

# A Study of Second Corinthians

## Week Three

2 Corinthians 3:17-5:5

### Day One

17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. 4:1 Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

v. 17 – If there is a finer, more encouraging and affirming word in the Bible, I can't find it. Wherever the Spirit resides, there is freedom! **Are you free?** I have been meditating on 2 Timothy 1:7, which states that God didn't give us a spirit of fear. Fear hinders freedom; fear kills freedom!

But I must be careful to keep this truth in context and the context here is Moses and the Law versus Christ and grace—the old covenant versus the new. And we are free from the Law as a means of possible access to God and His holiness. Instead we are children of God by grace.

Does this mean that we are free from obeying the Law? Absolutely not, at least not free from those parts that still apply. The Ten Commandments, for example, still apply (except for the Sabbath command). In fact, a stricter Law has been instituted:

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:21-22).

While a stricter standard was introduced, a greater grace was also made available to help us keep that standard. Consequently, I am free from my own works and also free to yield to the Spirit for help.

v. 18 – Just as Moses was transformed by his face-to-face encounters with God, now I am free to have the same experience. In the old covenant, only one man was changed through such encounters. Now in the new covenant, we all have that opportunity. **So are you encountering this dynamic in your relationship with the Lord and Spirit? Do you come away exhilarated and changed, or burdened and depressed? If the latter, then what is missing that isn't allowing you to enjoy this freedom to reflect God's glory to others?**

v. 1 – This verse indicates that Paul could have chosen to lose heart or that conditions were trying to force him to lose heart. Whatever you do, don't lose heart; God called you to have hope. God never promised you a rose garden, He just promised to be with you

always. **So, are you discouraged? Have you lost heart in any way with the church or the purpose God has for you? Then I implore you to do whatever you have to do to regain your hope and courage.**

## Day Two

2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

v. 2 – Paul knew that there were those who did exactly what he claimed he was not doing. And some still do “it” today. What is the “it”? They have secret and shameful ways where the Word is concerned. They distort the Word, usually for personal gain, whether for money or attention. One of my “favorite” distortions of late that I have noticed is the “breakthrough gift”. I saw a man last night promising a breakthrough in business and personal finance if one would simply send a sacrificial gift to his ministry. Sorry, but that’s just what Paul was referring to here.

Last year I was on a cruise with Dr. Sproul, well-known reformed theologian. When he delivered a message, he got out of the way, so to speak, and let the Word speak for itself. In my mind, Dr. Sproul did what Paul referred to in this verse: set forth the truth plainly for all to see. By doing so, Sproul and Paul commended themselves to every man’s conscience in God’s sight. That should be the goal of every one of us who handles and teaches God’s word.

Be careful not to have the goal of seeing secret things from God’s word. There is a difference between insight and special revelation. I want to teach “wonderful things from God’s law (see Psalm 119:18), but I don’t want to distort God’s word to do so. For that reason, I try to be careful and state when I am teaching that certain things are my opinions. They may or may not be from the Lord and people are free to accept or reject and certainly are expected to give them more study and prayer before they do either.

v. 3 – Paul referred back to the veil that was over the hearts of the Jews when the Law was read. The same veil was present for those who didn’t like Paul’s aroma of God that he carried wherever he went. This is why it is often *impossible* for someone to see or comprehend what you are saying, even when you state it in plain terms. There is a veil over their mind that prevents them from seeing. Jesus encountered the same dynamic when He spoke:

This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have

closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Matthew 13:13-17)

v. 4 – We see that there is a spiritual dynamic present as we preach and hope others received the word of God. Satan, the god of this age, can blind their eyes. While we must preach, only God can remove the veil or heal the blindness. So be diligent to preach the Word, but understand that the results of your preaching are in God's hands. You aren't looking for someone to simply accept a clever or logical presentation. You want them to see as only they can see when God removes the veil. That is my goal when I preach and teach! I hope it is yours as well.

