

# The Minister's Passionate Plea

2 Corinthians 6:1–2

by Mike Riccardi

## Introduction

We come again this morning to our study of Paul's Second Letter to the church at Corinth, so turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 6. If you've been engaged at all in genuine Christian ministry, you know that true ministry is always accompanied with an abundance of sorrows. The joys and the victories and the blessings are unparalleled! But the sorrows can be as deep as the joys are high.

And one of the greatest pains in all of the Christian life is having a dear friend or a beloved family member make a profession of faith in Christ, only later on in life to renounce that profession and live for themselves. I think it's not an exaggeration to say that nearly all of us know someone who fits that description. One of my best friends from the end of high school and into the beginning of college, was one of these guys for me. He and I had been discipled by our youth group leader together. We'd often share stories of what God was teaching us through our Bible reading and prayer times, and stories of our evangelistic efforts with the unbelievers in our lives. He was the leader of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in his high school, and I was the leader of a fellowship of Christian students in mine. We prayed together; we stood alongside one another in corporate worship and sang songs of praise; we even *composed* worship songs together. And then, in his first year of college (my second year), as we were making preparations to lead a Bible study together, he sent me an email telling me that he'd been indulging in secret sin for a long time, and just got tired of fighting it. He wasn't coming to Bible study, or to Sunday school, or to church, and he'd no longer be calling himself a Christian.

Janna, my wife, could tell a very similar story about her best friend from her childhood, who was also a friend of mine, but truly like a sister to Janna. They grew up in each other's houses, went to the same Christian school, discussed Scripture and spiritual things together, prayed together, served in the nursery together, and stood side-by-side in youth group and Sunday school and corporate worship together. Then, in the middle of high school she began dating an unbeliever. Years later, after they had broken up, she eventually began studying psychology and concluded that Scripture was not the sufficient and authoritative Word of God.

And in both cases, when that happened, I was absolutely heartbroken. These were dear friends—people whom Janna and I had trusted and counted on, people we poured our lives into. And our immediate reaction was to sit down with them, and speak with them, and urgently warn them not to continue down the path they were going. I remember saying, “So all of that Bible reading, all of that prayer, all of that evangelism, all of that ‘service,’ all of the sermons and Sunday school lessons and deep conversations—you're saying all of that was for nothing?” And I remember feeling, “No, not you! Maybe I could see this happening to somebody else, but not you! We've sung together, prayed together, enjoyed the Word together! Don't let all that come to naught!”

And that was precisely how Paul was feeling about the Corinthians. You remember that the Corinthians were being led astray by false teachers who sought to undermine Paul's character in order to peddle their own heresy. The Corinthians had originally bought into these lies and began questioning the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship, and therefore, the legitimacy of the Gospel that Paul preached. And that has launched Paul on an extended definition and defense of the Christian ministry.

And that defense comes to a culmination of sorts in chapter 5, verses 14 to 21. In those verses, Paul virtually preaches the very Gospel he's defending to the Corinthians. He says in verse 14 that he is driven to sacrificial ministry by the love of Christ: "the love of Christ controls us," or constrains us, he says. And then he begins discoursing on the content of the Gospel that so brilliantly displays Christ's love. And we have dug deeply into verses 14 to 21 in order to drink of the fresh waters of the well of soteriology, of the doctrines of salvation. We've examined such rich doctrines as penal substitutionary atonement, representative headship, particular redemption, lordship salvation and sanctification, monergistic regeneration and its effect on all of life, the reconciliation accomplished by Christ on the cross which overcomes the alienation between holy God and sinful man, and then finally to the mountain peak of the doctrine of justification upon the ground of the imputation of our sins to Christ, and the imputation of His righteousness to us, received through faith alone apart from works. Paul preaches this glorious Gospel to the Corinthians.

And as glorious and lofty as these truths are, Paul does not stay in the clouds. Paul is not content to remain in the realm of the merely theoretical. For Paul, even the deepest theology is immensely practical. And so after speaking about the nature of salvation and, in somewhat of a generalized way, the doctrines of the Gospel, Paul as it were takes his eyes from heaven and fastens them upon the eyes of the Corinthians themselves, and says, chapter 6 verse 1, "And working together with Him"—with the God who has accomplished this great Gospel—"we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain!"

