

2 Corinthians

Chapters 1-13

Introduction

Paul planted a church in Corinth on his second missionary journey (See Acts 18). The city of Corinth was the capital city of the province of Achaia. It was a wealthy city due to its prominence as a port city and primary trade route. Corinth was famous for its high brow culture and arts as well as for its rampant sexual immorality and temple prostitution.

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia sometime around a.d. 55/56.

The Purpose for Paul's second letter to the Corinthians was written as a follow up to a stern letter written with "many tears" to the Corinthian Church mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:3-4.

I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you. —2 Cor. 2:3-4

For this reason, it is believed to be the fourth letter written to the Corinthians. The first letter is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9, the second is our 1 Corinthians, the third is the "many tears" letter mentioned in 2 Cor. 3-4, and fourth is 2 Corinthians.

The letter addresses primarily three issues. First, Paul's legitimacy as an apostle was being called into question because of his suffering and struggles in his ministry. Paul will argue in the first seven chapters that it is his sufferings, struggles and weakness that actually make his apostleship legitimate as a sign

of sharing in the sufferings of Christ and the power of his Spirit.

In chapters 8-9, Paul then calls the Corinthian church to participate in the offering which he is collecting for the persecuted believers in Judea. Paul will encourage the believers in Corinth to be generous out of their abundance.

Finally in chapters 10-13, Paul returns to the subject of the "super-apostles" of the Corinthian Church who

were stirring up dissention and undermining the apostolic authority of Paul. He confronts them in their arrogant boasting. He challenges their legitimacy by a comparison to his own credentials as an apostle.

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Paul's Defends His Legitimacy as an Apostle (1-7)

The main focus of 2 Corinthians is in Paul's defense of his own legitimacy as an apostle. His concern is not so much with himself as it is with the believers in the Corinthian church and their faith and commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul Defends His Legitimacy as an Apostle	2 Cor. 1-7
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Paul's Boast in Christ: His Sincerity toward Them	1:12-2:17
Paul's Letter of Recommendation: The Spirit in Them	3:1-4:6
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Greetings and Introduction (1:1-11)

Paul identifies himself as "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God" (1:1). He is writing not only to the Christians in Corinth but to the whole province of Achaia. His opening prayer is a blessing of God for his comfort in afflictions and sufferings. This opening blessing reveals the crux of the issue faced by the letter. A group of so called "super apostles" (see 11:5; 12:11) had infiltrated the Corinthian church and were calling into question the apostolic authority of Paul by pointing to his sufferings and afflictions.

Paul sees the very afflictions which he is undergone as the ground of his legitimacy. He is sharing "abundantly in Christ's sufferings" (1:5) For Paul, suffering is a reason to bless God for in suffering we are forced to "rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead." (1:9)

Paul's Boast in Christ: His Sincerity toward Them (1:12-2:17)

The issue of boasting will come up again later in the letter. (11:16ff) The "super-apostles" likely pointed to their own status, successes and eloquence as evidence to their supremacy over Paul and the other apostles. Paul points not to his success but to his personal relationship with and sincerity towards the Corinthian Christians.

His concern is that his delay in visiting them could be misconstrued as a broken promise. (1:15-24) He explains that the delay in his visit was to spare them the pain of a difficult and inevitable confrontation had he come. (2:1) His absence provided the necessary space for them to exercise the church discipline called for in his last letter in order for there to be occasion for forgiveness and restoration of the sinner. (2:2-11)

Paul's sincerity in his tearful accountability and gracious accommodation toward the Corinthians should be compared to the "peddlers of God's word" (2:17) who are doing ministry for their own gain rather than to serve others and Christ.

Paul's Letter of Recommendation: The Spirit in Them (3:1-4:6)

Paul continues in his defense of his apostolic ministry by providing a “letter of recommendation”. The “letter” is the ministry of the Holy Spirit of God at work within them. Earlier he spoke of his desire to have “a second experience of grace” with them.

Certainly, the first experience of grace was in the proclamation of the Gospel and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of the believers of this church. Paul compares the ministry of Moses and the “letters on stone” to his own ministry written with “the Spirit of the living God...on tablets of the human heart(3:3).

Paul's exposition of Exodus 32-34, highlights the supremacy of God's glory revealed in the new covenant in Jesus Christ as compared to the old covenant through Moses. The primary difference between the two is in the locus of divine glory.

Moses displayed a reflected and fading glory. As awesome as the light shining from his face was, it was nothing in comparison to the glory of Christ—a transfigured glory shining from within his own divine personhood. Those who behold the face of Jesus Christ are themselves transfigured from within by the divine Spirit of God, because the Spirit is the Lord!

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. —2 Cor. 3:18

Paul's conclusion is that his letter of recommendation is an “open statement of the truth” as opposed to the “disgraceful and underhanded ways” of those who “practice cunning and tamper with God's word.” (4:2). The gospel speaks for itself in the changed lives of those who are being saved and changed by it. Therefore, Paul has no need to commend himself; the fruit of the ministry of the Gospel is commendation enough.