### **Day Three**

5 For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

v. 5 – I have written in previous studies how impressed I am with Paul's focus. It was always about Jesus! When I wrote the Philippians study, I pointed out how Paul mentioned Jesus' name 10 times in the first 18 verses. When I noticed that, I realized that I had preached whole messages and never mentioned Jesus' name once! Here we read that Paul determined to preach Jesus and not himself. He would mention himself only if it was in the context of his service of the people on behalf of Jesus.

**Why is it that I don't believe that preaching or teaching Jesus is enough? Why have I thought I would need to incorporate all these clever ideas to keep the people interested? Why hasn't Jesus been enough for my tastes and the tastes of others?**

Since I saw what I mentioned in Philippians, I have made a conscious effort to simplify my message and tie them all back into Jesus. I have felt more comfortable and feel I've had better results.

v. 6 – This is an interesting connection. Paul tied the creation dynamic of "let there be light" to the light of understanding and revelation that came to the apostles concerning Jesus. The light in Genesis was a sovereign act of God. No man was an agent or intermediary in that transaction. The same can be true for the work of Christ, both on and after the cross. That was all an act of God's mercy; no man had a role. Man is only the beneficiary.

Just as no one can take credit for the light of the sun or the rest of creation, so no one can take credit for the work of Christ. It was and is a gift of God.

Paul was a good writer, or should I say the Holy Spirit was a good writer through Paul. I think “his light shines in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” is a beautifully stated truth. It gives me a picture of the light of Christ coming to me just as the light of the sun came to the earth. Both were and are an act of love, grace and power.

v. 7 – This is one of my favorite verses. I quote it regularly. I have often said that my most common mistake in ministry and as a Christian was to underestimate just how earthen my vessel is! That applies to your vessel, too. Many times, I have expected more from others than they can possibly give. Henri Nouwen wrote that most of us need to forgive others simply because they couldn’t be God to us—he or she could not give or do for us what only God could do.

**Are you still surprised when you stumble, sin or fail? Why should you be?** You are an earthen vessel and your weakness just shows how great the deposit is in that vessel. I have also been mistaken at how reluctant the Spirit is to overrule the earthen-ness of our vessels. There are times when I have said, “God won’t tolerate that. God won’t bless that. God will deal with that.” What I am saying is, “I hope God deals with that in the other person because I don’t like it!” Yet God seems much more comfortable with my humanity and the humanity of others than I am. What’s more, God uses people I would never use. Aren’t you glad I’m not God! That’s okay. I’m glad you’re not, either.

**Is there someone you need to forgive because they couldn’t be God to you? Do you need to forgive yourself for something that you did, said or thought in your earthen-ness? Do you need to release others from unrealistic expectations of what they should do or how they should behave?**

#### Day Four

8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

v. 8 – Paul went on to explain how this earthen-ness manifested itself in his life and the life of the other apostles. It seems that Paul borrowed some terminology from the world of sports, namely wrestling (not the modern version). Paul was wrestling with a supernatural enemy and even his own humanity and at times didn’t know how to respond or what to do. He was hard pressed, just like as if he were wrestling with an opponent who had him in a hold from which Paul could not escape.

Yet he did not give up! He would not give into despair, even though he was in the hold of his wrestling opponent. He didn’t always know what to do. There is the thinking

among spiritual people that we will always have the answer or that God will provide one quickly. That isn't always the case. There were times when Paul was outmaneuvered by the devil and let down by his humanity. I see apostles today who are so in control, so ready with a formula or answer for everything they see or hear. They are seldom surprised or out of control. If that's the image or persona of an apostle, what was Paul doing wrong?

He wasn't doing anything wrong. I think any wrongness that exists is with the modern apostles, not the ancient one!

v. 9 – This term “persecuted” seems to have its roots in a race where the runner is being pursued by another runner, about to be passed. Yet it doesn't happen. Paul was running his race about to be passed by his opponent and enemy, but alas, God doesn't allow that to happen. Paul won the race.