"I urge you, Corinthians, not to be the kind of people who sit under the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, who experience the gracious blessing of being exposed to the truth, and, because of the trickery and deceit of these false apostles, bring all of those blessings to vanity! You, dear Corinthians, are my spiritual children—" He says in 1 Corinthians 4:15 that "in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel." Night and day for those 18 months that he spent with them when the church was founded, he spent them preaching and teaching this Gospel, which he's just re-preached to them in verses 14 to 21. And so he's looking at the Corinthians, his spiritual children, and he's saying, "No, not you! Maybe I could see this happening to others, but not you! We've sung together, prayed together, enjoyed the Word together! Don't let all that come to naught"

And so the heart of our passage this morning, 2 Corinthians 6:1-2, is this urgent, heartfelt, penetrating exhortation for professing believers not to receive the grace of God in vain. Let's read both verses together: "And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain—for He says, 'At the acceptable time I listened to You, and on the day of salvation I helped You.' Behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of

salvation.” So, along with that central exhortation, Paul also makes a statement about himself as the one who makes that exhortation, and he also gives a reason for the exhortation he gives. And the passage unfolds across those **three units of thought**: the exhorters, the exhortation, and the reason for the exhortation. And we can examine those three points as (1) **the privilege of ministry**, (2) **the plea of ministry**, and (3) **the promise for ministry**.

### **I. The Privilege of Ministry (v. 1a)**

Let’s look first, then, at **the privilege of ministry**. In verse 1, Paul comments on his own role as a minister of the Gospel that he’s just outlined. And he says, “And *working together with Him*, we urge you.” **The privilege of ministry** is that the faithful Christian minister is rightly called a fellow worker with God Himself in the mission to save sinners.

This is absolutely astounding. We spoke in our sermon on chapter 5, verses 18 to 20, about how God has acted in Christ to reconcile sinners to Himself through the Gospel—by not counting our trespasses against us, but counting them against Christ on the cross, who bears them as our Substitute—and then by counting Christ’s righteousness to us through faith alone. But God has also ordained that His work of reconciliation, and forgiveness, and justification be applied to sinners through the means of the preaching of that Gospel. And, wonder of wonders, God has enlisted us to be the preachers of that Gospel—to be the instrument by which the saving Gospel comes to His enemies! And so Paul says in verse 18 that God has *given* us the ministry of reconciliation as a gift; and in verse 19 that He has *committed* to us the word of reconciliation as a stewardship; and in verse 20 that “ambassadors [on behalf of] Christ,” and that God is actually “making an appeal through us” as we speak the message of the Gospel to unbelievers.

As we go through these foreign lands of unbelief as Christ’s faithful ambassadors, heralding terms of peace from our King whom sinners have offended and whose wrath is justly kindled against them—as we proclaim to them that the Lord Jesus Christ has come to pay for sin, and satisfy wrath, and accomplish peace through the blood of His cross, and that this reconciliation might be received through faith alone apart from any works, and as we *plead*, verse 20, with God’s enemies on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God, the voice of the ambassador is as the voice of the King! God Himself speaks through us! We who were once hostile, alienated enemies—ourselves having received this gracious reconciliation—are now put into service by this reconciling God to be the instrument of the reconciliation of other enemies!

And so we are rightly called “God’s fellow workers!” We are “working together with Him!” In 1 Thessalonians 3:2, Paul calls Timothy, “our brother and *God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ*.” In 1 Corinthians 3:6, Paul illustrates the ministry saying, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.” Then he says in verse 9: “For we are *God’s fellow workers*.” What an amazing thought that we—creatures of the dust, sinful traitors and enemies of the King of Grace—could be then transformed into fellow workers with God, fighting alongside Him in the spiritual battle for the souls of men! Dear friends, the ministry is a singular **privilege**!

I remember when I first moved to California as a young seminarian, I imagined what a **privilege** it would be if I could serve as an intern under one of the pastors on staff at Grace Church. And by God’s grace, in my second year, I began working with Tom Patton as an intern in

membership. What a **privilege** it was for me to spend time with him, to pick his brain, to sit in on counseling meetings, to think through philosophy of ministry about membership and baptism, to learn from his wisdom, and to work alongside him for the good of the church. Two years later, I was asked to join the pastoral staff as the Pastor of Local Outreach ministries. And I remember thinking that it was such a **privilege** for me to be part of pastoral staff meetings with men like Lance Quinn, and Bill Shannon, and Kevin Edwards—and to sit across the table from John MacArthur as we all discussed how to work together to best serve Grace Community Church, this historic church. It was an absolute honor to pull my ministerial weight alongside these men that I admired so much.

