

Introduction to 2 Corinthians

Peter Evensen | August 2017

Author

Paul names himself the author at the beginning of the letter:

2 Corinthians 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia:

Paul also identifies himself as the writer in chapter 10:

2 Corinthians 10:1 I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!—

Paul includes Timothy as a sender of this letter because Timothy had just visited the church in Corinth and had recently returned with the news of how they had received Paul's previous letter.

Recipients and Background

Paul tells us to whom he is writing in v. 1: "To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia." This address is broader than that of 1 Corinthians, which only mentions "the church of God that is in Corinth." This broadening of the recipients is probably due to the problems in the Corinthian church having become known and perhaps even having spread outside of Corinth into the surrounding churches in Achaia.

See **Recipients and Background** in the **Introduction to 1 Corinthians** for more information on Corinth and the church in Corinth.

Date of Writing

Paul made a second visit to the Corinthian church after writing 1 Corinthians and learning from Timothy how it was received:

2 Corinthians 13:2 I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—

We do not know exactly when Paul made this second visit, but it was probably during his stay in Ephesus.

Paul intended to return to Corinth after his work at Ephesus was finished. He wanted to visit them both on the way to and on the way back from Macedonia:

2 Corinthians 1:15-16 Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea.

Paul sent Titus to Corinth sometime during his stay in Ephesus. Paul had to leave Ephesus earlier than he had planned because of the riot incited by the silver idol maker Artemis. Paul then went to Troas (Acts 20:1) where he hoped to meet Titus. Although the door was open for

him to work in Troas, he continued on to Macedonia because he did not find Titus in Troas and was worried about the Corinthian church:

2 Corinthians 2:12-13 When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

Paul finally met Titus in Macedonia and received news about the Corinthian congregation:

2 Corinthians 7:6, 13-15 But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus...Therefore we are comforted. And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling.

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians from Macedonia sometime near the end of 56 AD. It was sent back with Titus and two others. Titus was to gather the collection for the saints which Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians and Paul encourages the Corinthians in this letter to complete this collection.

After Paul finished his work in Macedonia, he went to Greece and spent three months there, most likely in Corinth (Acts 20:2-3).

The Severe and Sorrowful Letter

In this letter Paul references a previous letter written out of anguish that caused the Corinthians sorrow:

2 Corinthians 2:3-4 And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

2 Corinthians 7:8-9 For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. 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.

Some people think that this refers to a letter Paul wrote between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians that the Holy Spirit did not preserve for us. The description Paul gives of this letter, however, would fit 1 Corinthians. It is most likely to what we call 1 Corinthians that Paul is referring here.

Occasion and Purpose

Paul's previous letter (1 Corinthians) did have some effect on the Corinthian church. It appears that the man who had moved in with his father's wife did repent, but that the church was not quick to forgive him and perhaps it was carrying the discipline too far:

2 Corinthians 2:5-8 Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

While the divisions in the church had decreased, there were still those who challenged Paul's apostleship. They had a number of complaints against Paul:

- Paul had said that he would visit the Corinthians on the way to Macedonia but then he changed his plans (2 Corinthians 1:15-17). Because of this, they claimed Paul was not reliable.
- They said Paul was all talk. He was strong in his letters but weak in person (2 Corinthians 10:10)
- Paul would not accept financial support from the Corinthians. They claimed this showed that Paul knew he was not a true apostle because he did not think he deserved their support (2 Corinthians 11:7-9)

These so-called "super-apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11) were also teaching another gospel and another Jesus rather than the true one. The Corinthians were accepting this false teaching and being led away from the truth:

2 Corinthians 11:4 For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

These teachers were also abusing their authority and taking advantage of the Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 11:20 For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

Paul was also preparing to make his third visit to Corinth. He was concerned that they would not be ready for his visit. In particular, he was worried that they would not have the collection ready for the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul had boasted about the Corinthian's zeal in gathering this offering to the believers in Macedonia. He did not want to be humiliated by the Corinthians not completing the collection:

2 Corinthians 9:1-4 Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident.

Paul was also concerned that there were some who had not yet repented of their sins:

2 Corinthians 12:21 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.

Paul wrote this letter to deal with these issues. He writes to explain that he changed his plans to come to them because he wanted to spare them a severe visit (1:23). It was not because he was fickle or unreliable. He encourages them to forgive and comfort the man who was led to repentance (2:7-8). He writes to defend his apostleship, pointing to the signs of a true apostle that were performed among them (12:12). He defends his choice to not accept support from them so he could preach the gospel free of charge (9:18). He writes to prepare them for his visit, so that he would not have to be severe in the use of his authority when he comes:

2 Corinthians 13:10 For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

His first letter had been full of law. It had pointed out the many sins and problems in the congregation. Paul writes this letter encourage and build up the Corinthian church.

