



# 2<sup>ND</sup> CORINTHIANS

Survey of the New Testament: The Pauline Epistles

Winter 2006

## Introduction (1:1-11)

Author: The apostle Paul (1:1a).  
Audience: The church in Corinth (1:1b)  
Date: AD 56.

### Occasion for the Writing

Fee and Stewart, in their book *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* summarize the difficulty in studying the book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians:

*“Reading 2 Corinthians is something like turning on the television in the middle of a very complicated play. People are talking and things are happening, but we’re not sure who some of the characters are or what the plot is.”*

This letter from Paul to the church in Corinth is intensely personal and deals with issues of conflict and correction between the apostle who founded the church and the church. But the issues in the book are not readily apparent, so to gain any understanding of the book, therefore requires us to understand the plot of the “play” and a few of the characters in the play.

### The Plot

Chronology of Paul’s Relationship with the Corinthian Church		
AD 51	1 <sup>st</sup> Visit	Paul first visits Corinth in the spring of AD 51. He establishes the church and stays for 18 months as part of his second missionary journey.
AD 53	1 <sup>st</sup> Letter	Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9) from Ephesus during his third missionary journey early in his 2-year stay in Ephesus. This letter has been lost.
AD 53-54	2 <sup>nd</sup> Letter	Paul learns from Chloe’s household and from a letter written by the Corinthians of problems within the church. Paul writes his second letter to the Corinthians (known as 1 <sup>st</sup> Corinthians).
AD 54	2 <sup>nd</sup> Visit	Paul makes his second visit to Corinth, sailing directly from Ephesus to Corinth rather than traveling through Macedonia as expected. This was the “painful visit” referred to in 2 Corinthians 2:1.
AD 54-55	3 <sup>rd</sup> Letter	Paul returns to Ephesus and follows up his visit with a third (now lost) letter to the church. This letter grieved Paul greatly because of its highly disciplinary nature. This letter was probably carried by Titus.
AD 56	4 <sup>th</sup> Letter	Paul fled Ephesus in the spring of AD56, heading towards Troas, where he hoped to run into Titus, returning with a report from Corinth. Not finding Titus, he continues to Macedonia where he meets Titus and learns that the Corinthians have responded positively to his letter. Paul writes his fourth letter to the Corinthians (known to us as 2 <sup>nd</sup> Corinthians) in response to this news.
AD 56-57	3 <sup>rd</sup> Visit	Paul makes his third and final visit to Corinth in the winter of AD 56-67.

Source: David K. Lowry. “2 Corinthians.” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, ed. Victor Books, 1988.

After Paul write his 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians, Paul relationship with the Corinthians has taken a turn for the worse. We don’t know exactly what the issue which caused the relationship to sour, but Paul changes his plan and makes an unexpected visit to Corinth, not traveling through Macedonia as

expected, but sailing straight from Ephesus to Corinth. This visit is called the “painful visit” in 2 Corinthians 2:1. Following this visit, Paul writes a scathing letter in which he is highly critical of the Corinthians. The letter has been lost to history, so any speculation as to the issue is just conjecture.

Paul, very likely, sent this letter by the hand of Titus. Knowing that Titus would return to Ephesus through Macedonia and Troas, Paul travels first to Troas then to Macedonia, hoping to meet Titus to see how the letter was received. Paul meets up with Titus in Macedonia, where the report is good. The Corinthians took the letter well and repented.

Paul writes a third letter in response to this good report. This is the book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians.

### **Paul’s Opponents**

Clearly from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, Paul faces some vocal and persistent opponents in the church in Corinth. These opponents doubt his apostolic authority and find his style weak and unworthy of his status. What we know of these opponents, however, only comes from Paul’s reaction to them in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. Nonetheless, we can piece together the following profile:

- They were Jews from Israel (11:22).
- They claimed to have apostolic authority. Paul says they claimed to be the “most eminent” apostles, or as the ESV translates it, “super-apostles” (11:5, 12:11). They had letters of recommendation from prominent church leaders backing this authority (3:1).
- They claimed to be disciples of Jesus (5:16, 10:7)
- They had a high view of Moses (3:7-16)
- They claimed to have visions and revelations (5:13, 12:1, 7).
- They performed miracles (12:12)
- They accepted payment by the Corinthians for their service as apostles (11:12)
- They very eloquent and full of wisdom and knowledge (11:6).

