

Second Corinthians

Introduction

Second Corinthians, written around 55 to 56 A.D. approximately one year after First Corinthians, is a response to the complex history between the Apostle Paul and the church he had established in Corinth. Of all Paul's letters it is the most personal and intimate. In it he bared his heart and declared his steadfast love for the Corinthians even though some had been extremely critical and very fickle in their affection for him. What concerned Paul preeminently was the presence of false teachers, claiming to be apostles, who had entered the church. They promoted their own ideas and at the same time sought to discredit both the person and message of the apostle.

The circumstances behind this letter reveal the difficult, often painful realities of life in the ministry. More than any of his letters, this one shows us the heart of Paul as a pastor.

As we learned in First Corinthians, the church in Corinth was weak, struggling with division and spiritual immaturity. Paul's authority had been undermined by an opposing teacher who was misleading and dividing with false teachings.

In an attempt to solve the turmoil, Paul traveled to Corinth, but the distressing visit only fueled the church's resistance. When Paul returned to Ephesus he wrote again to the church, pleading with them to repent and avoid God's judgment. Later Paul received good news through Titus that many in Corinthian had indeed repented, but a small and fractious group continued to cause problems there.

Purpose

Second Corinthians was written to defend the authenticity of both his apostleship and his message. In the process of Paul's defense, three key purposes emerge: (1) Paul expressed his joy at the favorable response of the church to Paul's ministry (chaps. 1-7); (2) he sought to remind the believers of their commitment to the offering for the Christians in Judea (chaps. 8-9); and (3) he sought to defend his apostolic authority (chaps. 10-13).

Summary

In chapters 1-7, Paul describes the characteristics of an Apostle. He explained that his ministry was to preach Jesus Christ alone and not himself, *"For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as bondservants for Jesus' sake"* (4:5).

Paul then explains that Christians will suffer. *"we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed"*. It is promised to followers of Christ that they will suffer. Paul states that

compared to eternity with Christ the sufferings of this world are temporary and have a purpose for us: *"For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."*

In chapters 8-9, He urges the Corinthians to give the offering to the believers in Judea, as they had promised. He taught that if they gave generously they would also *"reap generously"* (9:6).

Chapters 10-13 Paul defends his ministry and responds to attacks about his Apostleship. They had been questioning his authority and opposing him. Paul declares that if anyone preaches a different Gospel or a different Jesus, other than what Paul and the Apostles were preaching, they are false teachers and deceitful workers and should not be accepted.

Paul also explains a theology of his own suffering. He asks God to remove a suffering from His life but God refuses. God responds to him, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness"*. Paul understood that God is sovereign and in control over even his sufferings. Therefore, Paul embraces his suffering because God allows them into his life for a purpose regardless of how difficult they may be. In times of calamity, he understood that these were times when he depended on God's strength and mercy the most. Paul responds, *"Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong"*. Paul knew he was the strongest when he felt the weakest because he depended on God, the one who has infinite strength.

The last thing Apostle Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians is how to test yourself. If you want to know if you are a Christian, if you want to know if you are a believer and follower of Jesus Christ, than you must test yourself, *"to see if you are in the faith"*; examine yourself with Scripture (13:5).

Themes in Second Corinthians

Suffering is Part of Christian Service - Paul was no stranger to suffering. He had endured much opposition, persecution, and even a physical "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Through painful experiences, Paul had learned how to comfort others. And so it is for anyone who wishes to follow in Christ's footsteps.

Church Discipline - Immorality in the church needs to be dealt with wisely and appropriately. The church's role is too important to allow sin and false teachings to go unchecked. The goal of church discipline is not to punish, but to correct and restore. Love must be the guiding force.

Future Hope - By keeping our eyes on the glories of heaven, we can endure our present sufferings. In the end we overcome this world.

Generous Giving - Paul encouraged continued generosity among the members of the Corinthian church as a means of spreading God's kingdom.

Correct Doctrine - Paul wasn't trying to win a popularity contest when he confronted the false teaching in Corinth. No, he knew that integrity of doctrine was vital to the health of the church. His sincere love for the believers is what drove him to defend his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Key Word(s):

While the general focus of this epistle is Paul's "defense" of his ministry and authority, a key word that surfaces is "comfort" (occurring 11 times in 9 verses). As we face the various dilemmas of life, we must all learn to find our comfort in God who is the God of all comfort.