And finally Paul wrote that he was struck down, which again is a wrestling image of one wrestler being taken off his feet by his opponent. Can you now understand the earthen vessel analogy better? We are in contest for which we are poorly suited. Yet the treasure of Christ in us by the Spirit is more than a match for what we face, while we are no match at all without that Spirit. So stop trying to live up to some expectation of what it is to be spiritual and rely in Jesus!

vs. 10&11 – We carry around the death of Christ. Christ surrendered Himself to the human authorities and died as a human being. The good news is that He was raised back to life. While we replicate this in our daily lives and will ultimately in our death (should the Lord tarry), we also replicate His resurrection on a daily basis. In some sense, in order to have the life of Christ we must also share in the death process. I like the life part; I don't always enjoy the death part. But it is something that all of us must encounter, both daily and ultimately..

**Are you fighting the death aspect of life? Do you want the victory but without the struggle? That just isn't Christianity. Many “systems” have been developed to devise ways to avoid the death but they don't work.**

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it (Mark 8:34-36).

v. 12 – The death that produced the life in Paul's work worked to bring life to the churches in which he worked. This is part of what I call the price of leadership. As a leader, God will put you through things so that you will have life and help to give to others, help not based on theory but experience. So death works in leaders so that they receive life and then give life. It isn't always easy, but it is effective. That is why you shouldn't follow any leader who hasn't paid the price, hasn't been through a death process that qualified him or her to bring you life!

## Day Five

13 It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. 15 All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

v. 13 – This is such an important verse, which is also found in Psalm 116:10, but let's look at the context in which the psalmist wrote it:

For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I believed; therefore I said, "I am greatly afflicted." And in my dismay I said, "All men are liars" (Psalm 116:8-11).

Faith never requires that you deny the reality you are in; it just requires that you don't allow that reality to define who you are or what you can do. It is important that you align what you say, however, not with reality, but with faith. You don't say things to make them happen, you say them because they will happen. Your saying those things doesn't make them happen; this isn't name it and claim it. But if you have faith that something is going to happen, it's alright to say that.

### **So what are you believing and therefore speaking?**

v. 14 – Here is a great example of what I am saying. Paul spoke about the resurrection and the fact that he and all the saints at Corinth would join the Lord in that state of existence. His saying it doesn't make the resurrection happen; but he aligned his speech with the faith reality. There were eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection who gave a report, and Paul believed their report. His assurance of his resurrection, however, rested in his faith that it would happen. And that faith caused him to speak and write about it.

**So what is your faith causing you to speak and write about? What difference has faith made in your life? If you believe in the resurrection, are you sharing that with others? Is the faith fact impacting and directing the way you live your life on a day-to-day basis?**

May I recommend my study on New Testament faith called *The Faith Files*? It is a study of every verse on faith that I could identify and can be found at [http://www.purposequest.com/bible\\_studies.htm](http://www.purposequest.com/bible_studies.htm). I know these *Files* will help you understand the role of faith in your life and help you on a day-to-day basis.

v. 15 – Paul was always looking for and tying his afflictions to benefits for other people. What a great way to live! Everything that was happening to him was furthering the gospel and directing people to God, whether to know Him or thank Him. Paul lived with

a single focus, which is a great way to live. He didn't have his work life, family life and church life. He had one life and all he did was to fulfill his purpose of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. **Do you have that kind of focus? Does that kind of focus seem too limiting to you and for you?**

**Can you also see how what you have been through is contributing to who you are and what God wants you to do? Can you thank God for those things, even if they have been difficult?**

### Day Six

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 5:1 Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

v. 16 – This was a remarkable statement for Paul to make. He did not lose heart. In the midst of all that he went through, he did not become discouraged. He knew that the stakes were high and he was willing to endure whatever to see the gospel furthered and preached. The Lord showed Paul early on through Ananias what awaited him:

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15-16).

