

The Example of the Macedonians
2 Corinthians 8:2-5
Part Two

Christians are all too often satisfied with the status quo. It is as if they do not understand that extraordinary power that is available to us in Christ to live transformed lives. And one of the most typically neglected areas of transformation is the area of giving, but fortunately for us we will have ample opportunity over the next several months to be transformed from glory to glory in this specific and very important area.

This brings us back to our study of **2 Corinthians**. So where are we in this study? Paul in **2 Corinthians 2:12-7:1** had been defending his apostolic integrity to the whole of the church excluding no one. But beginning in **2 Corinthians 7:2** this all changed when Paul began to address his remarks exclusively to only the repentant, or in other words only to those who in response to the “**severe letter**” had acknowledged their sin against God in having ignored and even mistreated him, the apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Paul began to address the repentant within the Church of Corinth he detailed for them certain responsibilities that still remained for them to fulfill.

The first responsibility that Paul brought to the attention of the repentant in 2 Corinthians 7:2-16 was their need to completely separate from his opponents. This is what Paul in essence meant when he admonished the repentant in **2 Corinthians 7:2** to make room for him and his associates in their hearts. But this was not the only responsibility that Paul brought to the attention of the repentant. There was another.

The second responsibility that Paul brought to the attention of the repentant was their need to complete the collection for the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8-9). These responsibilities, as well as the instructions related to that responsibility, were then spelled out for the repentant in **2 Corinthians 8-9** which are the chapters that we began to examine last week.

And what is the question that we are seeking to answer as we examine these two chapters? What did Paul share with the Corinthians that helped them to become wholeheartedly committed to completing the collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem in 2 Corinthians 8-9?

This is the question that we began to answer last week. So, what was the first thing? The first thing that Paul shared with the Corinthians was the example of the Macedonians (2 Corinthians 8:1-7). Paul provided this example in **2 Corinthians 8:1-7.**

Last week we only considered **verse 1**. So now let me read this for you. **“Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia.”** So how did Paul go about introducing the Macedonians’ extraordinary example of giving? Paul introduced the Macedonians’ extraordinary example of giving by first of all informing the Corinthians that the Macedonians had been given the grace of God. He introduced the grace in **verse 1** because the grace of God was the source of the Macedonians’ extraordinary giving.

This morning we will be moving on in our text from the source of the Macedonians’ extraordinary giving in 2 Corinthians 8:1 to a description of the giving itself in 2 Corinthians 8:2-5.

So now let me read these verses for you. **“That in a great ordeal of affliction [speaking of the Macedonians] their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. (3) For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, (4) begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, (5) and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.”**

These verses contain a description of what Paul saw when he examined the giving of the Macedonians. And what did he see? He saw the grace of God! And this is what he wanted the Corinthians to see when they considered his description. He wanted them to see the grace of God, or in other words he wanted them to see a kind of giving that God alone can produce when His followers are wholly yielded to Him and are being filled with His Spirit. So how did Paul go about laying the groundwork for this thought?

Paul began to lay the groundwork for this thought by reminding the Corinthians that the giving that he was about to describe in **verses 2-5**, that he believed could have only been produced by God, or in other words by the grace of God, had taken place **“in a great ordeal of affliction.”** And isn't this exactly what Paul introduced at the very beginning of **2 Corinthians 8:2**? Absolutely! This is exactly what he introduced.

So let us for a moment consider what Paul meant when he used the phrase **“in a great ordeal of affliction.”**

The word “great” (POLUS) in the Greek means “much” or “many” and indicates the extreme nature of their ordeal.

The word “affliction” (THLIPSIS) in the Greek literally refers to pressure as in crushing grapes. Figuratively, in light of this context it would describe the extreme pressure the Macedonians were under while engaging in their generous giving. So, what exactly was the nature of this extreme pressure?

This is hard to answer. But we do have some information. So let me now read for you the words of Paul to the church at Thessalonica, which was one of these Macedonian churches, and this is what Paul said, and I will be reading from **1 Thessalonians 2:14-15**.

