

Hardship

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[0 : 00] We can understand that. We have to sum up the context, the first half of this chapter, so that we know where Paul is going as he writes this. At the very beginning here, as we go into this chapter, Paul is teaching us, and he's teaching the people that he wrote this to, that this life that we have here on Earth, from the day of our birth to the day of our death, is short.

It's really short. He speaks about our earthly tent, this temporary, nomadic existence that we have been destroyed.

Speaking about how our life on Earth comes to an end in death. And then he speaks about how through the Gospel we can look forward to being with the Lord forever, when we die.

And when we die, he says, in verse 10, we must all appear before the judgment seats of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Because of that, Paul knows not only that this life is so short, but also that this life is so important, that your life is crucially important, that it's not something that you should undervalue or throw away.

[1 : 28] Your life matters. Even if you have a long life, 80 years, or 100 years even, we all need to give an account to Jesus as to how we've lived, ultimately as to how in our lives we have responded to him and to his Gospel, whether we've rejected him and the salvation that he offers, or whether we repent it, whether we believed in him as Savior.

And what Jesus then decides has consequences that last for all of eternity, and how we'll spend that. So because of that, Paul is writing to these people, and he is refusing to give up on them when there's a battle going on here in the background, because there are people in this church in Corinth who are saying, don't listen to Paul, forget him and what he's saying.

He believes that the people he's writing to matter, and that their lives matter, and that they need to hear this. He believes that they will one day have to appear before Jesus.

So when people are criticizing him, Paul, to the Corinthians, and saying, stop listening to that Paul guy, he fights for them, and he defends his message, his Gospel, which is the focus of a lot of this letter that he writes.

He's not defending himself because his ego is bruised, and because his pride is hurt, and he feels disrespected. He's defending his Gospel, because he, as we were saying, believes their lives matter that much into all of eternity.

[3 : 10] And because of that, he knows that they're going to go on into eternity, either in glory or in shame. So he's fighting here for the right to tell them the Gospel, to tell them about Jesus.

And what Paul writes is still relevant for us, because our lives also are of eternal significance. They will go on even when our bodies die, and how we've responded to Jesus, to his Gospel, makes all the difference between a lost and a found eternity.

That's what's underneath this letter. So on that basis, Paul knows that everyone in the whole world, in this church in Corinth 2000 years ago, in Edinburgh today, in St. Columbus, because everyone has to stand before Jesus. He's carrying on defending his message, trying to show us what we should listen to, and how we should listen when we listen to the Gospel.

In this chapter, it starts to become really clear what kind of opposition Paul is facing, why he has to make this big argument. If you've read the first letter that he wrote to the Corinthians, it comes before this, first Corinthians, you might remember that at the very beginning of the letter, he picks out a problem that they have in their culture and in their mindset.

It's in chapter 1, verses 11 to 13. He writes this, My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this. One of you says, I follow Paul. Another, I follow Apollos. Another, I follow Cephas.

[4 : 59] Still another, I follow Christ. Is Christ divided? That was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

This church in Corinth is a church riddled with personality cults. In modern terms, it would be a church completely swept along by the surrounding celebrity culture, a church in a society where everything is driven by glossy magazines, celebrity worship, the cult of personality, and where the church has a kind of Christianized version of what goes on in the culture around it, a Christianized celebrity culture where instead of reality TV stars, there are celebrity preachers, and they all get put up on pedestals. I follow Paul. Well, I get Cephas podcast. Well, I think Apollos writes the best books.

So the church in Corinth, it's just mimicking the celebrity, the deifying, making up God's culture that it lives in, except it's doing it with Christians and with preachers and with church leaders.

It has all these tendencies to make idols out of personalities, to treat people as though they're gods. And Paul's really incisive about how he deals with this because he gets right to the heart of the problem.

That kind of personality cult is rooted in idolatry, in idolatry within our own hearts, because it looks to personalities as though they were gods, as though they were your saviours.

[6 : 56] Paul picks up on that immediately in 1 Corinthians 1 at the very beginning of this, in verse 13 when he says, is Christ divided? And then he gets right into the heart of the matter, was Paul crucified for you?

