Book of Faith for February: <u>2 Corinthians</u>

2 Corinthians is not for the immature. It features some of Paul's profoundest reflections on several topics. 1) The physical decline of age. 2) On his own apostleship: that his various sufferings, rather than obvious success and glory, are in keeping with the Master whose slave he is. 3) Challenging thoughts on the mutual responsibility of church life. 4) Wonderful comparison of the superiority of Christian faith to the law-based religion of Israel. 5) The most beautiful promises about stewardship in all Scripture.

<u>Introduction</u>.

We have more correspondence (29 chapters) from St. Paul to the congregation in Corinth than to any other. In fact, Paul in each of 1 and 2 Cor refers to other letters he had written as well. So 1 Cor in not <u>the</u> first. And, 2 Cor 10-13 are so very different in tone and situation from 1-9, that some think that the "sorrowful letter" Paul refers to early in 2 Cor might be chapters 10-13!

From what Paul says in his letters, this is the history of his relationship with the Corinthian church:

a. *Paul brings the Good News to Corinth and forms those who believe into a church.*
b. *Paul sends them a letter (1 Cor 5.9)*
c. *Paul sends Timothy to Corinth (1 Cor 4.17). Perhaps Timothy was the one who took the letter.*
d. *The church writes to him (1 Cor 7.1)*
e. *Paul writes 1 Cor while he is in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8), responding first to news of the congregation that he got from Chloe's servants who brought him the letter, as well as to questions about Christian faith and life that the church raised in their letter.*
f. *Timothy returns to Paul (perhaps having delivered 1 Cor?) with news that some Jewish Christian missionaries (as Paul himself was, though he is an apostle who met the risen Lord!) had come to Corinth and were teaching differently from Paul and undermining his authority as an apostle. (2 Cor 11, 12).*
g. *So Paul visits Corinth in person. It is a painful visit (2 Cor 2:1, 7:2). Someone in the church grievously offended Paul (2 Cor 2:5-6).*
h. *Paul writes a "tearful letter" (2 Cor 2:4, 7:8).*
i. *The church, at least mostly, is persuaded of Paul's position and returns to his authority and doctrine. Paul learns of this when Titus meets him in Macedonia (2 Cor 7:6-7).*

2 Corinthians may in fact be a collection of parts from two or more letters. For reading, then, we should not be put off by abrupt changes of tone or situation, but prize every bit for its own inherent truth.

<u>February 5</u> assignment. Read by (2/12): <u>2 Cor 1-3</u>

<u>Chapter 1</u> <u>3-6</u> is a striking reflection on comfort and affliction. "We" is Paul and his helpers. V. 4 does not mean that God comforts us <u>by ending our sorrows but comforts us IN our sorrows.</u> *How have you experienced that?* And, *how can you comfort others IN their afflictions with that same comfort?* Along the same lines note v. 6: Paul, as a pastor, is afflicted for the sake of his

service to the congregation which is to comfort them with the Gospel. And when Paul is comforted it is when the congregation is comforted. And when is that? They are comforted NOT when affliction ends, but when with their hearts set on Christ they are comforted by their faith in Christ's care for them and so endure with patience. 8-11 What happened to Paul we don't know, but *how can you learn from what he says to handle the disasters that come upon you?*