Shortly after that, I became one of the co-pastors of GraceLife, and I almost had to pinch myself when I would get calls from Phil Johnson! And even better, to meet up and have lunch with him! This was a man whose courage and conviction I'd so long admired, and now here I was, a pipsqueak 26 year-old kid getting to stand alongside him and shepherd the people that he loved, the people I was soon to grow to love and care deeply for. And then, a little over a year ago, when Pastor John asked me to take a look at some of the work done on the systematic theology project, which then led to my having a role in assisting Pastor John with the writing and editing, I'd get phone calls and text messages from John MacArthur! And the fact that I was working together with him on a project that, we pray, will have a global and even historical influence—that will preserve the theological legacy of one of the greatest expositors of our generation—that is an amazing **privilege!**

But friends, none of that even comes close to being a fellow worker with *God!* Some of you hear me rehearse those things and you say, “Oh, I'd sure love to have experienced those kinds of privileges—to have that kind of extended face time with Tom Patton, or Phil Johnson, or John MacArthur, and work alongside them to accomplish something meaningful for the kingdom.” GraceLife, you are fellow workers with the God of the universe! The infinite, eternal, immortal, invisible, all-wise, all-loving, consummately gracious King of all kings and Lord of all lords! We get to spend our lives in the same effort, in the same mission, pushing for the same goal, suffering for the same cause, that the God of all glory Himself is working towards! That is simply outstanding!

And we are not only engaged in the same effort, but God Himself is working *in* us, supplying us, through the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, with the very divine energy and power to accomplish the impossible task He has entrusted to us. And so Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:10 that the grace of God working within him is what caused him to labor more earnestly. In Ephesians 1:19 he speaks of “the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” In Colossians 1:28–29, Paul defines his ministry by saying, “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to *His power*, which *mightily works within me.*” What a **privilege** it is to be called to this ministry!

And friends, when you are pressed with the difficulties and sorrows of ministry—when remaining faithful in evangelism is difficult, when persevering in counseling a brother or sister is difficult, when admonishing the unruly, encouraging the fainthearted, helping the weak, and being patient with everyone (cf. 1 Thess 5:14) is difficult—speak truth to your own heart!

Remind yourself of the **privilege** of working together with God Himself! And when the challenges of serving one another seem to be beyond your strength, remind yourself of the **privilege** of being empowered by the strength of the Holy Spirit who works mightily within you. The ministry can be and often is sorrowful. But because of the **privilege** of ministry, Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 6:10 that he is sorrowful, yet *always rejoicing*.

## II. The Plea of Ministry (v. 1b)

Well, then the Apostle turns from describing the exhorter to identifying the exhortation that he makes. We've seen the privilege of ministry. Let's consider, **secondly, the plea of ministry**. 2 Corinthians 6:1, again, "And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain."

And in the first place, I just want to observe that the ministry *is* marked by pleading—by the issuing of a **plea**. Paul says, "We *urge* you," Corinthians. "We *exhort* you." "We *admonish* you." The word is *parakaleo*, the common word for exhortation and admonition in the New Testament. Paul used the word in chapter 5 verse 20 to speak of the appeal that God makes through the Gospel preacher—the urgent entreaty for the sinner to be reconciled to God. And while in verse 20 it is God who issues the **plea**, here in verse 2 it is the minister who issues it. As I said before, it's as if the Apostle Paul, having had his gaze fixed in heaven as he expounded the glorious doctrines of the Gospel, now lowers his eyes back to the earth and fastens them upon the eyes of the Corinthians, and says, "Just as God sends us to preach the Gospel to unbelievers, so that He might **plead** with sinners through us, so also we, working together with Him, **plead** with you, my dear Corinthians, not to receive the grace of God in vain!"

And I believe we learn from this that the minister's job description does not merely include teaching, or instructing, or informing. It includes *exhorting*. It includes passionate **pleading**. It includes coming alongside the sheep who are unruly and admonishing them to get back into line. It includes coming alongside the sheep who are discouraged and encouraging them to conduct themselves in accordance with divine truth. It includes ensuring not only that the people of God *know* the truth, but that they *love* the truth, and that they live, consistently, in *light* of the truth! Commenting on this verse, John Calvin wrote, "Ministers are here taught, that it is not enough simply to advance doctrine. They must also labor that it may be received by the hearers, and that not once merely, but continually" (245).