Were you baptized into the name of Paul? These personalities, he's saying, did not die on the cross for you. So why do you treat them as though they did? And there's a kind of graciousness and self-effacing way about Paul here, which comes from how caught up he is in Jesus. He doesn't name and shame all these other guys and say, did a Paulist die for you?

It's himself. Did I die for you? I did not. Jesus was crucified. Were you baptized into the name of Paul? No, you were baptized into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

So why do you treat me as though I've accomplished these things for you? I haven't done anything to merit you treating me like I'm your saviour, and yet you've elevated me to that. Don't. Look to Jesus instead. That's where he's going here.

You were baptized into Jesus' name as one of his followers. So why do you act as though you were actually baptized into the name of a Paulist, or Paul or Cephas, making idols out of people, celebrity worship, and depending on them as though they save us, when we should depend on Jesus, our actual saviour, doing that invariably lets sin blossom, because when idolatry goes unchallenged, it provides all of the perfect climate in which sin blossoms and grows and gets really out of control.

[8 : 49] So Paul has already tried in 1 Corinthians to challenge that idolatry and that personality obsession in 1 Corinthians, but the problem is still evidently there. So that's why he's writing about it again in 2 Corinthians, because he almost inadvertently has been drawn right into it, and people are saying, don't listen to Paul. Listen to and then insert whichever name you like. Listen to Paulist. Listen to Cephas. Listen to them instead.

They're a lot better than Paul. Paul's not a super-apostle, and they've created this rank of, you know, it's like the big four in the Premiership. Don't support Hull or Wigan. Go for Chelsea. Go for Man United. So how does Paul handle this? This is a big, big problem.

Well, he first does it by challenging the superficial way that these people think when they're in that personality cult mindset.

And there's a lot there for us in that. So that's our first point, is depth versus superficiality. And we're looking at verses 11 to 17. In the backgrounds, people have been telling the Corinthian church, you know, move on from that Paul guy. You know, he is so 30 years ago. He's so last season. He's a bit of a fake.

He's not glamorous. He's no super-apostle. So Paul is having to defend the ministry that he's done among them, and the gospel message that he's been preaching. And the way that he does that is really interesting.

[10 : 29] He does it by setting up a pattern. There's a balance here in what he's saying between explaining on one hand, firstly, what he believes, and then after that, because of it, what he does. So it's all about belief and action. And he starts that in verse 11, when he writes, since then, we know what it is to fear the Lord. We try to persuade men, but we are as plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.

What is Paul talking about here, when he starts speaking about what he believes, what he knows, he knows what it is to fear the Lord. Fearing God is quite a classical piece of biblical language. You find it in the Old Testament, you find it in the New.

And when we hear this in our culture, well, we already have quite a clear idea of what we mean by the word fear. It means being afraid in the face of perceived danger, doesn't it? And it ranges from weak fear, where you're simply a bit nervous to strong fear, terror.

Is that what the Bible means? Well, remember the first song that we sung tonight, Psalm 130, which gives the classic example of what the Bible means when it speaks about fear.

In verse three of that, Sam, if you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But, and then the next verse, but with you there is forgiveness. Therefore, you are feared.

[12 : 10] You hear that and you think, wait a minute, what happened there? That doesn't make sense. If God kept a list of each of our sins, none of us could stand, i.e., we would be destroyed and consumed by His holiness, but the Lord is a forgiving God and as a consequence of that, therefore, we fear you.

So the order is, God is sinless, we are sinful, God has every right to destroy us, but He has forgiven us, so the response is fear.

And when you start to put this together, you see that by fear, the Bible doesn't mean what we might think it means, because fear here is an attitude that grows, not when we are in danger, in real danger of God destroying us and we really don't know what He's going to do, rather it comes when that danger is removed in forgiveness.

You forgive me and as a result, I fear you. So what the Bible means is that once we know God is right to judge us and in His grace, He forgives us, it fills us with a new attitude, a wonder filled, bold humility that I once heard it described, and I thought that was really accurate.

There's no one word that really captures it because it's such a unique experience, so the Bible calls it fear. That's what the Bible is trying to capture here.