A new subject 12-14 Paul's conduct is above reproach, particularly concerning the Corinthians. 15-22 Paul explains. He had told them his plans to see them; plans which he then had to change. Some in the church accused him of being unreliable. In what seems like a change of subject but is not, Paul states that his Gospel, and therefore his work, are not "maybe, maybe not" but God's YES to us in Christ. Such a simple and fine way of stating the Good News! "Amen" is Hebrew, which Paul taught these Greeks to say, which means something like "this is most certainly true": a word that faith speaks! 1:23-2:11 Paul has parried the charge that he vacillates, now he gives his reason for not coming: he did not want to have to be harsh with them, which would cause pain for them both. (His tearful letter is h) above.) He refers to someone who had used Paul badly on his last (painful) visit, and since the majority has returned to Paul's side and rejected that man's criticism, Paul urges them to reconcile him. *V. 11 When have you been aware of Satan trying to damage the church by dissension?* 12f The measure of Paul's worry over the Corinthian church is that he could not keep his mind on a good opportunity for Gospel teaching in Troas (Asia) and hurried to Macedonia (northern Greece). 14-17 For the happy resolution Paul praises God. He compares knowing (through Christ) the God of the Gospel to a wonderful fragrance that, through the apostolic missionaries, is being spread everywhere. *How is your knowledge of God like an aroma? How does it go with you wherever you go, so that others can get a whiff of its sweetness?* 15f The aroma (knowledge) is the same, both among those who believe it whom God is bringing to salvation, and among those who disbelieve it who are dying (being alienated from God). So the one fragrance is among these the stench of death that leads to death; but among believers the perfume of life that leads on to life.

Chapter 3 The TMs (Traveling Missionaries) who visited Corinth ("f)" above) apparently came with letters of recommendation from other churches and then asked the Corinthians also to write them a letter that they could take to the next church they visited. Paul spins this out into some wonderful reflections on the nature of ministry and of the Gospel itself. 1-3 Paul says, we neither need to commend ourselves nor do we need a letter from you. Why? Because you Corinthians are yourselves our letter! (The simple existence of the church there, established by Paul, proves that he is an effective apostle.) This "letter" is not hand-written, but is "written" on their believing hearts, which is far more impressive! V. 3 two things: One, they are a letter from Christ to the world, through their faith telling about his salvation. Two (and Paul is going to teach some powerful things by this distinction) you Corinthians are not a ink-written letter, but the Spirit of God has written on your hearts. 4-7 These are two different **kinds** of communication; not only what is said, but how it is communicated (in writing or not) makes all the difference! This section is a wonderful exposition by the Apostle of what Lutherans call "the distinction of Law and Gospel." "Written on tablets of stone" (v. 3); "the letter (or written code) kills" (v. 6) refer of course to the 10 Commandments, which was the covenant the Lord made with the Hebrews at Mt. Sinai, the Old Covenant. V.7 Paul calls that, the Law of Go, "the ministry of death"! As Paul says elsewhere, "the Law kills." This is because the Law demands

of human beings righteous behavior—upon pain of death. And the Law clearly shows people that they are not righteous, "the Law always accuses." Yet the Law is "the ministry of death" because until a sinner "dies" (recognizes that his guilt puts him in God's wrath) the sinner cannot be raised to new life through faith in the Cross and baptism. In this way, the Law "ministers" to us, "serves" us by making us aware of our need for Christ. Sort of like a smoke detector: it gives you bad news (there is a fire) but it is really information you want so you can seek a remedy! The OT story that Paul is explaining here is Ex. 24:29-35. The Law was given at Sinai in glory (remember that the Law is bad news for sinners not because the Law is bad but because we are; the Law itself—as God's demand that people live honorable lives—is very good, even glorious.). 8-18 Paul—ever needing to remind his people that, good as the Law is, the Gospel is far better because only the Gospel makes us alive—remarks that the Gospel is more glorious. He notes, from the Ex. 24 story, that the glory Moses' face received when talking to the Lord to receive the Law, faded. This teaches that the Law was only a temporary covenant, that has been set aside for the New (and better and permanent) Covenant: the blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Moses put a veil over his face so that people could not see the glory fade. V. 14 Israel did not recognize that the Law was only a temporary covenant—Paul says even today the "veil of Moses" covers them so that they don't "see"—they don't understand. They still think the Law can save them. V. 16 only when a Jew, or Gentile, turns to Christ for justification is that veil removed so the person can see what Paul is saying here: that the Law is not meant to save but is a glorious ministry of death, and a temporary covenant, to prepare for the Gospel of grace through faith in Christ's cross. V. 18 Finally, we Christians with unveiled faces (since we know all this) look (by faith) at the glory of Christ and now our faces begin to glow!—because as you look to Christ his glory illumines your face.