That's why I don't get up here and deliver a dispassionate lecture on Sundays. You say, "Mike, you get really loud, and really excited, and you're kind of all over the place." Well, that's because I'm trying to do more than get God's truth *out* of *my* head; I'm trying to get it *into* your *heart*. I've had people say to me, "Well, this morning, you stopped preaching and started meddling"—meaning, I'm hitting nerves and calling out specific things in people's lives. And I have to do that. I have to preach applicationally, in the second person, folding the Word of God

and its implications onto your lives, because I don't want a congregation that's biblically-informed but practically illiterate. I don't want a congregation that's doctrinally-sound but not acquainted with the practice of godliness. I want to do everything I can, by God's grace and by the power of the Holy Spirit, to make the truth of this Book penetrate your heart! And so Pastor John comments on this verse by saying, "God's ambassadors are privileged pleaders, begging their hearers to respond to the truth" (223).

And that applies to all of us who minister to the body of Christ, not just pastors. When you preach the Gospel to the lost, you're not to engage in a cold, detached, impersonal, matter-of-fact, take-it-or-leave-it, recitation of facts! You are to passionately proclaim the holiness and righteousness of God; you are to weep with them over the brokenness and the offense of their sin; you are to exult in the perfectly sufficient atonement that Christ has accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection; and you are to earnestly plead with them to be reconciled to God through repentance and faith in Christ!

And this even applies to your ministry to one another in the church. Brothers and sisters, you have been tasked with sharpening one another with the Word of God! You have been entrusted with the sanctification of your brethren! "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds," Hebrews 10:24; "Exhort one another, day after day, so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin," Hebrews 3:13. You *are* your brother's keeper! And that's going to mean more than politely giving generalized suggestions to people for fear of offending them! Now, this isn't license to be a jerk, but 1 Thessalonians says "Admonish the unruly." The word "unruly" referred to a soldier who was out of line. You do need to be willing to come alongside your fellow-soldiers, show them their sin from Scripture, and admonish them to get back into line. And you also need to be willing to *receive* that admonition and correction with meekness and in love. All of these things are implications of **the plea of ministry**. We are to **plead** with the lost to be saved, and we are to **plead** with the saved to be sanctified.

But what is the *content* of the minister's pleading? What is the character of his exhortation? Look at the text: "We urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain." Now, that is an interesting phrase. What would it mean for someone to receive the grace of God in vain? Is that even possible? Can grace be received by someone, and yet not achieve the goal for which it is given? Can God fail in His purposes? Does He just give humanity a little grace and hope for the best? What does this phrase mean?

One thing it does not mean is that salvation can be lost. Some people say Paul is addressing the Corinthians as believers in Christ, but since they're tempted by the deceptions of the false apostles, he's warning them not to have received the grace of salvation in vain by believing another gospel. But we know that's not what he's teaching here, because Scripture is abundantly clear that true believers cannot lose their salvation. *Eternal* life can't be lost, or it isn't eternal.

Jesus says in John 10:27: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give *eternal* life to them, and they will *never* perish; and *no one* will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and *no one* is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” John 6:39, Jesus says: “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.” And Paul believed this. Romans 8:38, Paul says: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, *nor any other created thing*, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And again in Philippians 1:6: “He who began a good work in you *will perfect it* until the day of Christ Jesus.” So whatever this means, it cannot mean that true believers lose their salvation, as long as these texts are in the Bible.

So what does it mean? I think Paul conceives of receiving the grace of God in vain in two ways—with respect to *salvation*, and with respect to *sanctification*. First, with respect to salvation, you receive the grace of God in vain when you fail to truly repent and trust in Christ—when you receive God’s grace in a merely superficial way. Sitting under the ministry of the Word of God is a manifestation of the grace of God. For the Corinthians to have had access to Paul’s personal presence and his apostolic teaching for 18 months at the founding of the church can only be described as God’s grace to them. There were other places in the world that never had access to the message of salvation; that the Corinthians even heard the Gospel from the Apostle Paul is God’s grace to them. And many of them responded to the message Paul preached, and the Church of Corinth was born.