[13 : 43] It's not that we're terrified of God as though we did not know for sure whether He's forgiven us, maybe God will kill us all tomorrow as Christians, we just don't know, so we're terrified of Him.

It's not that. And then on the other hand, it's not that we treat Him as though He's just a pal, as though He hadn't really shown amazing grace in forgiving us.

Instead, we fear Him because He could have, He would have been right to judge us, and yet He forgave us through the cross. So we have this new attitude towards Him, this bold humility, where you have these two things that you normally don't associate together, and yet the Gospel gives us that.

Paul knows what that is. He knows forgiveness, he knows about God's holiness, he knows about God's grace, and because of that, he makes it his mission to persuade other people, to persuade the Corinthians, to persuade us in St. C's, that we too can know God like that, that we can know His righteousness, that we can know His forgiveness, that we can have these things together.

Then in verse 12, he starts to encourage the Corinthians and us to look much more deeply into what he's talking about when he talks about that.

[15 : 05] Remember, his critics are, a lot of them are making very external criticisms of him and his personality. In verse 12, he says, we're not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than what is in the heart.

Now we don't have a photograph or a painting of Paul's physical appearance, because he lived before that, and what he lived before, the era of photos, and if there were pictures of him, they would have decayed a long time ago, so we don't have any accurate pictures of Paul.

But when we read the New Testament, we can deduce a lot about him, about his appearance, about his demeanor, and paint a word picture of Paul. He was probably a physically small person.

There's nothing really reflected in his letters or in the stuff written about him that makes you think this was a really bold, big kind of physical person.

It looks like Paul may have had quite bad eyesight. A lot of New Testament scholars think that from things Paul writes about. See what large letters I write to you. A lot of people think that was the thorn in his flesh.

[16 : 24] He was also an outcast from an ethnic minority group, so he's trying to work in this non-Jewish world, and he comes from that ethnic group, and yet they've turned their backs on him because he believes in Jesus.

He also happened to be a geeky academic theologian. He's not a rugged, strong fisherman type, like some of the other apostles. Paul is this nerd and bookworm.

It looks like he wasn't a brilliant, confident, outstanding public speaker. Again, that comes across in his letters. He doesn't seem very confident about himself as a public speaker.

All of these critics are trying to undermine his work and dissuade people from following his message by appealing to all of these outward things and saying, look at Paul. Don't look past the external. Let's take pride in what is seen.

Why would you listen to him? Go for the super-apostle with the dazzling smile. Go for the guy that's making lots of money from what he's saying. And Paul's response is basically, I am not trying to sell myself to you on the basis of my personality or my looks.

[17 : 40] I don't take that much pride in what is seen. My pride is in what's unseen. It's in my heart. Look in there and find Jesus. My goal has never been to commend myself to you as though you would be Paulites or Paulines or whatever you would call them.

My goal is to commend the gospel to you, to point you to Jesus and not myself. So he's encouraging the people to think really deeply about what he's saying, to break out of the superficial judgmental mentality that the church has absorbed from the culture that it's in.

Then he goes back to what he's doing again in verse 13 with the pattern talking about what he believes and what he does. If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God.

If we are in our right mind, it is for you. When he speaks here about being out of our mind, what he means is that he's so awed by God, so amazed by him, that he has nothing to say.

He looks at God and he finds an almost obscene beauty, something that leaves him speechless, responseless. He has nothing to add, just worship, basking in who God is.

[19 : 02] That's what Paul is like towards God. Then he says, and for you, he speaks about being in our right mind. Literally what he writes is, we think seriously.

He's amazed about God, and because of that he thinks seriously for the Corinthians, for the church. He's saying, look beyond my appearance, look into my heart, get to the heart of what I believe and what I do.

Can you see that I am in awe of God? My goal is not that you'll be in awe of me. Because of that, I'm not caught up in any of the shallow personality cults, the idolatry.

I want you to be as out of your mind about God as I am, so that you'd be bored with all of the celebrity culture.

Because you see that God is so much better. And because I'm like that about God, he's saying, I think so deeply for your sake so that I can help you.