Key Verses

4:5-6. For we do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 4:6 For God, who said "*Let light shine out of darkness,*" is the one who shined in our hearts to give us the light of the glorious knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

4:16-18. Therefore we do not despair, but even if our physical body is wearing away, our inner person is being renewed day by day. 4:17 For our momentary light suffering is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 4:18 because we are not looking at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

5:17-19. So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away, see, what is new has come! 5:18 And all these things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who has given us the ministry of reconciliation. 5:19 In other words, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's trespasses against them, and he has given us the message of reconciliation.

Commentary

Life is relational. We hope and hurt the most about relationships with people who matter to us. Second Corinthians is all about relationships—not perfect ones, but real ones. In this letter the apostle Paul reveals that he is struggling deeply in his relationship with the believers in Corinth. Though he founded this church, they have apparently rejected him. This letter is an attempt at reconciliation. What made Paul's relationship more complicated was the seeming contest between Paul and his converts. The Corinthians were enjoying charismatic ecstasy. They had their orators, theologians, super-saints and super-apostles. They were strong, wise and triumphant. Paul, in contrast, was weak, foolish and a seeming failure.

In similar circumstances most people try to use strength and wisdom to win their way back. They create just the right leadership image. But Paul chose to pour out his soul to them, trusting that in the process Christ would be revealed. In this letter Paul is both medium and message. This great Christian leader takes the enormous risk of telling how confused, upset and weak he is. In First Corinthians Paul lets us see inside a first-century church. But in Second Corinthians Paul lets us see inside a first-century Christian, the apostle himself. Through his large heart we see into the heart of God and the heart of the Christian message.

Paul founded the church in Corinth about A.D. 50. It was a lively church composed of first-generation Christians but infected with many of the problems associated with a mission. Corinth was the Las Vegas of the Roman Empire. Some new believers polluted the church with their secular standards in business and sexuality. They argued that all things are permissible in Christ. Others got super spiritual and boasted about their visions, prophecies, words of knowledge and spiritual experiences. In the course of time they wrote Paul asking for advice. Paul wrote First Corinthians to address these questions and various problems. Then it seems the Corinthians turned against the founding apostle, a crucial fact to know in order to understand 2 Corinthians. This letter was born in hurt.

Paul paid a second "painful visit" (2 Corn. 2:1) and wrote a "sorrowful" letter, now lost, from Ephesus (2:4). It is highly likely that Paul then came to Macedonia (2 Corn. 7:5), modern Greece, where he was reunited with Titus from Corinth and from which he wrote 2 Corinthians, probably while in Philippi. Later in A.D. 56 Paul visited Corinth again to receive their gifts for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

As 2 Corinthians was written, Paul had several problems with the Corinthians: he changed his travel plans and did not come when he said he would (2 Corn. 1:12—2:4); they failed to discipline the person who caused a grievous offense (2:5-11); their contributions for his collection for the Jewish Christians had lapsed (2 Corn. 8—9); he had accepted financial support from the Macedonians (Thessalonica and Philippi) but not from the Achaians, especially the Corinthians (11:7-11). Paul also conflicted with newly arrived ministers in Corinth who preached a different gospel, probably a return to a form of Judaism (2:14—7:4; 10:1—13:14). Some individual Corinthians criticized Paul because he was a powerful letter-writer but a weak speaker who was unimpressive in person.

This relational conflict becomes the medium for revealing the distinctive message of this book: Christ meets us at our point of desperate weakness, *not only before we are saved, but after*. Against the false triumphalism of his opponents, Paul proclaims a gospel in which God's power is demonstrated best in human weakness. We have the Christ-treasure in jars of clay. In a day when authentic Christianity seems less attractive than super spirituality or the "gospel of health, wealth and prosperity," Paul's searing honesty offers exactly what the world so deeply hungers for: it tells us how to be really real. As we walk through Paul's relationship with the Corinthians step by step, we

discover how God in Christ is prepared to meet our deepest relational needs just as we are and where we are.

Relevancy

Second Corinthians is quite relevant today, especially for those who feel called to Christian ministry. The first half of the book details the duties and privileges of a leader. The epistle is also a tremendous source of hope and encouragement for anyone suffering through trials.

Next Month: Galatians