They did not appear to require the Gentiles to be circumcised or follow all aspects the Jewish law, except perhaps Jewish dietary laws. While they seemed to dazzle the Corinthians with the logic and rhetoric, they probably were not Greek philosophers. Nonetheless, they boasted in themselves and their inflated view of spirituality, and seem to believe that they had become partakers of God’s eternal kingdom already (5:1-10).

### **Unity of the Book**

The book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians has some sharp divisions in its structure. This leads most biblical scholars to believe that the book was actually at least two separate books which were later placed together. Most scholars see chapters 1-9 as one book, dealing with the Corinthians acceptance of Paul’s rebuke, while chapters 10-13 require Paul to openly rebuke the Corinthians.

Those who believe this two be two separate letters disagree as to when chapters 10-13 were written. Some believe these chapters to be the third “sorrowful letter” which Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 2:4. Others see these chapters as a fifth letter Paul writes after he hears that his opponents had again gained the upper hand after Titus had left with the positive report.

However, while the book has multiple topics and occasions, there is nothing in the text to suggest that chapters 10-13 stand alone as its own letter and the tradition of this book’s unity is sufficient for us to assume that the entire book was delivered to the Corinthians as a unified letter.

### **Theme of the Book (1:3-12)**

Paul had suffered greatly in Ephesus (which is located in Asia) just prior to writing this letter (1:8, Acts 19:23ff). The Corinthians had been praying for Paul’s deliverance from this persecution, and God had indeed delivered Paul (1:10-11).

But for Paul, while difficult, the persecution was something of which he found comfort (1:4). For Paul, to suffer is to share in the suffering of Christ (1:5). This introduces the theme of 2 Corinthians.

Throughout the book, Paul will boast not in his accomplishments, but in his suffering. For Paul, the gospel is found through weakness and suffering.

*Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)*

## Structure of the Book

He writes how glad he is that they have properly responded (chapters 1-7). He also reminds them that he still plans to come to receive the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem, as he told them in 1 Corinthians 16. Finally, he finishes the letter with a rebuke of those in Corinth who are still in rebellion against Paul's teaching.

Salutation	Paul Explains His Conduct						The Collection	Paul's Defense	Conclusion
	Paul's Change of Plans		Superiority of Paul's Spirituality		Reconciliation with the Corinthians				
1:1    1:11	1:12	2:13	2:14	7:4	7:5	7:16	8:1    9:15	10:1    13:10	13:11    13:13

## Paul Explains His Conduct (1:12-7:16)

### Paul Explains His Change of Plans (1:12-2:13)

Evidently Paul had fallen under criticism by his opponents for not following through on his stated plan to visit them. He had told them that he would be visiting them after traveling through Macedonia, and then continue on his way to Jerusalem (1:15-16, 1 Corinthians 16:5-6). But, Paul had not shown up to visit them.

Paul's opponents had used this to state that Paul was unreliable (1:17a) and you couldn't trust his word. Paul defends his word (1:17b). Paul states that he hadn't visited them because his words to them would have caused them too much sorrow (2:1). Instead he wrote to them a "sorrowful letter" (2:9) by the hand of Titus. Now Paul had traveled to Troas, hoping to find Titus on his return trip from Corinth (2:12). But when he wasn't there, Paul continued to Macedonia hoping to find him there (2:13).

### Superiority of Paul's Spirituality (2:14-7:4)

Paul uses his distress at not finding Titus to break-off the discussion and talk about the nature of true spirituality in contrast to the spirituality being offered by his opponents. He will pick up the story of what happened with Titus and Macedonia in 7:5.

### Paul Contrasts the New and Old Covenants (2:14-3: 18)

#### *Paul's Motives for Preaching (2:14-3:6)*

Paul begins his digression with thanksgiving that God had given him the opportunity to share the word of God (2:14). Paul finds joy in the preaching of Christ alone, where as his opponents used preaching as an opportunity for monetary gain (2:17). Indeed, Paul doesn't preach to enhance his reputation. He doesn't preach so he can gain letters of recommendation. The Corinthians themselves are his letter of recommendation, written not in stone, but on their hearts (3:1-3). For Paul finds his adequacy not in letters of recommendation, but in God as servants of the new covenant (3:4-6).