[20 : 08] Then he starts to explain what he thinks deeply about for these people. For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.

The word that he picks here compels is a deliberate choice, a really evocative word that communicates a lot. It's the same word that we have elsewhere in the New Testament.

In Luke chapter 8, when Jesus is in a huge crowd of people, you might know the story, He's in a massive crowd and they're thronging him and the crowd is driving him along.

And there's a woman that has a bleeding problem that she's had for years and years. So she touches his cloak because she believes she'll be healed by his power, and she is. In the middle of that story, Peter says to Jesus, the people are crowding and pressing against you.

And in the original, in the Greek New Testament, it's the same word, the people compel you. The people, there's so many of them around you that they're driving you along.

[21 : 16] You go where the crowd is directing you. You're compelled by this mass movement around you. Paul is saying that Jesus' love has that impact on him, that it's a mass movement of gracious love that pushes his life along, where Paul goes as for the love of Jesus directs him to go.

He's compelled by it. It's like being in the midst of a huge crowd. Why is it so compelling to Paul? He says, because we are convinced that one died for all.

Paul is absolutely convinced about the Gospel. He hasn't just done the normal thing in his culture, which is to make a quick, shallow, externally based judgment about, well, how good does this look on the outside?

He has thought at length about it. In fact, after he became a Christian, he spent three years in Arabia thinking long and hard about Jesus, about Jesus' death, about Jesus' love, about Jesus' resurrection.

In a superficial culture, Paul was challenging people to think, challenging them to think more deeply about the Gospel.

[22 : 38] Is our world all that different? Are things radically different here? I think some of us aren't into preaching in such a huge way that we all have our favorite celebrity preachers.

I follow Tim Keller. Well, I'm a John Piper man. Well, I follow Mark Driscoll. For some of us, that might be the case. But if, probably for the majority of you normal people, that's not the case for us. The fact is that nonetheless we live in an idolatrous, celebrity, personality cult, driven culture, and this call to think long and hard about Jesus above anyone else still has a massive challenge for us.

Are you going to spend the next week watching endless, mindless TV, watching lay about celebrities, sitting in a jungle talking about nothing? Or will you take some time to do what Paul does and think for yourself?

Will you engage your mind to consider what Paul has wrestled with to the point of being convinced and also become convinced about the truth of Jesus Christ, that he died for our sins, that he lived a perfect life, that nonetheless he ended up on a cross, and that he rose again after three days, and then he returned victorious over death, returned to his father. Will we think about that?

It's the most counter-cultural thing we can do. And then Paul carries on. He stays in the pattern of explaining what he believes and what he does. Because he's convinced of the gospel, he says, he regards no one from a worldly point of view.

[24 : 33] He doesn't make externally based judgments on people, on the basis of appearance. In other words, because he believes the gospel, he does the exact opposite of his critics.

And it's again all about the gospel, the reason that he doesn't just judge people like that, because he says if anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation. Paul looks at you this way.

If you are a Christian, he looks at you as a new creation. If you're not a Christian, he doesn't judge you externally. He says that you can become new as well in Christ. And because of that, he tells us that we should look at each other that way too.

So that's where he goes first of all, when he's trying to challenge the big distraction from the gospel in Corinth. He speaks about depth versus superficiality. And then he goes off to look at how this gospel is applied again, and describing it to really ram this point home. And our second point, which is reconciliation, the climax of belief in action.

At this point, Paul is trying to sum up what God has done for him. He's spoken about how Jesus has died for his sins. He knows that he's blessed because he's forgiven.

[25 : 49] God loves him unconditionally. He knows that when he dies, he will go to be with Christ, which is even better than this life. He has all of that to look at right now and to look forward to.

And he's explicit in saying that he has not earned any of this, that he didn't conjure it up, that the gospel was not Paul's idea.

You know, in this context of personality cults, and of people looking to men and celebrity preachers as though they were saviours, was Paul crucified for you, a culture where Paul has to bring that point out.

Paul is saying, this whole thing is all from God. It's all about God. I didn't do it. Paul us didn't do it. Cephas didn't do it.