But then these false apostles have infiltrated their ranks, and have stirred up dissension and confusion about the true Gospel, and Paul’s not sure some of the Corinthians are truly saved. They’ve made an outward profession of faith; they’re members of the church; they study the Scriptures and pray and gather for corporate worship. But they’re not truly regenerate. That’s why Paul calls them later on in chapter 13 verse 5 to: “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” Because it’s possible to make an outward profession of faith, and yet be self-deceived—and still be unregenerate and outside of Christ. The parable of the soils teaches us that. Turn to Matthew 13. In this parable, Jesus compares the many different responses to the Gospel to seed sown on a path, on rocky soil, on thorny soil, and on fertile soil. The rocky soil illustrates what Paul’s after in our text. Jesus explains what He meant by that in Matthew 13:20–21: “The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.”

The Corinthians who are enticed by the false gospel of the false apostles are in danger of proving themselves to be the rocky soil. They had superficially received the Word of God immediately

with joy. But along comes the affliction of false teaching, and they're being led astray. Paul is saying, to use the language of 1 John 2:19, "I urge you: Don't go out *from* us—don't abandon the community of the only true Gospel—and prove that you were never really *of* us! Don't give in to this false teaching and prove that you never had any firm root of salvation to begin with!" In 1 Corinthians 15:2, he calls for perseverance in faith by saying: "You are saved, *if you hold fast* the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain." Failing to hold fast the word of the Gospel that Paul had preached to them would mean that they had believed in vain—in emptiness, in a way that reveals that their "faith" was not true faith at all. Colossians 1:22–23: "He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—*if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast*, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard." And Hebrews 3:14: "For we have become partakers of Christ, *if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.*"

Persevering faith in the true Gospel of Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation! And those who flirt with false teaching, or who entertain notions of abandoning the Gospel, are in danger of having received the grace of God in vain. And dear friends, I urge you—I **plead** with you—don't let that be you! Don't you receive the grace of God in vain! You who have sat under this ministry, under the preaching of this Gospel, with every spiritual benefit available to you at your fingertips! What an utter shame it would be for you to die of starvation while seated at the banquet table! How all the grace of God which you've received here at this church, and in this fellowship group, would come to vanity if you sat under a sign-post that week by week points you to forgiveness, to blessing, to eternal life, to Christ Himself, and to perish under that sign! "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God! But encourage one another day after day, so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin!"

Get honest with yourself! Search your heart! Demand of yourself whether there be any true love to Christ in your heart! Any delight in Him for His own sake! Any relish of His glory! Any genuine love for the truth of the Word of God! Any genuine hunger and thirst for righteousness! Any true revulsion and distaste of the false pleasures of sin! Dear friend, I urge you: don't receive the grace of God in vain. Come all the way to Christ in genuine repentance and faith.

You can receive the grace of God in vain, with respect to salvation, when you receive that grace only superficially, and fail to persevere in genuine faith. But you can also receive the grace of God in vain with respect to sanctification. And you do that by failing to make use of that grace for the very purpose it was given: namely, to make progress in personal holiness. No doubt, there were professing believers in the Corinthian church who were not truly saved, and who needed to be exhorted to come all the way to faith. But then there were those who *were* saved, but who still needed to heed warnings concerning the false apostles' deceptions. And he's saying, "Look, if



you guys get sidetracked with the externalism of these false teachers—their eloquence and their charm and their letters of commendation—you’re going to fail to make progress in grace!” Just like he said to the Galatians in chapter 3 verse 3, “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” “Having been justified by nothing but the grace of God in Christ, apart from any works, are you now going to abandon that grace for a legalistic, Judaizing system of sanctification?”

And there are so many ways that this applies to us—so many ways that we who are truly saved might fail to make use of the grace of God in our lives for the purpose for which it is given. An obvious way would be to be deceived by the many false teachers of our day who, as Jude 4 says, “turn the grace of our God into licentiousness.” There are many Christians today who have been hoodwinked by a false paradigm of sanctification that basically excuses all manner of gross immorality and sinful behavior because, well, God will be gracious. This is quintessential antinomianism; the kind that literally advocates sin that grace may abound. An article was published just this week by the mistress of a recently fallen pastor, who said that he would seek to salve their consciences by speaking the word “*Tetelestai*”—“It is finished”—after their adulterous sexual encounters. That man, Tullian Tchividjian, is a false teacher. And yet there are many genuine believers who have bought into his so-called “hyper-grace” model of sanctification, that would *prostitute* the words of the Savior’s triumph *over* sin, and make them a license *to* sin!

