

2 Corinthians 6:1–10 — As Fellow Workmen

Grace Not Received in Vain, Giving No Occasion for Stumbling, and the Circumstances of Faithful Ministry

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 6:1–10

“As fellow workmen also we call upon you not to receive the grace of God in vain (for he saith, In an acceptable time I hearkened to thee, and in a day of salvation I helped thee: behold, now is the well-accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation)”

“giving no offence in anything, that the ministry be not blamed, but in everything commending ourselves as God’s ministers, in much endurance, in afflictions, in necessities, in straits...”

“as grieved but always rejoicing, as poor but enriching many, as having nothing and possessing all things.”

Fellow Workmen: Everyone in the New Creation Has a Career

The chapter opens with the words as fellow workmen. J.N. Darby’s reference to 1 Corinthians 3:9 — we are God’s fellow workmen; ye are God’s husbandry, God’s building — gives the meaning. The apostle Paul is not claiming equality with Timothy, or announcing that he and Timothy are going to lay down the law to the Corinthians. He is saying that the Corinthians, being in Christ and part of the new creation (5:17), are fellow workmen with him. Every person in the new creation has a career. The same boss, the same project. The project turns out to be us — ye are God’s husbandry. The farmer and his workers labor over the flock; that is the work.

This is a dose of humility. Paul was writing to Corinthians who, as the first epistle shows, were in a bad state and had contracted significant defilement. And he says: as fellow workmen. Not as the apostle speaking down to failing saints, but as a fellow laborer addressing those who share the same work and the same Master. A servant does not his own will but the will of his master — that is what the word servant means. Each of us, after the hours of earthly employment or schoolwork are done, has some minutes in which we could either do our own will or ask the Lord, what is thy will for me? The chapter is about what it looks like when we take the second option seriously.

Grace Not Received in Vain: The Most Important Parenthesis

Verse 2 is a parenthesis in Darby's translation, and it is the most important parenthesis in the chapter. Now is the well-accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation. Before someone can enter 2 Corinthians 6 and walk as a fellow workman, they must first be saved. Everything in the chapter that follows — the endurance, the afflictions, the consistency through tough circumstances — presupposes being in Christ. You cannot be in the new creation until you are saved. And when should that happen? Now. Not tomorrow. This is what verse 2 is there for.

Simon the sorcerer wanted to be a fellow workman with the apostles. But Peter had to tell him: thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter. He had never gotten to verse 2. He was never on the ground of grace. The grace of God had been received in vain — heard about, admired for its power, but never appropriated for salvation. That is the danger verse 1 warns against. For those who are in Christ, the danger of receiving grace in vain is using it for self-aggrandizement, feeding the flesh on the privileges of Christianity rather than letting grace transform the life.

Giving No Offence: Adorning the Doctrine

Verse 3: giving no matter of offence in anything, that the ministry be not blamed. The underlying thought in the word offence in English is an occasion for stumbling. The verse supposes that each person in the new creation has something valuable — a ministry, a testimony, the truth of the gospel — that is worth protecting from blame. There is something in what I am and what I do that could add to the power of the words I say about the Lord Jesus, or that could completely take away that power.

A man tells his neighbor about the Lord Jesus and the salvation he has found, and then hits his thumb with a hammer and coarse words come out. The neighbor says: ah, he's just like me. Those were just words. The testimony is blown. Titus 2:9–10 says that servants are to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things. The same principle: behavior adorns or disgraces the words spoken. Paul in the Philippian prison is the model — his behavior throughout that whole episode resonated so completely with his ministry that when the opportunity came to speak to the jailer, it came with power. We are epistles known and read of all men. They do not read the scriptures, but they read us.

The Lord's Plan Is Certain: Understanding Our Part

Before entering the list of difficult circumstances in verses 4–10, the chapter's overarching point must be grasped. The Lord is doing a work here on earth. He has plans. Everything he has purposed is going to happen. The question is whether we have a part in it, or whether we fail and he brings another servant in to do what we should have done. We did not come up with the work; we did not get a blank check. The Lord's commission in Matthew 28 is not a blank check for anyone to go anywhere and do anything for God in their own energy. The question is what part in his plan is mine, and then whether I carry it out in a way that adorns or disgraces the gospel.

A brother in Christ who prays for his parents' salvation cannot know whether God's plan is to use him or another servant. But his responsibility is clear: make sure that nothing in his life gives them an occasion for stumbling, a reason to point to the inconsistency between his words about Christ and his daily behavior. The Lord's purpose for that household will not be thwarted. The question is whether that brother has a part in it or not.

The List: Endurance First, and Why

Verse 4 begins the long list of circumstances with much endurance. Darby's marginal note translates this as patience. The first quality required in God's ministry is: I must wait. Paul waited years after his conversion before his active public ministry began. The Philippian jail was not in his plans for that day. Endurance is not merely patience that lets time pass pleasantly; it is uphill work, holding ground when there are no visible victories, staying when everything in the flesh wants to leave. Like Shammah standing in the field of lentils — the enemy came, the people fled, he stood, and the Lord gave a great victory.

Then come afflictions — things that land directly on us despite our patience. God has allowed it; nothing comes into a Christian's life without passing through his review. Then necessities — needs unmet, things lacked. The weaver in England with his wife and children in the cold basement, starving, sat down and gave thanks for the meal he did not have. A knock came, and a delivery of bread arrived from a broken-down cart. Another knock, and fish from a rich man's table. He turned to his children: come, now we will dine on what the Lord fed the multitude in the wilderness. Then straits — narrow places where there is only one option: go straight ahead with the Lord. No choices, no alternatives, just the one path.

The list continues through stripes, prisons, riots, labors, watchings, fastings — not all of these come to every Christian, but each of us will find somewhere in

the list the verse that nails our life. And none of them are offered by the world Cain built. Cain did not name his city after his son in order to produce more afflictions for people. He was making the best possible life without God. These circumstances are the opposite of what the flesh arranges for itself; they are what come to those who are in the world as servants of the living God.

The second half of the list turns: pureness, knowledge, long-suffering, kindness, the Holy Spirit, love unfeigned, the word of truth, the power of God — and the chapter ends, as having nothing and possessing all things. The blacksmith shoves the iron into the furnace, heats it red-hot, pulls it out, beats it on the anvil, and says: I just pray the Lord won't stop working on me. That is the response of a servant who understands what the Lord's plan includes for him — and who would not have it otherwise.

As having nothing, and possessing all things.