Tim Keller didn't do it. Mark Driscoll didn't do it. Derek didn't do it. James didn't do it. All this is from God. I haven't done any of it. So don't go looking to me as though I achieved your salvation.

[27 : 00] Look to who I'm telling you has achieved your salvation. Look to Jesus. All this is from God. And at this point, Paul's, he's trying to describe this, that all this, what God has done in a word with an image, with an illustration, with a concept that will sum up that all this. And he finds it in this word, reconciliation.

All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.

And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. Reconciliation is interesting. It's an image that only Paul uses in the Bible. It's an image of people who used to be friends, and yet some process has happened, sorry, the people who used to be enemies, and some process has happened which has taken that away.

And they reconciled, they become friends, people who used to be estranged, and not haphazardly or randomly, but because of some specific process, something has changed this. Someone has taken decisive action to the point that they're not estranged anymore.

They're not strangers. They know each other. They're close again. That's the way that Paul is describing what Jesus did for us on the cross.

[28 : 57] And then Paul starts to describe, he follows that up with an unusual statement, that God has given us this way of serving others, reconciliation.

He gave us that as a ministry to be agents of reconciliation, to promote peace rather than hostility. He starts to expand those thoughts in verse 20.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

This is beautiful and important, because Paul is speaking to people who were caught up in the first century church equivalent of the vote for your favourite celebrity, reality, TV, star, preacher.

Paul is saying, we're not in this for ourselves. I'm not in this so that you'll think I'm great, so that you'll love me and buy my book and subscribe to my sermons on iTunes.

[30 : 15] Paul is saying, we are ambassadors. We're people that come representing someone much greater than ourselves. We're doing this for Jesus, and we're imploring you. If you have not been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, to be reconciled, Jesus exhorts you.

Jesus tells you that this can happen, that what he has done through the cross is enough to take away that gap between you and God, and to bring you close to Him.

So as we get to the end of the chapter, Paul has completely turned the situation around. It begins with people who are hooked on personality conflicts, who cannot see past their favourite celebrity, even within the church, not just within the culture around it.

People who love watching ego boxing matches. Instead, he's turned it around to draw them to Jesus, to the point that they think Jesus is so great, that all these personalities are just as messengers.

What we really want is Christ Himself. We want the person that they are ambassadors for. We want to be reconciled to God. If we have this encouragement that comes at the end, that God made Him who had no sin to be sin.

[31 : 41] It's this picture of almost unspeakable horror, that Jesus was perfect, that Jesus had done nothing wrong, and yet the decisive act of reconciliation occurred by Him taking all of our wrong upon Himself, so that when God looks in judgment, He looks at Jesus, and He sees all the wrong there, so the punishment goes to Him.

With the end result being so that in Him, if we are in Christ, if we trust in Him, if He is our Saviour, we might become the righteousness of God. So we start off as sin, and we end up as righteousness.

What an encouragement for us to take up this challenge, to take up this way of serving those around us, to be ministers of reconciliation, to take Jesus and His life and His death and His resurrection to Edinburgh, to the city around us, so that we can spread reconciliation, so that people who are estranged from God and who do not know Him, can come to know Him.

May God help us to do this, to be inspired by His Word. Amen. Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, thank you for reconciliation. Thank you for your Son Jesus Christ, who had no sin, and yet you made Him to be sin, and you did that for us, so that if we are in Christ, that we can become your righteousness.

It's so hard for us to take that in. It's almost unbelievably good, and yet it is true. So help us, Father, to believe it. Help us to believe your Gospel.

[33 : 35] Help us, if we have not been reconciled to you yet, to look to Jesus, to look past personality cults, to think deeply in a superficial world, and Lord, help us to embrace Jesus.

Lord, those of us who have been reconciled to you, help us to be filled with joy, help us to be filled with gratitude, in a refreshed and in a new way for what you've done for us through Jesus.

And Lord, inspire us, encourage us to implore others to be reconciled to you. Lord, help us to live out all the applications of that, to be peacemakers in a world where people don't know your Gospel, in a world where there is so often hostility and conflict, where people so often prefer to prolong and to extend and to entrench estrangements from each other.

Lord, we pray for this in Christ's name. Amen.