisters, we are not only out of debt ... we have inherited a fortune!

Sometime after writing this letter, the apostle spoke of how the Lord Jesus had once said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’.<sup>82</sup> And our passage tells us that, when Paul reported these words to the Ephesian elders, he was fully aware that the Lord Jesus knew far more about the blessedness of giving than did any other! For, loving us with an intensity and passion unmatched by any other, He gave all His riches that He might enrich us.

Mr Frank Houghton served for many years with the former China Inland Mission. When meditating on our text during his travels in 1934 – which was a particularly difficult time for the Mission – he penned a Christmas hymn, which opens with the glorious words:

Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,  
All for love's sake becamest poor.<sup>83</sup>

How very true!

In the following few verses – down to verse 15 – Paul makes two things clear in particular :

First, that God is concerned, not so much with the portion we give, as with the **proportion** we give<sup>84</sup> -- consistent, of course, with what our Lord Himself taught about 'the widow's mite'.<sup>85</sup>

And Paul's second point is that he is not suggesting for one moment that the Corinthians should exchange living standards with the poor saints at Jerusalem – that, as a result of the Corinthians' generous giving, those in Jerusalem should then live in luxury, while they would be reduced to poverty. He had no intention, that is, of relieving one distressful situation by creating another.<sup>86</sup>

His aim, he says, is simply to level things out a bit – seeing to it that those with more than they need give away some of their surplus to those who have less than they need – which was, of course, as he points out, the very principle on which God Himself had worked when supplying the manna for Israel in the Wilderness.<sup>87</sup>

And, indeed, Paul makes it clear that he saw the arrangement as reciprocal – as two-way traffic – that, if ever the shoe was, so to speak, on the other foot, the Christians of Jerusalem would come to the assistance of the Corinthians.

In the remainder of our chapter – from verse 16 onwards – Paul fills in some of the important administrative details about the conveying of the completed collection to Jerusalem.

We know that he was ever sensitive to the charge levelled at him by some at Corinth, that he, having made great play of the fact that he had refused to accept any financial support from them (to which he was entitled as an apostle)<sup>88</sup> ... that he was in fact pocketing money from the relief offering for the Jerusalem believers – enriching himself at the expense of such as the Corinthians – feathering his own nest, so to speak. As we saw two weeks ago, he had hinted at such an accusation at the beginning of the previous chapter,<sup>89</sup> and, God willing, on some later occasion we will discover that he comes back to it in chapter 12.<sup>90</sup>

So, enter 'the dynamic trio'<sup>91</sup> – one (Titus) already well-known to the Corinthians,<sup>92</sup> and two others,<sup>93</sup> both respected and well-accredited brethren, whose names Paul does not give, but who, presumably, would be introduced to the church by Titus when they arrived with him.<sup>94</sup> By associating such men with him when delivering the collection to its advertised recipients, Paul hoped to 'avoid' even the faintest suspicion of dishonesty on his part – even the slightest whiff of corruption.<sup>95</sup>

The apostle concludes our chapter by urging his readers to furnish proof in full view of other churches<sup>96</sup> both of their own Christian love<sup>97</sup> and of the validity of his boasting about them,<sup>98</sup> and to do this through the way they received and treated the dynamic trio.<sup>99</sup>

Ah, but what, we may well ask, was the sequel. Well, it certainly seems from Paul's later letter to the Romans that his appeal to the church at Corinth – Corinth being the capital city in the Roman province of Achaia – didn't fall on deaf ears.<sup>100</sup> Given that his letter to the Romans was almost certainly written from Corinth, all the evidence points to the success of the apostle's appeal.

And from Paul's comment to Governor Felix in Acts 24 about having brought 'alms' to the Jews of Jerusalem, it seems that the completed collection reached its planned destination,<sup>101</sup> and from Luke's report that Paul and his companions had been warmly welcomed by the believers at Jerusalem<sup>102</sup> it seems that the completed collection proved 'acceptable to the saints'.<sup>103</sup>

So much for our chapter. But do you not get the feeling that the Lord may be trying to tell us something this evening?

I have read that Martin Luther once said, 'There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, the mind and the purse'.<sup>104</sup> Of these three, it may well be that we today find the conversion of the purse the most difficult.<sup>105</sup>

My problem is not in understanding what the Lord says about my stewardship of money. My problem is not putting into practice what I know He says.