Paul sent this letter with three people: Titus:

2 Corinthians 8:16-17 But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord.

Another brother, whom Paul does not name:

2 Corinthians 8:18 With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel.

This brother does not appear to have been an associate of Paul (compare with “our brother” below).

And a third, unnamed brother:

2 Corinthians 8:22 And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you.

This third brother seems to be an associate of Paul, as Paul calls him “our brother” in contrast to simply “the brother” in verse 18.

Content

2 Corinthians is very different from most of Paul’s other letters. He does not deal as much with doctrine and practical issues. Instead, it is a deeply personal and emotional letter written by Paul to a church he founded that was facing many problems. This is the most autobiographical of his letters. For example, in this letter:

- Paul speaks of all that he has suffered as a servant of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23-27, 32-33)
- Paul speaks of his sincere concern for all the brethren (2 Corinthians 11:28-29)
- Paul speak about his “thorn in the flesh”, which God sent to keep him humble (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

2 Corinthians shows us much about Paul’s activity as an apostle and his care and concern for the work Christ has given him. The defense Paul gives of his ministry encourages us to treasure his writings as the true word of God. 2 Corinthians is doctrinally rich and a source of much encouragement for us today.

Many well-know and often-quoted Bible passages are found in 2 Corinthians, including:

- God is the Father of mercies and God of all comfort (1:3)
- All God’s promises are “yes” in Christ (1:20)
- God, in Christ, always leads us in triumphal procession and spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him through us. (2:14)
- Our sufficiency is from God (3:5)
- The veil Moses put over his face to hid the fading glory, and the veil that remains over unbelievers hearts (3:13-15)
- We with unveiled faces behold the glory of the Lord and are transformed into his image (3:18)
- “we have this treasure in jars of clay” (4:7)
- “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak (4:13)

- “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” (4:16)
- “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (4:17)
- “For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (5:1)
- “we walk by faith, not by sight” (5:7)
- “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (5:17)
- God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ and has committed to us the message of reconciliation. (5:19)
- “he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (5:20)
- “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.” (6:14)
- “go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing” (6:17)
- “godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death” (7:10)
- “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (8:9)
- “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (9:6)
- “God loves a cheerful giver” (9:7)
- “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.” (9:10)
- “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” (9:15)
- “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds...” (10:4ff)
- “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (10:17)
- “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” (11:14)
- “Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” (11:29)
- Paul’s being taken up to the 3rd heaven (12:2-4)
- Paul’s thorn in the flesh (12:7-8)
- “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (12:9)
- “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith.” (13:5)

Outline

1. Introduction (1:1-11)
2. General Remarks (1:12-2:11)
 - a. Paul's change in plans (1:12-2:4)
 - b. How to deal with the repentant sinner (2:5-11)
3. Discourse on the work of the Ministry (2:12-7:16)
 - a. The blessings of the ministry from God (2:12-4:6)
 - b. The weakness of the ministry in men (4:7-5:10)
 - c. The strength which God give to men (5:11-6:10)
 - d. A call for separation (6:11-7:1)
 - e. Paul's joy in their repentance (7:2-16)
4. Instructions on the collection for the saints (8:1-9:15)
5. Paul's defense of his actions and work (10:1-12:18)
6. Concluding Remarks (12:19-13:14)
 - a. Call to repentance (12:19-13:10)
 - b. Final exhortations and greetings (13:11-13)
 - c. Benediction (13:14)

(this overview is based on a study prepared by Pastor Nathanael Mayhew,
<http://atlanta.clclutheran.org/booksofthebibleoverview.html>)