

# Paul's Offering as an Example of Repentance

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I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. <sup>23</sup> They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy" (Galatians 1:22-23)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In our Bibles Galatians immediately follows 2 Corinthians. It was not planned this way because of content. In fact the letters of Paul are arranged by size, just as the minor prophets are arranged approximately by date – or at least this appears to be the organizing principle. And yet the thematic relationship between the material at the end of 2 Corinthians and the beginning of Galatians could not be closer. In this case what I would like to point out is the connection between what Paul did to the Judean churches in Gal 1 (see also Acts 8:1), and the offering he gathered for them in 2 Cor 8.

## Paul's Offering

When Paul urges the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to gather an offering for the churches in Judea, they might have had a special need, but part of the need was in Paul's heart. It wasn't all about the churches in Judea being poor. Earlier Paul had tried to destroy God's church and had focused especially on congregations in Judea. He says in one place, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief" (1 Tim 1:13). It is true that God is always willing to forgive, but he wanted to do what he could to make things right with those he had harmed.

Paul's persecuting activity had at one time assumed prophetic proportions, having to do with the seventy weeks of Dan 9:24-27. Jesus had ministered for about three and a half years in person. Then, after He ascended back to heaven, the results of His ministry were felt in Judea for three and a half more years until the stoning of Stephen.

Read the first seven chapters of the book of Acts sometime and ask yourself, What does this tell me about Jewish attitudes toward the early church? When people put their sick out beside the road so Peter's shadow would fall on them and make them well, that's respect (see Acts 5:15). Later a great persecution would break out, but that's in

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chap. 8. The first 7 chapters deal with the second period of three and a half years that together go to make up the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy. When that time was over the gospel was to go everywhere. But during the three and a half years of Christ's own earthly ministry and during the three and a half years prior to the first persecution of the church – from Jews, not Romans – Christ was confirming a covenant with many.

When the persecution finally broke out, Paul (Saul of Tarsus) was the one who made sure it was carried out diligently. Paul went from house to house seeking out people to put in prison (see Acts 8:3), and worse. People lost their lives during this time (see Acts 26:10).

## Paul's Repentance

When he was converted, Paul's repentance was as deep and sincere as his former hatred had been. His offering for the churches of Judea was, in my view, an effort on his part to undo at least some of the harm he had done. Surely there were unsophisticated people among churches everywhere. To the believers in Corinth he wrote,

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. (1 Cor 1:26-27)

As for outright poverty, Paul says of the churches in Macedonia, "And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. <sup>2</sup> Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity" (2 Cor 8:1-2). So why not have the churches in Judea take up an offering for those in Macedonia? Financially it might have made sense, but that would have missed the point.

The offering for the saints in Judea was not just about dealing with poverty. It was about repentance. Paul felt keenly about the way he had mistreated people earlier and wanted, insofar as it was possible, to help those he had harmed.

## Conclusion

Paul's hatred for the church had run deep. His repentance ran equally deep. This is genuine repentance. Feeling sorry for sin could be a self-centered thing. In Paul's case his sorrow for past mistakes took the form of bringing practical and timely help to help those he had wronged. This is one of the deeper lessons to be learned from the offering Paul gathered for the churches of Judea in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 and from the connection between those chapters and Galatians 1:22-23.