February 12 assignment. Read by (2/17): 2 Cor 4-7

Chapter 4 Just as in 1 Corinthians Paul had to explain to them the nature of his ministry, to restore their confidence in the Gospel he gave them, so again here. 1-6 All the reasons Paul does not "lose heart." 1) his ministry is from God's mercy. *Do you trust so wholly in God's mercy that it is your foundation?* 2) Because his confidence comes from the certain mercy of God, his strategy of ministry is not trickery or any kind of "false advertising" but rather simply telling the truth about Law and Gospel and wrath and Christ—praying that the Spirit will help people recognize God's Message as the truth. V. 3 and even if some don't, that is not the fault of the Gospel but the devil has blinded their minds so that they cannot even see the bright glory of Christ. 3) Paul is not about self-promotion (like his opponents who visited Corinth); he is only about proclaiming Christ. 7-16 Paul's remarkable statement that Christ's apostolic ambassadors, like Paul, are not powerful persons but physically fragile! He points to all the ways that he suffers—he is not made of Teflon nor asbestos, but mere clay. This is good he says; for it shows that all the success of his mission is not due to his person at all, but to the power of Christ and of the Gospel.

Chapter 5 1-10 continues Paul's reflections on the apostolic vocation as being not one of prestige and luxury, but hardship and sorrow (very cross-like). 1-5 contrasts our "tent" (current temporary carnal body) with the dwelling (solid structure: our permanent "spiritual body" in heaven). The yearning, here and in the following verses, is to escape this world of sickness, futility and decay and be with Christ! 6-10 Whether in our humble state here or in glory there: it

is all about Jesus! V. 7 is a gem: as Paul elaborates elsewhere: when we can SEE God's protection and favor, that is not faith! Our faith comes into play when we are surrounded by adversity and YET trust God. *How can you remember, next time stress comes, not to doubt but to believe?* V. 10 While Paul is certainly the champion of the faith that we are "justified by faith in Christ without works" Paul says things like v. 10 often. There is not contradiction. Christians—who because of their faith truly love God, are full of the Spirit, and strive to please Christ—do much good in this life (though we do not, thereby, deserve grace or heaven). Non-believers, without those resources, will be judged for their wrong-doing. 11-15 Here 14-15 are especially fine. *What are ways that you, urged on by Christ's love, no longer live for yourself but for Christ who died and was raised for you?* 16-21 V. 17 is a radical statement: like Christ's that baptism is a re-birth to a new life. *How does Christ make all things new for you?* V. 19 is a powerful statement of the Gospel, as is v. 21.

Chapter 6 V.1 is a pointed challenge: not to accept God's gifts for nothing! Also in 1 Cor Paul warns that those who have experienced God's grace will not necessarily be saved, indeed will not be if they do not repentantly turn their lives toward God. 3-10 another wonderful section of a main theme: as Jesus, the Lord of glory, lived as homeless, misunderstood, persecuted and died as rejected and despicable—so also his emissaries will not work and live by prestige and easy success.

Notice that 6:14-7:1, as a complete and unexplained change of subject, seem to be an insertion here of material from some other document. For 6:11-3 continues with 7:2-4 as a poignant, affectionate, generous plea for the Corinthians to return Paul's affection. The insertion is on a completely different subject: urging Christians not to be joined with unbelievers, since they are so different from each other. *Do you know anyone who, married to an unbeliever, has a difficult life because of it?*

Chapter 7:5-16 Paul's expressions of deep joy at Titus' news from Corinth that they had turned back to Paul, and away from the man who had wronged him.

February 17 assignment. Read by (2/24): 2 Cor 8-9

These two chapters are both about Paul's "collection for the saints." In many of Paul's letters he mentions this project. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were very poor. Paul appealed to the (mainly) Gentile congregations he had founded to send money to the home church of Christianity to relieve their distress. It may well be that Paul thought of this as fulfillment of the many OT texts that speak of the wealth of the nations flowing to Zion!

In the course of these two chapters, Paul says wonderful things about generosity. The two chapters seem to be two different letters about the collection (or at least sections from two different letters) since 9:1 begins as if chapter 8 weren't there.