We can also be tempted to receive the grace of God in vain by engaging in patterns of sin—by failing to press on in the fight for holiness. In 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul writes, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.” You see? Grace *works*! Paul says, “God gave me grace, but I didn’t let that grace prove vain—I didn’t let it go to waste. No, I received that grace and I got to work! I labored all the more earnestly, *precisely because* of the grace I was given!” And in Titus 2:11, Paul says, “For the *grace* of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, *instructing* us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age.” See, we don’t just receive grace for justification, which just leaves us in our corruption. Justifying grace *is* sanctifying grace. The grace that saves us *instructs* us to deny ungodliness and worldliness.

There is nothing more incongruous and backward than a genuine believer who fails to make consistent progress in grace—someone who is always taking one step forward and two steps back, who is only a hearer of the Word and not a doer of the Word, who is always yielding to temptation, who is inconsistent in the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading and prayer, who treats church as if he’s a passive spectator and doesn’t get involved in serving the body, who never speaks the Gospel to unbelievers, and who, because of all of that, never enjoys the assurance of his salvation and stumbles through his Christian life in fear and doubt.

Dear friend, if you fit into any one of those categories, I urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain! The grace of God that has forgiven you of the judgment and the punishment that your sins deserve is the grace that is the very power of God for holiness, and sanctification, and increasing Christlikeness! Don't squander that spiritual strength that is at your fingertips. Lay hold of it by trusting in the promises of God, by communing with Christ, by engaging in daily mortification, by serving the body, by preaching the Gospel. "Make every effort," as Peter says, "to add to your faith virtue, and knowledge, and self-control, and perseverance, and godliness, and brotherly affection, and love. For," 2 Peter 1:8, "If these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

### **III. The Promise for Ministry (v. 2)**

Well, we've seen the privilege of ministry, and just now the plea of ministry. Let us now turn, **thirdly**, to **the promise for ministry**. Look at our text: "We urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain—for He says, 'At the acceptable time I listened to You, and on the day of salvation I helped You.' Behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation.'"

In verse 2, Paul gives his rationale for his exhortation not to receive the grace of God in vain. "Don't let God's grace prove ineffective in your lives, *for*, or *because*, He says..." and then he quotes from Isaiah chapter 49. And it's important to observe, just briefly, that Paul doesn't just say, "*Scripture* says;" he says, "*He* says," "*God* says." And he doesn't even say, "For He *said*," past tense, but "He *says*," in the present tense. This demonstrates that the Apostles believed that what Scripture says, God says. And that even what He *said* in the Old Testament, He *says* to New Covenant believers today. This proves the abiding authority and relevance of the Old Testament for the Christian community.

But it also part of Paul's strategy of defense against the Judaizing influence of the false apostles. Since they boasted in their being Hebrews (cf. 11:22), they would have acknowledged the authority of the Old Testament, and perhaps insisted on it all the more, since they viewed Paul as undermining the Mosaic Law with his doctrine of grace. But to what Jewish authority would these false teachers appeal in order to discredit Isaiah 49? Paul is saying that his ministry is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy!

And the particular prophecy it fulfills comes in Isaiah 49. Turn there with me. Now, in Isaiah 49 we the second of the four so-called "Servant Songs." And the Servant Songs are passages in which the Messiah is either speaking, being addressed, or being spoken about. He is identified as the Father's special Servant, who would come forth from among Israel and redeem the nation out of exile and unbelief. The Servant speaks in verse 3, saying, "He," that is, the Father, "said to Me, 'You are My Servant, Israel, in Whom I will show My glory.'" The Servant is called "Israel."

And sometimes in these songs “Israel” refers to the whole nation; other times it refers only to the faithful remnant within the nation. But still other times it refers to the Messiah Himself, the quintessential faithful Israelite, the representative and fulfillment of God’s people. In this passage, we know that “Israel” can’t refer to the nation, because verse 5 says this Servant’s mission is to restore Israel: “And now says Yahweh who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be regathered to Him.” In verse 6 it says the Servant’s mission is “to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel.” This is an instance in which “My Servant, Israel” refers to the Messiah Himself.

And interestingly, verse 6 says that the restoration of Israel alone is “too small a thing” for the glorious Messiah who brings Yahweh’s salvation. This salvation is so glorious, it can’t be restricted to one nation. So, the Father says to the Servant, “I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the *ends* of the earth.” When the Messiah comes, it will be His mission to bring salvation to all the nations!

