

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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2 Corinthians

Second Corinthians shows Paul as a pastor. He passionately desires to win the Christians in Corinth back to himself, convinced that the Good News is above all a message of reconciliation. Paul faced criticism and accusations from fellow Christians who doubted him as a leader. Forced to defend himself, he opens his heart to this congregation to a degree not found in his other letters. Paul faced many dangers, including threats to his life, but being falsely accused by Christians he had won for Christ was one of his worst trials. Paul's example, demonstrating how Christ loves his church, is a great source of encouragement and hope to Christian leaders and to their congregations.

Setting

The apostle Paul first came to Corinth in the course of his second missionary journey (see [Acts 18:1–20](#)). The city was ancient even in Paul’s day. It had developed into a strong, well-populated economic and urban center from the 500s BC. Under Roman occupation and influence since Julius Caesar reestablished it in 44 BC, it became a city of fine buildings, shops, theaters, and houses. Its trade brought much wealth, and the city prospered. Artisans crafted bronze artifacts, pottery, and especially the terra cotta lamps that were well-known throughout the ancient world (see [2 Cor 4:7](#)). Agriculture was also key to Corinth’s prosperity (see [9:6–10](#); [1 Cor 3:6–9](#); [9:7](#), [10](#)). Beginning in 27 BC, Achaia (southern Greece) came under the control of the Roman senate because of Corinth’s economic importance and geographical advantage.

The religious life of Corinth is well attested in contemporary writings. The Greek goddess Aphrodite (whom the Romans called Venus)—the goddess of life, beauty, and passion—was a popular deity. Strabo speaks of her vast temple on a hill above the city as a center of prostitution, and the moral climate of Corinth was infamously degraded. Scholars are now cautious about this opinion, since the political rivalry between Corinth and nearby Athens might have motivated Strabo’s denigrating remarks about Corinth. However, we know that Paul wrote [Rom 1:18–32](#) while he was at Corinth (see Romans Book Introduction, “Date, Place, and Occasion of Writing”; cp. [Acts 20:2–3](#)), and 2 Corinthians undeniably reflects his awareness of serious moral problems there (see [2 Cor 6:14–17](#); [12:19–21](#)).

Into this city Paul brought the message of Christ. By God’s grace and the ministry of his servant, a company of believers was established, and the nascent church grew. Paul’s converts, whom he regarded as his children ([6:13](#); [12:14](#); [1 Cor 4:15](#)), were a mixed lot, a cross-section of cosmopolitan society in this city that was famous for its pretensions to wisdom and rhetoric, its popular culture, its trade, its two harbors, and its love of life. At the climax of his list of trials in [2 Corinthians 11:23–28](#), Paul writes: “Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.” No congregation seemed to bring Paul more concern than the church at Corinth.

Summary

This letter arises out of challenges to Paul's apostolic authority and the infiltration of false teachers. So, in the first half of 2 Corinthians ([chs 1-6](#)), Paul outlines his understanding of Christian service. Suffering for Christ's sake is a necessary part of service ([1:1-24](#)), though it is hard to endure when we are offended by fellow Christians ([2:1-17](#)). The message of Good News gives life in the Spirit and God's salvation, replacing the religion of the old covenant, though it has continuity with it ([3:1-18](#)). The power of the message shows through the weakness of God's servants ([4:1-18](#)) and centers in the death of God's Son, by which we are restored to God's favor ([5:1-21](#)). Christian living is marked by devotion and dedication that distinguish believers from the evils of the world ([6:1-18](#)).

In the second half of the letter ([chs 7-13](#)), Paul explains how he came to write his letters to Corinth ([7:1-16](#)), reveals principles of giving and stewardship in discussing the collection for the Jerusalem church ([8:1-9:15](#)), and makes a spirited defense of his apostolic work against those who denigrated his status because of his weaknesses ([chs 10-13](#)).

Author

No one has seriously challenged Paul's authorship of 2 Corinthians. The sole exception is that [6:14-7:1](#) is sometimes regarded as a non-Pauline insertion, perhaps from a sect, since it is similar in terminology to the Dead Sea Scrolls. More likely it is simply a digression, or perhaps it has been taken from another of Paul's letters to Corinth and inserted here. Either way, the material in it was most likely written by Paul himself to deal with the moral and spiritual situation in the church at Corinth.

Date and Occasion of Writing

During his two- to three-year stay in Ephesus (AD 53~56), Paul wrote 1 Corinthians and sent it to the church in Corinth by the hand of Timothy (see [1 Cor 16:10-11](#); 1 Corinthians Book Introduction, “Date and Occasion of Writing”). Apparently 1 Corinthians was not well-received, and some of the Corinthians were now questioning Paul’s apostolic authority. This crisis was anticipated in [1 Cor 4:18-21](#), but the challenge became more vocal and aggressive. So Paul made a personal visit from Ephesus ([2 Cor 2:1](#)). This visit apparently failed to achieve its purpose, as Paul’s opponents apparently withstood him. Humiliated before the church and insulted by a prominent member, Paul returned to Ephesus in great distress. He then wrote a “severe letter” and sent it with Titus to Corinth ([2:3-13](#)). This severe letter, which has been lost, was successful in finally bringing the Corinthians to repentance ([7:8-10](#)).