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. —2 Cor. 4:6

The awesome power of God's glory in us, leads to an awesome ministry of reconciliation through us.

Paul will now return to the presenting issue used by the “super apostles” to question the value and legitimacy of his ministry—namely his own physical suffering.

Paul's Ministry of Reconciliation: Treasure in Jars of Clay (4:7-5:21)

Paul argues that his own external suffering serves to highlight the surpassing glory that shines within his heart and ministry.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. –2 Cor. 4:7-10

The ministry of reconciliation will lead to physical death, and eternal life. Just as Jesus was crucified in the flesh, so to must the minister of the Gospel humbly accept the call to suffering for the gospel sake. The knowledge of the death and resurrection enables the minister of the Gospel to maintain a radical outlook on life and death. From a worldly point of view, it may even seem crazy. (5:13) But from a kingdom point of view, it is the reconciling power of God.

God has chosen to use those who are “in Christ” be instruments of his “new Creation”. Paul calls this the “ministry of reconciliation” which has been entrusted to all Christians as a holy calling.

¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. –5:18-19

The heart of Paul's ministry is in this ministry of reconciliation. He is a divine ambassador calling all people to a reconciled relationship with God—including the Corinthians!

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. –2 Cor. 5:20-21

This message grace and forgiveness has been at the heart of Paul's service to them. The super-apostles are leading them away from this message of grace. Paul is calling them back to it. Paul is willing to undergo any indignity, pain or tribulation in order to see this grace fulfilled in the lives of the people of the Corinthian Church.

Paul's Challenge to Repentance: The Joy of Godly Grief (6:1-7:16)

The humility and suffering of Paul, coupled with the glory and power of the Gospel should serve to drive the Corinthians toward the joy of repentance—indeed it has! Paul could care less about his own personhood, his desire is for their salvation through repentance to Jesus Christ and holiness of life (6:1-7:1).

Paul had been bold with them in confronting the sin within their congregation in his “letter of tears”. (7:8)

This perhaps was part of the reason why they were questioning the relationship with Paul and turning toward the “super apostles”. Paul had not minced words in confronting some wrong within their congregation. While Paul realizes that the letter caused the church some measure of pain and grief. He even had mixed feelings about sending it! (7:8) His letter produced a godly grief within the congregation that led to the joys of repentance and restoration.

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.
—2 Cor. 7:9-10

Paul’s Appeal for Generosity toward the Christians in Judea (8:1-9:15)

In chapters 8 and 9, Paul shifts subjects and turns to his present task of collecting an offering to take with him to the persecuted Christians in Judea. Presently, Paul is in Macedonia. He has been completely surprised by the generosity of the Macedonian Christians. The contrast with the Corinthians could not be more stark. Macedonia is extremely poor and abounding in generosity, the Corinthians are

exceedingly rich, but will they excel in generosity?

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, whoever sows bountifully, will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. —2 Cor. 9:6-7

The Macedonian church is deeply impoverished themselves, and yet they gave not only financially, but begged to somehow give of themselves in participation. Paul praises the Macedonians as a godly example to be emulated by the Corinthians. He challenged them to excel in matching their generous witness. (8:7)

Paul encourages that if they will freely give to the Jerusalem Christians, God will match their generosity in blessings back to them in the form of thanksgivings and praise to God. (9:11-15)

Paul's Confrontation of the Super Apostles (10:1-13:11)

In the final three chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul returns his attention to the so called “super-apostles”. Paul recognizes that he is engaged in spiritual warfare with these false teachers. He is now ready to do battle with them directly in order to “take every thought captive”. (10:1-6)

It has come to Paul that the super-apostles say this of him: “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.” (10:10)

But, they do not know the Apostle Paul! They have mistaken his humility for weakness of character. Paul chooses to boast in his weakness and sufferings in order to magnify Christ and to demonstrate his love for those he serves.

Paul commends himself to them as the one who first brought them the Gospel. (10:14) He has never asked anything for himself in return. (11:7) On the contrary, the gospel came to Corinth by the expense and generosity of other congregations—even impoverished Macedonia! (11:9)

He calls the super apostles out:

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. 15 So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. –2 Cor. 11:13-15

No, Paul's credentials come in the form of his sufferings for the Gospel and Jesus Christ. (11:23-33) He could boast in his superior revelation from God (12:1-7), but he is embarrassed to do so as himself. The Lord has given him a “thorn in the flesh” to keep him from being proud. (12:7)

Paul's desire is that the church would heed his words from him and respond to his apostolic authority. His greatest fear is that they would be led astray by these false teachers.

For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. 21 I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced. –2 Cor. 12:20-21

But, Paul hopes and prays that his fears will not be realized as the Corinthian Christians respond to the call to godly sorrow and repentance as well as accountability with the false teachers. His desire is that the church will “put things in order” (13:11).