Let's be frank ... many – if not all – of us enjoy plenty, while many other Christians in our world are in dire need.

I don't find this easy, but I have to say it ... if we go out this evening without a determination to provide more help and support, one way or another, to our poorer brethren and sisters – or at the very least to maintain our support – then we might as well have stayed at home!

And I confess to you that I have my quiver filled with excuses for ignoring the plight of my poorer (even destitute) brethren and sisters in lands such as Syria, Iraq, Nepal, Africa and India. But, alas for me, in our chapter, the Lord has directly addressed some at least of these excuses – and has done a great job of pulling the rug out from under my feet.

And, bearing in mind the latter part of our chapter, if I should have doubts as to whether any support I might give will ever reach its intended destination, I have only to remind myself of such marvellous Christian organisations as Echoes of Service, Barnabas Fund, Medical Missionary News, The Lord's Work Trust, Open Doors and Vision Beyond Borders – and I name only those I know.

Oh ... perhaps I should have warned you at the outset: reading our chapter can seriously damage your wwealth!

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Luke 12. 33. God wants me to be generous with my money - not that the church might become rich, and certainly not that God might become rich, but that I might become rich!

<sup>2</sup> *Spoudē* (earnestness, zeal). This term appears five times in 2 Corinthians (7. 11, 12; 8. 7, 8, 16) and only twice in the rest of Paul's correspondence (Rom. 12. 8, 11). It occurs in only five other places in the entire New Testament.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rom. 7. 25; 1 Cor. 15. 57; 2 Cor. 2. 14; 9. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Although he made the request, the apostle found that it was unnecessary; far from declining or grudgingly accepting the assignment, Titus jumped at the opportunity to go. A. Plummer renders this, 'Secondly, *in his characteristic earnestness*, of his own accord he is going forth to you', International Critical Commentary on 2 Corinthians 8. 17 – treating the adjective as referring to a well-known quality or trait.

<sup>5</sup> Paul provides the commendation of the two brethren who would later accompany him and Titus to Jerusalem. The one was well known among the churches, presumably as a preacher of the gospel [out of the five other Pauline examples of ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ, four (Rom. 1. 9; 1 Cor. 9. 18; 2 Cor. 10. 14; 1 Thess. 3. 2) have this reference], and had been specifically chosen and appointed by a group of churches (presumably the contributing churches) to be involved in delivering the gift. The other appears to be an associate of Paul's, thoroughly tested and proved diligent on many occasions and in many ways, but sent also because of his confidence in the Corinthians, although similarly acting on behalf of the contributing churches.

<sup>6</sup> 'We are sending', is what is known as an epistolary aorist, i.e. a verb whose action will be past when the readers receive the letter. Therefore I render with the present sense.

<sup>7</sup> The verb may suggest 'by a show of raised hands'. But this is by no means certain. It may signify no more than appointing for a definite office or task. It occurs else only in Acts 14. 23.

<sup>8</sup> When the collection was finally taken to Jerusalem, at least seven envoys from various churches accompanied Paul and the money, Acts 20. 3-5.

<sup>9</sup> See note 6.

<sup>10</sup> The two other men are described as the agents, envoys, delegates, emissaries of the churches. The word translated 'messengers' (ἀπόστολοι) is that normally translated as 'apostle' in the New Testament. The term means an envoy, and a distinction needs to be made between those who were apostles of Christ (the Twelve and Paul; see, for example, 'an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God', 2 Cor. 1. 1; cf. Gal. 1. 1) and those who were apostles of local churches, sent to represent them for a specific purpose, as the two brethren here.

In Philippians 2. 25 Epaphroditus is referred to as ὑμῶν ... ἀπόστολον. It is clear that this should be translated 'your messenger' – that Epaphroditus was an authorised agent of the Philippians, sent to minister to and to help Paul.

'The simplest explanation of the word in the present context is that it derives from the occasional ... use of ἀπόστολος in Greek sources in the sense "emissary"', Margaret Thrall, International Critical Commentary on 2 Corinthians, volume 2, page 29.

<sup>11</sup> 'It is ... likely that the sense of the phrase δόξα Χριστοῦ is "promoting the glory of Christ". That Paul could sometimes use δόξα followed by a genitive in the sense "promote the glory of" is shown in 1 Thess. 2. 20: ὑμεῖς γὰρ ἐστε ἡ δόξα ἡμῶν' Margaret Thrall, *ibid.*, page 29.