Now, we learn in verse 4 that there will be a time in Messiah’s ministry when He will feel dejected, as if He had failed in His mission. The Servant says, “But I said, ‘I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity.’” But He reminds Himself of the faithfulness and sovereignty of God: “Yet surely the justice due to Me is with Yahweh, and My reward with My God.” Now, this is very similar language to what we read in Psalm 22, where David, foreshadowing the work of Messiah, begins with the cry of dereliction: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (22:1), but then answers that God is holy and faithful—that the fathers trusted in Him and were delivered (22:3–5)—and He proclaims triumphantly that He *will* tell of His Father’s name in the midst of the assembly (22:22).

Well we know that Psalm 22 is speaking of the cross, and I believe Isaiah 49:4 is as well. On the cross, as Jesus was experiencing the abandonment of His Father, He felt as if all was for naught. But then, in verse 8—the passage Paul quotes in 2 Corinthians 6—the Father answers Him in His distress. “Thus says Yahweh, ‘In a favorable time I have answered You, And in a day of salvation I have helped you; And I will keep You and give you for a covenant of the people.’” The Father would not abandon the soul of His Son to Sheol, nor let His Holy One undergo decay (cf. Ps 16:10). He would sustain Him through His cross-work, and would raise Him up on the third day, victorious in His mission of salvation! And He says He’ll make Him a *covenant* for the people—the One who on the eve of His crucifixion said to the disciples, “This cup which is poured out for you is the *New Covenant* in My blood” (Luke 22:20).

Paul quotes this text to the Corinthians, and says, “Behold, now is ‘the acceptable time!’ Behold, now is ‘the day of salvation!’” The time in which God’s promised Messiah would come to earth to redeem Israel and accomplish salvation for all nations—that time has come in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ! And in the hour of Christ’s need, His Father answered His prayers

and helped Him in His passion through to His resurrection! And through Him He has inaugurated the *New Covenant*, in which He forgives sins, in which He removes the sinful heart of stone and implants the heart of flesh, in which He makes the Spirit to permanently indwell the believer and writes the law of God on the heart! Paul is saying, “Corinthians! The New Covenant is here! Messiah has come! And the Father has helped Him! The ministry of death and condemnation has passed! The ministry of the Spirit and of righteousness has come! Now is the day of salvation!”

Do you see Paul’s argument? How ridiculous it would be for the Corinthians to be duped by these false apostles who are insisting that the church follow the ceremonies and customs of the Mosaic Covenant, when that covenant has been *fulfilled!* when the New and better Covenant has brought salvation! This is the age of the New Covenant, the day of salvation! What an utter shame it would be for you to come short of salvation in the *day* of salvation by living as if that day of salvation had not come!

### Conclusion

And dear friend, it would be no less ridiculous for *you!* The New Covenant age has not passed! We are still living in the days of Messiah! We still say with the Apostle Paul, “Behold, *now* is the time of God’s favor! Behold, *now* is the day of salvation!” Christ has come! He has lived the perfectly righteous life that you have failed to live! And He has died on the cross under the weight of the Father’s wrath to pay for the sins of His people! And He has risen again in victory over death, and has become the Mediator of a better covenant! And the **promise** upon which all **ministry** is based and grounded is that if you turn from your sin and put your trust in Christ alone for righteousness, you will be saved!

Don’t receive the grace of God in vain! Don’t fall short of salvation in the *day* of salvation! Come *all* the way to Christ! Lay aside every distraction! Cast down your idols! Put to death anything and everything that would hinder you from being fully committed to Him! Make absolutely certain that you have a saving interest in Christ this morning! that you not merely associate with His people, but that you yourself belong to Him! that you not only know *about* Him, but that you know *Him*, personally, as your Savior and Lord! And do it *now!* Not later. Not someday when you’re older when you’re really in trouble, or after you’ve had your “fun.” *Now* is the day of salvation! Lay hold of Christ now!

And to my brothers and sisters who know Him, be a faithful minister of this Gospel by which you have been saved. Remember always the **privilege** of ministry—that as you speak His Gospel and serve His Church, you are *fellow workers* with God Himself! Be diligent to issue the **plea** of ministry—to evangelize the lost and edify the saints with *passion*, personal investment, and earnestness. Labor to get the truth not only out of your head, but into their hearts! And do so in the strength of the **power** for ministry—the great reality that the Gospel of regeneration and

forgiveness of sins has come in the New Covenant work of the Lord Jesus Christ, that now is the day of salvation, for our Savior has died and risen.