Meanwhile, Paul left Ephesus after severe trials ([Acts 19:23-41](#); cp. [1:8-11](#); [4:8-15](#); [6:4-10](#)) and traveled to Macedonia ([Acts 20:1](#)). In Macedonia Paul found Titus, who had arrived from Corinth, and Titus gave Paul a very encouraging report about the situation there ([2 Cor 7:5-7](#)). In response to that report, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians (around AD 56) and sent it back to Corinth with Titus ([8:6](#), [16-19](#)). Paul then traveled on to Corinth himself, where he spent three months (see [Acts 20:1-3](#)).

The Unity of 2 Corinthians as a Letter

Although there is no question that Paul himself wrote 2 Corinthians, there are questions about whether it was all written and sent as one letter.

[2 Cor 6:14–7:1](#). In [1 Corinthians 5:9](#), Paul mentions a letter that he had previously sent to Corinth dealing with the issue of associating with immoral people. Although this letter has been lost, some scholars believe that at least part of it is preserved as [2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1](#), which addresses the same subject. If [6:14–7:1](#) is a fragment of that previous letter, it might explain why this section seems to be inserted in the discussion, which would otherwise flow naturally from [6:13](#) directly to [7:2](#). On the other hand, Paul often digressed while writing his letters, so it is also possible that [6:14–7:1](#) is simply a digression.

[2 Cor 10:1–13:14](#). The last four chapters of 2 Corinthians are a puzzle. The tone of these chapters is indignant and ironic. Some see them as part of Paul's "severe letter" (see [7:8](#)); but that is not likely, since the Corinthians responded to his severe letter with repentance ([7:9](#)). It makes more sense to regard [chapters 10–13](#) as being written later than [chapters 1–9](#) in response to a new situation that arose following the coming of false teachers to Corinth (cp. [11:4](#), [12–15](#)). The Corinthians had warmly received these teachers, who quickly reopened old wounds and insinuated that Paul was not a true apostle nor even a Christian at all (see [10:7](#), [10](#); [11:5](#); [12:11](#)). When Paul sensed the danger, he wrote a blistering note full of irony, invective, ridicule, and self-defense. At the heart of [chapters 10–13](#) is Paul's "Fool's Speech" ([11:16–12:10](#)), in which he resorts to boasting because the need compels him ([11:1](#), [16–17](#)).

We cannot tell whether the words preserved in [chapters 10–13](#) succeeded in warding off these threats and defending once more Paul's apostolic standing in Corinth. Paul followed up this letter with a visit ([Acts 20:2](#)) as he came to Greece, presumably Corinth. He eventually sailed to Jerusalem with the money donated by the churches, including Corinth. So it is possible that Paul's last letter was the most effective of all, and the Corinthians were finally won over. Forty years after the Corinthian correspondence, a letter known as *1 Clement*, written by a leader at Rome to the Corinthians, speaks warmly of Paul's ministry.

Meaning and Message

Second Corinthians is a very human document that opens a window onto the inner life of the apostle Paul. For that reason, it has been called Paul's most personal letter.

The Minister's Job Description. The first half of the letter ([1:1-7:16](#)) explains and describes the responsibilities and privileges of a leader. The message of Good News is new ([3:1-18](#)) and must be validated by the lifestyle of those who proclaim it. And the Good News brings reconciliation ([5:1-21](#)).

The Heart of the Good News. [Chapter 5](#) contains one of the fullest accounts of Paul's central message ([5:18-21](#)). Paul had already told the Corinthians that he came preaching Christ crucified ([1 Cor 1:18-2:2](#)). Now he explains how this message is to be applied in light of the current situation: People are out of harmony with God because of sin, so God has acted in response to human need. God in Christ has dealt with the problem of sin and alienation by becoming human and taking our sin upon himself at the cross. Through Christ, we are restored to a relationship of peace and acceptance with God. We are urged to be reconciled to God ([2 Cor 5:20](#)) and to maintain our reconciliation with God. This relationship needs to be maintained throughout our lives, which implies loyalty to the Good News as Paul proclaimed it and separation from moral evils such as those that plagued the city of Corinth.

The Call to Holy Living. Running through this letter is a summons to holy life. The two governing images are of the church as a temple ([6:14-7:1](#)) and as a bride ([11:2](#)). Both images speak of purity and dedication. The Temple is the holy place where God is worshiped, so his people should be consecrated to this task. The bride of Christ should be faithful to her husband.

The Need for Generous Giving. Two lengthy chapters ([8:1-9:15](#)) are devoted to this single theme. Those who are at strife in Corinth need to consider the needs of others, especially the poverty-stricken Jewish believers in Jerusalem. The incarnate Lord Jesus Christ is our supreme model for sacrificial giving ([8:9](#)).

What was at stake at Corinth was the essence of the Good News as expressed in the way of the cross. Paul's experience of suffering and weakness as an apostle was, to the believers in Corinth, a seeming contradiction to his authority. In fact, however, the

essence of the Good News is for people to accept another person's (Christ's) suffering on their behalf. This is still relevant to leadership and daily living among Christians today.