<sup>12</sup> There is here a play on words – 'show' is ἐνδειξίην and 'proof' is ἐνδειξασθε. This could be conveyed by translating, 'Display therefore to them, before the churches, the display of your love'.

<sup>13</sup> While the project is often simply termed 'the collection', several phrases are used to refer to it. For example, Paul uses the term 'service' (*diakonia*) (Rom 15. 25, 31; 2 Cor. 8. 20; 9. 1, 12, 13), 'gift' (*charis*) (1 Cor. 16. 3; 2 Cor. 8. 6, 7, 19), and "fellowship" (*koinōnia*) (Rom. 15. 26)..

<sup>14</sup> That is, 39 of 257 verses.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 24. 1.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor. 16. 1-4.

<sup>17</sup> Rom. 15. 25-31.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 24. 17. This reference may well explain the subsequent action of Felix; keeping Paul in custody, hoping that money would be given to him by Paul, Acts 24. 26.

<sup>19</sup> It appears that Paul was able to obtain funds and support from many Gentile churches – from the Galatian region (1 Cor. 16. 1) we hear of Derbe (Acts 20. 4) and Lystra (Acts 20. 4); from Macedonia (2 Cor. 8. 1-5; 9. 2, 4) we hear of Berea (Acts 20. 4), Thessalonica (Acts 20. 4) and Philippi (cf. Acts 16. 16 and 20. 6; an inference from the 'we' sections of Acts); from Achaia we hear of Corinth (Rom. 15. 26; 1 Cor. 16. 1-4); and from Mysia and Lydia we hear of Ephesus (Acts 20:4) and possibly Troas (Acts 20. 5-6).

<sup>20</sup> Acts 6. 1-4.

<sup>21</sup> Acts 11. 28-30.

<sup>22</sup> Rom. 15. 30-31. The apostle was rather apprehensive about the reaction of the saints at Jerusalem to the Gentile gift. We need to remember that the expression 'taking nothing of the Gentiles', 3 John 7, was still in use. Whereas in 3 John this clearly referred to unbelievers (cf. Matt. 5. 47; 6. 7, 32), its background may well have still been very real to many early Jewish Christians. Clearly there was significant poverty in the Jerusalem church. No doubt there were various reasons for this. The growth in numbers there would have increased the number of dependants, such as widows; its financial situation may well have been weakened to some extent by the initial



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sharing of resources (Acts 2. 42–47; 4. 32–37; 5. 1–11), since this had led to the disposal of capital assets; economic hardships caused by famine (cf. Acts 11. 27–30); and stresses due to persecution. Whatever the underlying reasons, one thing was sure: the church in Jerusalem were poor and in need of relief. Beyond question, there were very poor members materially amongst the Jerusalem Christians.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 21. 27–31.

<sup>24</sup> Rom. 12. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Gal. 2. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Rom. 15. 27.

<sup>27</sup> This important aspect of the collection is reflected in his use of the word ‘fellowship’ (*koinōnia*) to refer to the collection.

<sup>28</sup> Eph. 2. 16; 4. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Paul praises the earnestness of the Macedonians’ contributions in 2 Cor. 8: 2–5, just as he had noted the earnestness of the Corinthians in 2 Cor. 7. 12. His introduction of Titus in 2 Cor. 8. 16–17 had been anticipated by his remarks about Titus’s affection for the Corinthians (2 Cor. 7. 6–7, 13, 15).

<sup>30</sup> 2 Cor. 7. 14.

<sup>31</sup> 2 Cor. 7. 16 (*‘in everything I am confident in you’*, literally). Of the six times that the word translated ‘confidence’ occurs in the New Testament (2 Cor. 5. 6, 8; 7. 16; 10. 1–2; Heb. 13. 6), no less than five are in 2 Corinthians.

<sup>32</sup> 2 Cor. 8. 24.

<sup>33</sup> 2 Cor. 9. 2–4.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/chrysostom>

<sup>35</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Second Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, Homily XVI: Chap. viii. ver. 1. Accessible at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf112.v.xvi.html>.

