

God's Grace To The Macedonians

“Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God which hath been given in the churches of Macedonia; how that in much proof of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For according to their power, I bear witness, yea and beyond their power, they gave of their own accord, beseeching us with much entreaty in regard of this grace and the fellowship in the ministering to the saints: and this, not as we had hoped, but first they gave their own selves to the Lord, and to us through the will of God” (2 Cor. 8:1-4).

Paul now turns to another subject which clearly was in his mind; the proposed contribution for Jerusalem saints. He had earlier been asked by the twelve “to remember the poor” and he was open to their request (Gal. 2:10). Already he had, with Barnabas, been a messenger of the church in Antioch when it sent relief to the brethren which dwelt in Judaea (Acts 11:29-30). However, 10-12 years had passed between that event and this second letter to Corinth. The plight of the brethren lay heavily on his mind and ere he turned to another field of work (Spain) he wanted to assist the needs of Jerusalem Christians. To aid in that labor he solicited help from brethren in Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and very likely Asia since some of the messengers who actually carried funds were from there (1 Cor. 16:1-2; Rom. 15:26; Acts 20:4). As he introduces this subject to the Corinthians to provoke them “to complete the doing” he used the example of the Macedonians to stir them to finish what they had promised to do.

First, he speaks of the grace given in the churches of Macedonia. We almost invariably think of salvation when the scriptures speak of “grace” and well we should for the marvel of and singing of “Amazing Grace”. Still, we must remember that God's grace is not exclusively a reference to His marvelous salvation. Paul used the word to speak of the apostleship God gave him to the Gentiles (Eph. 3:2, 7, 8) and sometimes, as seen here, it signifies the ability to do a gracious and righteous work. God had enabled Macedonians to help the poor saints to such a extent that it was “beyond their power” (2 Cor. 8:3). Four phrases arrest our attention from the passage: “proof of affliction”; “abundance of joy”; “deep poverty”; “riches of their liberality”.

Paul meditated on the “proof of their affliction”. We know the locations of at least three cities where the churches were thriving: Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea — all begun by Paul on his second journey (Acts 16-18). Luke's narrative of Paul's efforts in these cities tell of his personal suffering: imprisonment in Philippi, harassed and driven out of both Thessalonica and Berea. The afflictions Paul suffered boiled over on to the churches as well and he specifically mentions their afflictions they had then and even later as he wrote, which, in the cause of the Philippians had been 10-12 years earlier (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:24; Phil. 1:29-30).

Afflictions did not dissipate their joy, however, for the apostle speaks of the “abundance of (their) joy”. To these Macedonians the prospect of eternal life with the peace and assurance of their forgiveness through their obedience to the gospel far out-weighted the

afflictions they suffered, and rather than diminishing their joy the afflictions only intensified their rich reward from God.

Added to their afflictions (which to doubters would diminish their joy) was the burden of poverty — deep poverty. A colloquialism of our present day, “living from hand to mouth,” would likely describe their status. Some have tried to overturn Paul’s later instructions that abundance of one should be a supply for the needs of another by saying that these Macedonians were actually worse off than Jerusalem saints: the Macedonians were in deep poverty while the saints in Jerusalem were only described as “poor”. This is an unfortunate choice of those who make such an effort for the word “poor” which describes the saints at Jerusalem is the same word which describes the widow whose liberality Jesus applauded (Mk. 12:41-44). Despite the Macedonians straitened circumstances, God’s grace enabled them to help needy Jerusalem saints.

Finally, ponder “the riches of their liberality”. We must ever remember that though a person’s gift might be insignificant when compared to the gift of another, it may very well be far greater as God assesses it. Two mites would pale in comparison the huge gifts the rich were casting into the temple’s treasury, yet Jesus said the poor widow gave more than the others. That was true because she had nothing left yet after their gifts, large as they were, still left the rich with an abundance. She gave all. What a wondrous testimony of her love and faith!

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