8:1-7 Paul exults in the response of the Macedonians to his appeal. (Macedonia is the northern section of Greece—check a Bible map—and would mainly refer to the churches of Philippi and Thessalonica.) The most important point is v. 1: "the grace of God granted them" means that they were so full of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ that they wanted to be extremely generous

when they themselves had little. That is, God's gift to them was the power of Spirit that made them so generous. *Do you find that generous people are the strong ones, and selfish people weak? Is it therefore a grace from God if a person is able to be generous?* V. 8 is so important (the gem Philemon is about the same thing): while Apostle Paul has the authority to command, he wants the Corinthians to act out of their own love rather than out of mere obedience. This is in keeping with v. 1: what matters in Christianity is having the right heart, a heart that only the Gospel and Spirit can give. V. 9 is as lovely—and succinct!—a telling of the Gospel as I know. *Tell someone today this bit of Gospel.* 13-15 is important and interesting. Paul says he is not trying to make others' lives easy and the Corinthians' hard, but only to get a better balance. He wants these Christians to think of each other as one group, so that the better off at one time will help the worse off. He cites the manna story of Exodus as God's idea of how goods should be distributed: no extremes, but all have enough. *Should that be the goal of your country's economic policies?*

9:1-2 Paul, as in ch. 8, tells one group how well the other is doing in generosity, to spur them on. (The Greeks loved competition; remember whence the Olympics came!) V. 6 is a bold analogy. A farmer who sows few seeds will not have much harvest. Likewise, Paul claims, you who give little with receive little, and you who give much will receive much in return. *Has this been your experience?* V. 7 is the them of 8:8: only cheerful and happy works, done for love of Christ, count. 10-12 The more you give, the more God will supply you since your giving does so much good: not only helping the saints, but increasing even the praise of God.

February 24 assignment. Read by (3/3): 2 Cor 10-13

10-13 are very different in tone from the rest of 2 Cor. This is Paul at war; for the sake of the church, he attacks his opponents. Not only that, but the situation seems different (contrast 7:15 and 10:5). This is the third bit of evidence (the first is the 6:14-7:1 insertion and the second that chapter 9 does not seem to know about chapter 8) that suggests that 2 Cor is not a single letter Paul wrote, but a compilation from several pieces of writing. Most of the themes here we already encountered in the early chapters. Perhaps this is part of Paul's "tearful letter" and then, when it has been effective and the Corinthians came back to him, he re-stated his points in a more peaceful way, and that is the early chapters.

Chapter 10 Because we are reading someone else's mail it is sometimes difficult to understand. For the Corinthians and Paul know the situation, and we don't, so we have to "read between the lines" to figure what he is talking about. Those traveling missionaries (hereafter: TMs) who arrived in Corinth to visit the church Paul planted, made these personal attacks on Paul:

- "His letters are weighty and strong but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible."
- Paul is not a trained orator (11.6).
- He lives "according to the flesh." Paul is no libertine, of course, so perhaps the TMs followed strict restriction in their lifestyle—perhaps Jewish dietary laws.
- Paul makes too much of his authority.
- Paul goes "beyond limits" (10:13, 14, 15).

- Paul is not a very noble person, since he works with his hands for a living (11:7-9; he supported himself by his trade of tent-making).
- If Paul had real apostolic authority, he would be more commanding to the church.

Paul's defenses:

- He HAS authority: he saw the risen Lord, was personally commissioned by Him as an apostle. Furthermore: he is the founder of the Corinthian church.
- His forcefulness is to "destroy arguments and every proud obstacle thrown up against the knowledge of God."
- I earned my own living in order not to burden you!

Paul's charges against the TMs:

- They try to look good by comparing themselves to others.
- They commend themselves.
- They work in a church someone else (Paul) founded.
- The TMs make slaves of you, so you fawn over them!
- He sarcastically calls them how they regard themselves: "Super-apostles."