<sup>36</sup> 2 Cor. 8. 6–7, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Translating a word signifying, ‘sincere, single-minded concern, with no hidden motive’; as in 2 Cor. 1. 12; 9. 11, 13; 11. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Compare 2 Cor. 11. 9 for the Macedonian generosity shown to him personally.

<sup>39</sup> So too does the Latin Vulgate: [http://vulgate.org/ot/1chronicles\\_22.htm](http://vulgate.org/ot/1chronicles_22.htm)

<sup>40</sup> The calculation is (i) 100,000 talents of gold = 300,000,000 shekels (<http://biblehub.com/weights-and-measures/#weights>); (ii) which equals 120,600,000 ounces (<http://www.unitconversion.org/weight/ounces-to-shekels-biblical-hebrew-conversion.html>); and (iii), as of 20 June 2015: (assuming Troy ounces), this would cost £91,217,000,000 (<http://www.gold-traders.co.uk/calculator/valuation.asp>).

<sup>41</sup> It is hardly surprising therefore that we find no warnings in the letter to the Philippians or in either letter to the Thessalonians against wealth.

<sup>42</sup> 1 Thess. 2. 14; Phil. 1. 28–30.

<sup>43</sup> 1 Cor. 4. 8. Even allowing for a little irony. Doubtless, those who are themselves poor are better able to understand and sympathise with others in a similar situation.

<sup>44</sup> I understand that the expression ‘beyond one’s means’ goes back at least as far as Homer (Iliad 13.787).

<sup>45</sup> 2 Corinthians was written in AD 56–57. Livy’s ‘History of Rome’ (Ab Urbe Condita) was completed around 9 BC ... [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ab\\_Urbe\\_Condita\\_Libri\\_\(Livy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ab_Urbe_Condita_Libri_(Livy)).

<sup>46</sup> Livy, ‘History of Rome’ (Ab Urbe Condita), 34. 4. 15. Quoted in F. W. Danker, II Corinthians, page 119.

<sup>47</sup> 2 Cor. 8. 1.

<sup>48</sup> If I am honest, I don’t even want to think about what that level of generosity might look like!

<sup>49</sup> The word translated ‘of their own accord’ occurs only here and in verse 17 in the entire New Testament.

<sup>50</sup> They positively clamoured to be included.

<sup>51</sup> The Macedonians’ liberality is evidence of the grace of God working among them in spite of their affliction and poverty. God has given grace to the Macedonians (cf. 1 Cor. 1. 4 for grace in this sense) with the result of making them generous. ‘Grace’ is a key word in this section of the epistle (8. 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 16, 19; 9. 8, 14, 15). Over one-third of the 18 references in 2 Corinthians are in chapter 8. Grace is associated with abundance also in 1 Cor. 1. 12; 15. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Such is the grace of God given to them, v. 1, that the Macedonians want grace from Paul, v. 4, so that they might show grace to others, v. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Michael P. Green, *1500 illustrations for biblical preaching*, page 73.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. ‘Who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you’, 1 Chron. 29. 14.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Therefore when you do your “merciful deeds”, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may have glory from men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward’, Matt. 6. 2

<sup>56</sup> Often projects have an encouraging start, but fail to be seen through to completion.

<sup>57</sup> Possibly Paul thought again of the successful mission Titus had already concluded in Corinth (chapter 7), and therefore looks to him to complete the collection, just as he has already completed the renewal of good relations between the apostle and them.

Compare:

(i) As to Titus, ‘as he had previously begun, so he would also complete’, v. 6.

(ii) As to Corinthians, ‘you, who last year ... began to do this work now complete the doing’, v. 11.

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<sup>58</sup> 'The people of Miletus gave this (the intention of simulating others to a similar activity) as the primary reason for the award they granted to Antiochus the son of Seleucus: "So that others also might make it their policy to be concerned about the temple in Didyma and about the people of Miletus, as they observe the benefactors of the temple being honoured by the people"', F. W. Danker, *II Corinthians*, page 122, and *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field*, page 437.

<sup>59</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, note on chapter 8 verse 1.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Cor. 1. 4-7.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Cor. 4. 8.

<sup>62</sup> 2 Cor. 1. 24.

<sup>63</sup> Which he was careful to avoid whenever he could, Phm. 8, 9, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. 1 John 3. 18.

<sup>65</sup> The human benchmark of love and sacrifice set by the Macedonians is eclipsed by the divine benchmark of love and sacrifice set by the Lord Jesus.