### *Contrasting the Glory of the New and Old Covenants (3:7-18)*

The old covenant was written on stone tablets, and when Moses encountered it, his face shown with the glory of God (3:7). But this glory faded. The new covenant is written on the tablets of human hearts, and carries a glory that does not fade (3:11). Moses covered his face with a veil to hide the fact the glory had faded (3:12). Those who continue to preach the old covenant still have that veil (3:15). But those who preach the new covenant have lifted the veil, showing a life of freedom from the law (3:17), and the promise of a life being transformed from into an everlasting glory (3:18).

### **The Coming Glory of Our Resurrected Bodies (4:1-5:10)**

Paul's ministry had been to reveal the glory found in God, and to unveil that glory through preaching Christ (4:5-6). But this glory was not to be found in our current earthly bodies (4:7). These bodies will always face affliction. But we do not despair, for our glory is yet to come when the life of Jesus comes in our resurrected bodies (4:8-10). For he who raised Jesus from the dead, will raise us (4:13) into this everlasting glory (4:14).

Our current bodies are but earthly tents, burdened with suffering (5:1, 4). While we remain in these bodies we are absent from the Lord (5:6), but in death we become absent from the body, but present with the Lord (5:8).

Therefore, Paul states that Christ's death and resurrection changes our perspective on everything. Because we need not fear death, for in it we are glorified, we therefore can live not for ourselves but are free to live for Christ (5:15).

### **The Gospel of Reconciliation (5:11-6:13)**

Indeed, we are now new creatures who don't deal in the flesh (5:17). Instead we have experienced reconciliation with God and are now therefore ministers of reconciliation to others (5:18-19). We are ambassadors of this reconciliation, passing on the good news that Jesus took our sin, so that we might become the righteousness of Christ (5:20-21). Therefore, Paul is willing to put up with all kinds of suffering (6:4-5) so as to fulfill this role as the ambassador and minister of reconciliation (6:11-13).

### **Do not be bound with Unbelievers (6:14-7:5)**

Paul seems to change topic in 6:13, calling on the Corinthians to not be bound together with unbelievers. This verse is often applied to various sorts of relationships, such as marriage and business partnerships. But Paul's concern was most likely with his opponents who were teaching as false apostles (11:2-4), not with non-Christians<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, we know that Paul did not want the Corinthians to stop their association with non-Christians (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). Instead, Paul considers those who oppose him to be unbelievers who are causing their fellowship to be impure and needed to be purged from their fellowship (7:1).

By ridding themselves of these false apostles, the Corinthians would have room in their hearts for Paul, who boasts on their behalf and is comforted by them, overflowing with joy in the midst of his affliction (7:4).

## **Reconciliation with the Corinthians (7:5-7:16)**

Paul was so joyful, for when he came to Macedonia, he was downhearted, for he had not found Titus (7:5). But God comforted him with the coming of Titus, and even more so, because the Corinthians had responded to the letter. Paul's sorrowful letter had brought them to the point of repentance (7:9). The theme of finding strength in weakness and joy in the midst of adversity is found even in Paul's sorrowful letter (7:9). So Paul rejoiced, was comforted and found confidence again in the Corinthians (7:16).

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<sup>1</sup> David K. Lowry. "2 Corinthians." *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, ed. (Victor Books, 1988), 570.

## The Collection (8:1-9:15)

In 1 Corinthians 16:5-6, Paul had told them his plan was to pass through Macedonia and then visit with them for a few months before heading to Jerusalem. When doing so, he would pick up from them a collection of money for the saints suffering famine back in Jerusalem. While Paul had to make an intervening journey to them, his return trip to them would be for the purpose of picking up this collection.

### The Example of the Macedonians and of Christ (8:1-24)

Paul begins this section by telling the Corinthians how generous the Macedonians had been in the collection, having given beyond their ability to give (8:1-3). The Macedonians were much poorer than the Corinthians, and Paul hoped their example would inspire the Corinthians. Paul was not commanding them to give (8:8), but appealed to them on the basis of Christ's willingness to give up his riches for their sake (8:9). The Corinthians had seemed eager to participate a year ago (8:10), and now he hoped that they would finish out their pledge (8:11).