Now let us follow the text. 10:1-11 Paul defends his authority. Why does Paul do so? Is he looking for personal advantage? Of course not! Rather, he wants to maintain his authority over the church so that he can help them and guide them (v. 8). *Have you ever been in a church situation where a pastor had to defend his or her authority?*

Chapter 11 1-6 This is not only a war over who has authority in the Corinthian church, but over what is the true gospel! V. 4 sounds like Galatians, where other (maybe the same!) "super-apostles" came behind Paul and proclaimed "another gospel," that is, that salvation comes by Christ AND by circumcision. 7-10 Paul's defense against his social status as a tradesman: "was it a sin" that I took support from other churches in order not to burden you?! 12-15 is a sharp counter-attack against his opponents. Paul will continue to accept no support from the Corinthians so that those TMs who come and demand support can not "compare" themselves to Paul! V. 14 is much like the Lord's warning about "wolves in sheep's clothing": of course when the Enemy comes he will put on a friendly disguise. *How has Satan tempted you by appearing to be an angel of light (that is, helpful, kind, wise)?*

11:16-12:10 is the heart, and best, of these chapters. 16-21 Paul is about to say some crazy stuff about what he is proud of—what he "boasts in." So he prefaces it by writing: OK, you think I am a fool, I will talk like a fool; and you are so wise that you will be patient with a fool and listen. 21-33 Paul's shocking "resume." He is going "foolishly" to compare himself to the TMs, super-apostles—he has already said that comparing ourselves is not intelligent. He begins with a few unsurprising points—but then gives a whole catalogue of his miseries! His point is brilliant: What will the lives of the emissaries of a crucified Messiah look like? Prestige and ease? Or trouble and suffering for love's sake?!

("Forty lashes minus one": another example of how pious Jews "put a hedge about the Law." That is, to be very sure that they did not transgress God's laws, they—mentally—put a hedge, or warning track, in front of the law so that they would not even get close to breaking it. So, in order not to give more than 40 lashes [Deut 25:3] they only gave 39 lest a miscount would lead to accidental transgression. Similarly, in order not to take

the Lord's name in vain, they simply never spoke it at all! *How could you preserve the health of your soul by setting up a barrier to your worst temptation, so that you "don't even get close"?)*

The point of Paul's bizarre resume: I will boast about the things that show my weakness, because that proves I am an apostle of Christ. For just as Christ, though the Son of God, bore the weaknesses of human flesh, and yet the Spirit's power in Him conquered all enemies, just so as His apostle my personal weakness shows it is the power of Christ in me that accomplishes so much. Sort of like David and Goliath: the strength is from God, not from the person. *In what ways has Christ used your weakness to do great things to His credit?* 12:1-10 Is a special passage. Here Paul relates (though he speaks as if it were someone else, it is Paul) a mystical experience. Many Christians have had a "mystical experience," that is, a moment when the Lord spoke to them directly—such as a message of reassurance suddenly appearing in their mind. *Have you had such an experience?* ***Please tell me about it, if you have.*** Paul knows that it is not smart to boast of such experiences, but since he is being a fool . . . . The point of this story is that Paul tells us that this is how he himself learned the importance of his weakness! Namely, God allowed Satan to torment Paul in some way (there are lots of guesses, but no solid evidence, for what it was). Paul prayed for its removal. The answer he got to his prayer was No! *(Have you ever got that answer?)* Reason: it is better for you if you have this torment so that you always rely on my grace. That is why Paul is "content" (!) with problems: they show that Christ's grace is operative in him. *What weakness of yours help you to rely on Christ's grace?*

12:14-13:10 Looking forward to a personal visit, Paul's third (the first two were "a)" and "g)" above). 14-18 Paul will again refuse to accept support from them; he insists on showing his superior love for them in that way. 19-21 Paul braces himself for his visit! He fears that he will find them a bad congregation: first, the civil war described in v. 10, and second the backsliding into former sinful ways (1 Cor 6:9-11). And if he does not find them as he wishes, then they will not find him as they wish, namely, he will have to be very harsh with them.

2 Corinthians, while not always easy to follow, provides us surprising and deep ways of thinking about Christian life. Especially about suffering not as evidence that we are abandoned, but rather as evidence that the Crucified is living in us!