<sup>66</sup> Materially, our Lord was not among the poorest of the poor. His father worked a trade, carpentry, which Jesus followed; and during His ministry, He had the financial support of some who had been healed and touched by Him. There is no evidence that He was much poorer than most first century Jews in Israel. And yet, during his public work, He did lead a life of relative poverty; see Matt. 8. 20. At Golgotha, it seems He possessed only His clothes and 'His cross'. His only bequest to His disciples was His peace, John 14. 27.

<sup>67</sup> Luke 8. 2-3.

<sup>68</sup> 2 Chr. 6. 30.

<sup>69</sup> Luke 9. 58.

<sup>70</sup> Hag. 2. 8.

<sup>71</sup> Mark 12. 15.

<sup>72</sup> Psa. 50. 10.

<sup>73</sup> Mark 11. 3.

<sup>74</sup> John 17. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Heb. 12. 2.

<sup>76</sup> Luke 23. 35-39.

<sup>77</sup> Luke 16. 20, 22. To be destitute, poor as a beggar, reduced to extreme poverty.

<sup>78</sup> *Metropolitan Tabernacle*, 22 March 1888. Sermon entitled, 'Poverty and riches'.

See ... <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols40-42/chs2364.pdf>

<sup>79</sup> E.g. Judg. 6. 6,

<sup>80</sup> E.g. Prov. 23. 21.

<sup>81</sup> Rom. 8. 17.

<sup>82</sup> Acts 20. 35; cf. Matt. 10. 8. This concern for the poor characterized His ministry.

<sup>83</sup> Frank Houghton (1894-1972).

'This hymn was written at a particularly difficult time in the history of the missions to China. Missionaries had been captured by the communist Red Army and released in poor health after over a year of suffering. Others had been captured never to be heard from again. In 1934 the young missionaries John and Betty Stam ... were captured in Anhwei and beheaded. The news of these sorrows had reached the mission's headquarters in Shanghai. Though this was a very dangerous time for both the Chinese Christians and the foreign missionaries, Frank Houghton decided he needed to begin a tour through the country to visit various missionary outposts. While traveling over the mountains of Szechwan, the powerful and comforting words of 2 Corinthians 8:9, "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor," were transformed into this beautiful Christmas hymn'. Chip Stam, Director, Institute for Christian Worship, School of Church Ministries, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

See ... <http://www.wqotw.org/quote.php?date=2010-12-21>, and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank\\_Houghton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Houghton)

<sup>84</sup> 2 Cor. 8. 11-12. Compare, "Resources are to be taken into account in making a judgment about a person's liberality. For liberality does not depend on the amount of the gift, but on the attitude of the giver ... It is not easy," he continued, "for generous people to remain rich ... for they are lavish in expenditure and esteem wealth not for itself but as an instrument of donation", Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4.1.19-20. Quoted in F. W. Danker, *II Corinthians*, page 119.

<sup>85</sup> Mark 12. 41-44.

<sup>86</sup> The Macedonians gave 'above their means', but the apostle looks to Corinthians to do no more than to give according to their means – 'out of that which you have'. Cf. 'as he may prosper', 1 Cor. 16. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Without saying as much, the apostle turns to scripture to confirm his action. Although not formally quoting, he applies Prov. 3. 4 LXX: 'provide things honest in the sight of the Lord, and of men' (Brenton's translation). Compare Rom. 12. 17.

The point of the allusion is simply to establish the principle of equality. Whether or not there was some miraculous equalization of the amounts collected, Paul is establishing that there ought to be equality of provision. And commentators differ as to whether or not there was 'some miraculous equalization':

(i) *In favour:*

The Lord 'fixed at an omer for each member of their family (Exo\_16:16). In attempting to carry out these instructions, mistakes were not unnaturally made; some exceeded the set quantity, others fell short of it. But the result was found to be the same. Whatever the quantity gathered, when it was brought home and measured, the amount was by *miracle* made to be exactly an omer for each', *Thomas Constable*.

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'They gathered, as well as they could judge roughly, according to the size of their families; when they afterwards measured what they had gathered, they found to their surprise that they had each gathered exactly an omer a head', *Cambridge Bible*.

'Whatever quantity each person had gathered, when he measured it in his tent, he found that he had just as many omers as he needed for the consumption of his family', *Barnes*.