**Would you sign on for such an assignment? When you think of it, you and I don't have any choice. God makes the assignments of purpose and with some there is more suffering attached to their purpose than with others. Are you ready to suffer to fulfill your purpose? It won't ever be easy, but it will be rewarding and have eternal ramifications. Are you willing to pay the price?**

Our bodies are one day older and closer to death every day; from that truth there is no escape. Yet when we are doing what we were created to do (and connected to Who created us, for that matter), our inner beings are renewed and refreshed day by day. I just left a conference where a godly man was talking about how he has grown and changed more in the last 8 months than in any other period that he can remember—and he turned 70 last November! That's what I want; that's what I have access to according to this verse.

v. 17 – Paul saw his suffering as a transaction. His momentary and light afflictions (can you imagine that this was how Paul described the pressure and persecution he endured?) were given in return for a dose of eternal glory. Paul saw things so clearly and had his values in proper order. There was no self-pity, no asking for prayers that he would spare these tribulations. No, he was advancing and willing to endure his pain so he

could inherit his glory. The man was a fantastic servant and leader. It is no wonder why the Holy Spirit chose Paul to write so much of the New Testament, so that we could read about, appreciate and emulate this man today.

v. 18 – Paul fixed his eyes on what could not be seen. That’s good advice for you and me. I don’t watch too much television news, for that is what I can see. I try to spend my time on other things that are unseen, spiritual matters, eternal issues. If you can see it, it’s not of eternal value. **What do you see today? What has your heart and focus? If you are becoming discouraged from what you can see, then don’t wait for those things to improve. Focus on something else—what you can’t see, the things of God.**

v. 19 – I don’t think this verse means anything more than this: if we die doing the will and work of Jesus, it’s not the end of our world. It may be the end of the one we know, but there is another world we haven’t seen yet that is ours for eternity. **So what do we have to lose? Our lives?** Not really, for we have eternal life. Our relationship with the Lord? That was sealed and preserved by the blood of Jesus. **So what do you have to lose? What are you afraid of?** You can go forward in God’s will for your life, even be aggressive in pursuing it, without fear. You have a house waiting for you not built by human hands. Go for it! Go for God!

### Day Seven

2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, 3 because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. 4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

vs. 2&3 – Paul was longing for his next life, for he had faith that his next life, his reward from God, would not disappoint him or leave him naked or wanting. So Paul wasn’t longing to be delivered from his current predicament, he was longing for his ultimate reward, his relationship with God for eternity. *God, give me the perspective on life that Paul had! I want to see things as they are from your perspective.*

v. 4 – Paul saw that many of our earthly longings are really spiritual longings that will only be fulfilled by our next dwelling, our resurrected state. It’s been written that man isn’t a human being having a spiritual experience, but a spiritual being having a human experience. That’s true. This human life goes by quickly and is swallowed up by eternal life.

Another person said that each person has a huge void in their being and it is a God-sized void—that is, only God can fill it. We try to fill it with meaning through hobbies, leisure, sex, drugs, money learning and other things, but that hole, that longing is for God and God alone! So our job is to help people see that their “hole” is indeed a God-hole and to urge them to let Him fill it!

v. 5 – Here Paul mentioned again what he wrote about in chapter one: the Holy Spirit is a guarantee of what is yet to come. What proof do we have that we will live forever with Christ? The same Spirit that raised Christ to life lives inside you and me! He is there to provide the witness, the assurance by faith, that God’s promises to us are true.

God made us to be whole only in and through Him. There is no other substitute that can do the job. God made us for fellowship with Him. We were made for God. Hallelujah! God is so good. My desire for Him is something He put into me. Then He helps me fulfill that longing by giving me His Spirit to live inside me.

What a deal! There is no other “religion” or “God-system” that can offer that kind of transaction. All others have man pursuing God. Christianity is God pursuing man and, when He apprehends him, gives that man all he needs to love and serve God. Such a deal! What grace! What love!

**What are you doing with this great transaction, this deposit on the things of God? Are you making the most of His living in you? What more can you do? If Paul did the great things he did for God with no more or less than you have, what can you do? I know it is more than you doing now. So why wait? Go for it!**