### Paul's Guarded Confidence in the Corinthians' Gift (9:1-15)

Paul had been boasting of the Corinthians' generosity to the Macedonians, because they had been prepared for the collection for over a year. Now Paul was hopeful that his boasting was not in vain, that indeed the Corinthians had indeed followed through on their pledge (9:2-4). Just in case they weren't ready, Paul was sending some people ahead to make sure the promised give would be ready (9:5).

Paul then reminds the Corinthians and us that what we sow we reap (9:6). But we must give not out of compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (9:7). Furthermore, their gift will multiply thanksgiving to God. For while they might be thankful that God has supplied their needs, by sharing that gift with others, they might cause others to give thanksgiving to God as well (9:12-13).

## Paul's Defense (10:1-13:10)

Finally, Paul finds it necessary to conclude the letter by defending himself against the accusations of his opponents.

### Paul Defends His Poor Speaking Skills (10:1-11:15)

Paul's opponents had said that in person Paul was weak and lacking in confidence. In his letters he is bold and confrontational, but Paul doesn't have the courage to confront them in person (10:1, 10). Paul answers this attack by saying he is the same in person as in his letters (10:11). Paul has authority as an apostle to punish disobedience (10:6), but he does not feel the need to boast about his authority over them (10:8), for he doesn't want to scare them with this authority (10:9).

Furthermore, Paul doesn't feel the need to defend himself like his opponents have to (10:12). Paul's ministry has always been to present the gospel to people who have not heard it before, not to build on other men's labors (10:14). Therefore, if the gospel has taken root, it is because the Lord has caused it to happen, and the Lord's commendation is all that counts (10:17-18).

Paul may be a bad speaker, but that doesn't mean he didn't have knowledge (11:6). Furthermore, while his opponents earned their living by their teaching, this was not evidence that their preaching was worth more. In fact, Paul "robbed other churches" so that he would not be a burden to the Corinthians. In fact, it was the poorer churches in Macedonia who financed his mission to them, so that money wouldn't get in the way of the gospel (11:9).

Paul will continue this strategy, for it blocks his opponents (11:12). Paul's opponents were disguising themselves as apostles (11:13), just as Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (11:14).

### **Paul Plays the Fool (11:15-12:13)**

Paul then decides to “play the fool.” In Greek theater, the fool was used by the playwright to speak bold truth to the audience<sup>2</sup>, so Paul will speak bold truth to them. He asks the Corinthians to indulge his foolishness (11:16). In fact, they have already demonstrated their willingness to indulge foolishness by accepting those false teachers who enslaved, devoured and took advantage of them (11:20).

But Paul will play the fool by boasting to them not of his accomplishments, but in his weaknesses. His opponents may have boasted in their religious heritage (11:22) and in their service to Christ (11:23). But Paul demonstrates his service to Christ in the multitude of adversities he faced (11:23-29), and boasts then in these weaknesses (11:30). In warfare, the greatest honor went to those who scaled the wall first, but Paul find his honor in descending the wall of Damascus in a basket (11:33)!

If Paul wanted to, he could indeed boast of visions and revelations. He even had seen heaven itself (12:2-4), but is prevented from talking about it because of a thorn in the flesh (12:7). But Paul would rather boast not of these visions and revelations, but in his weaknesses and his thorn in the flesh.

Here Paul’s defensive strategy becomes apparent. By boasting in weakness, Paul finds strength. Jesus has said, “power is perfected in weakness” (12:9). Only when we become weak can the power of Christ be found in us (12:10). For Christ himself was glorified not by boasting in himself, but by becoming weak even unto death on the cross (13:4). Then the path to glory and strength for us is the same as it was for Christ.

### **Paul’s Call to Repentance (12:14-13:10)**

Paul finishes this section with a series of personal appeals to the Corinthians. Paul is going to visit them a third time, and he assures them that he will not burden them with his coming. But he comes as a parent who loves his children (12:14). Paul is worried that when he comes he will find them in sin (12:20). This will be his third visit to them, and if they are still sinning, he will not be able to spare them (13:2). Therefore, he calls on them to examine themselves (13:5) and correct their behavior in response to his writing so that he need not be sever with them when he comes to visit them (13:10).

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2002), 338.