'On returning to their tents, with the manna which they had collected, the Israelites proceeded to measure it with their own, or a neighbour's, omer measure, when the *wonderful* result appeared, that, whatever the quantity actually gathered by any one, the result of the measurement showed, exactly as many omers as there were persons in the family. Thus, he that had gathered much found that he had nothing over, and he that had gathered little found that he had no lack'. Puzzled they said, 'Whatchamacallit'. It might just be that those who gathered as much as they could ended up with the same amount as those who weren't so greedy. That for one group, the Lord downsized their portion; for another He upsized theirs. Everyone ends up with the same amount, regardless of how much he gathered'.

(ii) *Against*:

'The opening statement that "the Israelites did so" meant that they obeyed the rule about not gathering too much but just enough, and the rest of the two verses confirms this by more detail, explaining how everyone was careful to use measuring containers so as not to break God's law'.

'Some have proposed that the Israelites pooled their manna collectively, and each kept the ration of an omer per head. Those who shared their surplus would not lose out, because if hoarded the manna went rotten. But the idea of pooling the manna is not definitely stated in the verse. Also the enormous size of the Israelite camp (five or six miles across) and the number of people involved would seem to make pooling improbable'.

To me, the 'manner' (sorry!) of the supply of manna in each home equalizing out certainly suggests some degree of miraculous intervention.

<sup>88</sup> 1 Cor. 9. 11-12; 2 Cor. 12. 12-13. Paul refuse point blank to accept support from Corinth for himself to avoid potential accusations that he was motivated by a mercenary spirit.

<sup>89</sup> 'We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one', 2 Cor. 7. 2.

<sup>90</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 16-18.

<sup>91</sup> Paul made it clear to Governor Felix that he regarded the collection as 'alms' for the people of Israel: 'After several years I came to bring alms to my nation', Acts 24. 17. It seems that the Jews of the day required three men to be involved in the distribution of alms to the poor. 'The alms dish, they say (T. Hieros. Peah, fol. 21. 1), is by three; nor do they appoint "overseers" of it "less than three". Again, they say (Misn. Peah, c. 8. sect. 7. & Jarchi, Maimonides & Bartenora, in ib. T. Bab. Bava Bathra, fol. 8. 2. Maimon. Mattanot Anayim, c. 9. sect. 5), "the poor's chest is collected by two, but distributed by three ... the alms dish is collected by three, and distributed by three; for the collection and distribution are alike', John Gill on 2 Corinthians 8. 22.

<sup>92</sup> Paul identifies the first individual as Titus, which is hardly surprising as Titus played a key role in the service of the assembly at Corinth.

<sup>93</sup> The identity of these two brethren is unknown to us. Period!

<sup>94</sup> Paul had earlier referred to letters of recommendation, 2 Cor. 3. 1-2, and in effect he now provides such a letter, giving a brief character reference for each of the three brethren.

<sup>95</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) was a Roman philosopher, politician, lawyer, orator, and political theorist. The year before he died, he wrote, 'But the chief thing in all public administration and public service is to *avoid even the slightest suspicion* of self-seeking', *De Officiis*, Book 2 section 75 (Millner's translation. Accessed at ... <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0048%3Abook%3D2%3Asection%3D75>). How true!

<sup>96</sup> 'In the face of the churches' – probably through their appointees; the delegates would eventually report back what they have seen of the Corinthians to the churches that chose them. Cf. 'from the face of the assembly (*συναγωγῆς*)', Num. 20. 6 LXX.

<sup>97</sup> 'Show the proof (demonstration) of your love'; cf. v. 8, 'prove the genuineness of your love'.

<sup>98</sup> For Paul's boasting about the Corinthians, see 7. 14; 9. 3.

<sup>99</sup> The giving up of one's goods to help feed the poor in itself does not prove that this is necessarily motivated by love, 1 Cor. 13. 3.

<sup>100</sup> 'For Macedonia *and Achaia* have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem', Rom. 15. 26.

<sup>101</sup> Acts 24. 17.

<sup>102</sup> Acts 21. 17.

<sup>103</sup> Rom. 15. 30-31.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Richard J. Foster, *Money, Sex and Power*, page 19.

<sup>105</sup> Richard J. Foster, *ibid.*, page 19.