“For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, (15) who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out.” So, what was the nature of the ordeal that was afflicting the churches of Macedonia? The Macedonian believers were being persecuted by their own countrymen in a similar manner as their Jewish brethren in Judea had been persecuted by their countrymen (1 Thessalonians 2:14-15). And how severe was this similar persecution? This similar persecution was so severe that the Macedonian believers were figuratively being crushed like grapes, based on Paul's choice of words in **2 Corinthians 8:2**.

So now let me ask you a question. If a group of people were undergoing persecution and were figuratively being crushed like grapes, would we expect them in the midst of that persecution to generously, sacrificially and cheerfully give money to help others when they themselves were struggling

to survive? And the answer would be of course we would not expect such a thing. But even though we might not expect it, this is exactly what the Macedonians did, according to Paul.

So let us now go back **2 Corinthians 8:2** and see if this is not so. **“That in a great ordeal of affliction [referring to the Macedonians] their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.”** Wow!

Even though the Macedonians were being sorely tested “in a great ordeal of affliction” by all that they were suffering, it did not prevent them from giving liberally when given the opportunity (2 Corinthians 8:2).

But we are not yet done with this verse. The extraordinary nature of the Macedonians’ liberal giving, in spite of their great ordeal of affliction, is further enhanced by two separate paradoxes within this verse. So, what is the first paradox?

The first paradox was that in the midst of the affliction the Macedonian Christians experienced an abundance of joy. Experiencing an abundance of joy in the midst of a great ordeal of affliction is a paradox. In other words, it may appear absurd that the Macedonians could be experiencing both of these things at the same time, but nonetheless that was the reality. They were. They were being afflicted, but they also were experiencing abundant joy.

So let me ask you this question. How can this be explained? Based on **2 Corinthians 8:1** the answer must be the grace of God. In other words, it was not the Macedonians who produced this joy in the midst of the affliction, it was God who produced this joy in the Macedonians in the midst of this affliction from which the liberal giving of the Macedonians flowed according to **2 Corinthians 8:2**.

Now listen very carefully. The Macedonians liberality flowed from joy rather than their joy flowing from their liberality. This is important and it explains to us why God loves a cheerful giver. He loves a cheerful giver because their cheerful giving is not a testimony about them but rather a testimony about Him and what He has done for them in Christ, what He is doing for them in Christ, and what He will do for them in Christ.

In other words, they are filled with such thanksgiving and praise because of His grace toward them that they in their joy cannot help themselves when it comes to the matter of giving. They will give and they will give cheerfully! Not maybe, not might, they will!

Does this describe us? Hopefully it does, for when we give in this way, or in other words when we give cheerfully as an outflow of the joy produced in us by God's grace it magnifies Him and glorifies Him. Praise God! And this is exactly what Paul is telling us was true of the Macedonians here in this first paradox in **2 Corinthians 8:2**.

So, what was the second paradox that Paul shared with the Corinthians that enhanced the example of the Macedonians giving? Let us continue to read the verse. **“That in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy [that is the first paradox and here comes the second] and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.”** So, what was the second paradox that enhanced the nature of the Macedonians giving?

The second paradox was that the Macedonians' deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. Deep poverty overflowing in a wealth of liberality would not be something that we would expect. In fact it would seem rather absurd but this is exactly what the Macedonians had experienced in respect to their giving and this is why we would have to consider this a second a paradox.

So let us consider this paradox a little bit further. Let us first of all look at the Macedonians' deep poverty from which the wealth of their liberality flowed.

The Greek phrase translated “deep” literally means “according to the depth.” In other words, the Macedonians in their deep poverty had hit “rock bottom.” This is what Paul was attempting to communicate when he spoke of the Macedonians as being in **“deep poverty.”** They were hurting.

And where did this **“deep poverty”** come from? This **“deep poverty”** most likely was the result of the great ordeal of affliction that we referenced earlier, or in other words this deep poverty most likely was the result of the persecution that had been leveled at the Macedonians by their fellow countrymen because of their faith in Christ. But regardless of how the

Macedonians came to this place of deep poverty, the fact was that they were there. They were financially at “rock bottom.”

So let me ask you this question. Do you believe that there might be someone here this morning that may see themselves in this very same place? And what is the answer? I would have to believe that the answer would be yes.

And humanly speaking what might be the last thing we might expect from that person? Humanly speaking, I would think the last thing that we might expect from that person would be for them “to give.” But that is exactly what the Macedonians did. They gave and their giving was truly extraordinary! Or in other words, their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. This is stated very clearly for us at the end of **verse 2**.

The example of the Macedonians is a practical proof that true generosity is not exclusively the property of the rich or well off. In fact, true generosity may be more likely seen among poor believers than among rich believers. And if there is any doubt about this let us consider the Macedonians. Were the Macedonians rich or poor? They were poor? And yet here they are being used by Paul to stir up the Corinthians to grace giving by their example.

So when the deep poverty of the Macedonians overflowed in the wealth of their liberality, how did it look? When the deep poverty of the Macedonians overflowed in the wealth of their liberality it looked like the picture Paul painted in 2 Corinthians 8:3-4. So let us quickly consider these verses so that we might ponder we might ponder this picture that Paul painted for us.

Let us begin by looking at **verse 3**. **“For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord.”** So, what does this mean? Let us first of all look at the phrase **“according to their ability.”** When Paul referred to the Macedonians as giving according to their ability, he simply meant that they gave from the little they had and not beyond what they had. This is what he meant by giving **“according to their ability,”** but he didn’t stop there.

After Paul had said that they had given according to their ability he went on to say **“and beyond their ability.”** So, what did Paul mean by this? When Paul said that the Macedonians gave beyond their ability, he simply meant

that they went beyond what could be reasonably expected from such poor congregations. Life for them was difficult, and yet they in spite of their extreme poverty and as an expression of their joy, they gave with no regard for themselves. And they did all this **“of their own accord”** according to Paul at the end of **verse 3**. In other words, there was no arm-twisting.

In fact, it very well may be that Paul, aware of their deep poverty, had not even asked them to contribute to the poor saints in Jerusalem, which might explain why Paul in the next verse, or in other words in **verse 4** said that the Macedonians were **“begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints.”**

So let me ask you this. How often do you see people **“beg to give”** rather than **“beg to get?”** I would venture to say not very often. And yet this is exactly what the Macedonians had done. Such is the grace of giving when a person’s deep poverty or a church’s deep poverty overflows in the wealth of their liberality.

So how is the grace of giving unleashed in our lives? The grace of giving is unleashed in our lives as every other grace is unleashed. So let us now go to **verse 5** and see if this is not so.

“And this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.”

When Paul said, “And this, not as we had expected,” he was simply saying that the Macedonians had far exceeded what he and his associates had expected (2 Corinthians 8:5). Now that is saying something, isn’t it? How many people have ever exceeded what Paul expected? Not many! But the Macedonians in this case had.

And what was Paul’s explanation for this extraordinary example of giving that went beyond even what he and his associates had expected? Let us continue to read **verse 5**. **“And this, not as we had expected, but they first [in other words of first priority] gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.”**

So, what was Paul’s explanation for the Macedonians’ extraordinary example of giving? Paul’s explanation for the Macedonians’ extraordinary

example of giving was that the Macedonians, as a matter of first priority, had given themselves to God.

In other words, if the Macedonians had not, as a matter of first priority, given themselves to God, none of what Paul had written concerning the Macedonians' giving here in **2 Corinthians 8:2-5** would have ever been written. And it would never have been written because it never would have happened.

May God use the example of the Macedonians to open our eyes to the extraordinary transforming power of God's grace and may we see that power express itself in our giving.