

PART ONE

*Discussion
of Apostolic Ministry,
Interwoven with Narrative
of Paul's Relations
with the Corinthians*

SECOND CORINTHIANS 1-7

LESSON 1

Second Corinthians 1:1-14

Brief Introduction to Second Corinthians

Occasion and Purpose

Second Corinthians was written about a year after the first Corinthian epistle (2 Cor. 8:10; 9:1f). To date it in the mid-fifties is sufficient for our purposes. It was written from Macedonia (2 Cor. 2:12f; 7:5-7; 8:1; 9:1-5) after Paul's Ephesian ministry (Acts 20:1). Paul was planning to come to Corinth on his way to Jerusalem (Acts 19: 21f; 20:1f; 2 Cor. 12:14a; 13:1). The letter, apparently carried by Titus, aims at moving the Corinthians to be ready for Paul's coming (8:6; 9:1-5; 10:1-6; 12:19-21; 13:1-10).

After Paul sent the extremely critical first Corinthian epistle his Corinthian "children" (6:13; 12:14) remained heavy on his heart. He was anxious to know how they had taken his reproof (2 Cor. 1-7, especially 1:23-2:13 & 7:5-7). He had sent Titus to Corinth, either bearing the first letter or soon afterwards, and his heart was burdened as he anxiously awaited the arrival of Titus from Corinth with a report (2 Cor. 2:12f; 7:5-7). Second Corinthians was evidently written soon after Titus rejoined Paul in Macedonia. The arrival of Titus with good news from Corinth greatly relieved Paul's anxiety, but not entirely. The response to Paul's letter was everything Paul hoped for (2 Cor. 7:5-16). But still the state of the church gave reason for concern.

Another problem had come to Corinth in the form of false teachers, Jews (11:22), evidently teaching some form of Judaism. Perhaps the problem was not altogether new (for cf. 1 Cor. 9:1), but had become more serious. These teachers had attacked Paul, trying to undermine and discredit his apostleship and so to steal this church which Paul had labored to plant, which was so dear to his heart (2:4; 6:11-13; 7:2f; 12:15), and to bring it under their influence.

As we shall see, Paul expresses great confidence in his Corinthians. On the other hand, they had not stood up for Paul as they should have (12:11). Some seemed to be listening to the charges against Paul. Yet this church had been founded by Paul and the Corinthians were his own "children." Paul's heart must have been breaking. But it was not just a personal matter. It was not just Paul's reputation and personal standing

that were at stake. It was the truth of the gospel, and the salvation of the Corinthian disciples that hung in the balance. Unwilling to write them off, Paul comes to their rescue in this epistle. He had to defend himself or see the message resting upon his apostolic authority swept away.

In no other epistle does Paul bare his heart so fully as in this one. No other epistle takes us so deep into the great heart of the apostle. What a treasure God has preserved in this epistle for those who endeavor to do the work of the gospel today. We cannot be apostles, but we must most earnestly endeavor to have the heart of an apostle. We must turn to Second Corinthians again and again in order to understand the ministry of the gospel, the motives and method of the apostle, and to find inspiration, motivation and power for our own work in the twenty-first century.

Three Parts

Of three clear-cut divisions in the epistle, Part One consists of Second Corinthians 1–7. It is structured around a narrative of Paul’s relations with the Corinthians, a kind of update of Paul’s affairs after the first epistle as related to the Corinthians.¹ But interwoven with this narrative is a full discussion of Paul’s apostolic ministry. Hence the heading of Part One: *Discussion of Apostolic Ministry, Interwoven with Narrative of Paul’s Relations with the Corinthians*.

The subject of Part Two (chs. 8–9) is *The Collection for the Saints*. The Corinthians seemed to be lagging behind with regard to the order Paul had given in First Corinthians 16:1–2, perhaps under the influence of Paul’s critics in Corinth. This section encourages them to complete the job they had started a year before. It deals with preparations that needed to be made in advance of Paul’s coming. See especially 8:6 and 9:1–5.

Part Three (chs. 10–13) is *A Vindication of Paul’s Apostleship Against the Attack of False Teachers*. As we shall see, this section too aims at getting the Corinthians ready for Paul’s coming. See e. g. 12:19–21.

Thus each part is written with Paul’s anticipated visit to Corinth in view. Paul had delayed his coming (1:15–2:4) in order to give the Corinthians plenty of opportunity to correct the things that were amiss. And this entire letter is aimed at moving them to get ready for Paul’s coming. He did not want to come to them “with a rod,” but “in love and a spirit of gentleness” (1 Cor. 4:21; cf. 2 Cor. 1:23–2:1; 9:1–5; 10:1–6; 12:19–13:10).

¹ For this structure, pay particular attention to 1:15–2:13 and 7:5–16

Salutation (1:1–2)

The three main points of the salutation can be brought out with questions:

- 1a. What is the capacity in which Paul addresses the Corinthians?
- 1b. Discuss the significance of the phrase *through the will of God* in view of the effort that was being made in Corinth to discredit Paul's apostleship.
- 2a. How does Paul address the Corinthians?
- 2b. Some make much of Paul's addressing the Corinthian saints as a church of God (here and 1 Cor. 1:1f) in spite of all that was wrong with it. But would it have been a church of God if it had rejected the counsel of one who wrote with the authority of an apostle of Christ Jesus? (cf. 2:9).
3. How does Paul greet the Corinthians?

Partners in Affliction and in Comfort: Paul and the Corinthians (1:3–11)

Consider whether this heading captures the essence of this passage, also the significance of the passage in view of the effort of false teachers to drive a wedge between Paul and the Corinthians (see esp. chs. 10–13). Then notice the link with the next passage (12–14).

Outburst of Praise (3–5)

1. If you will read the first seven chapters, taking special note of what is said about Paul's relations with the Corinthians (cf. 1:23–2:4, 2:12f & 7:5–16), you will understand why this epistle begins as it does. What accounts for the outburst of emotion with which the epistle begins?
2. God could be characterized in many ways, of course (cf. 1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13; Eph. 1:17; etc.). How is he characterized in this exclamation of praise, and why?
3. How did God comfort Paul, according to 7:5–7?
4. What divine purpose would be served by the comfort extended to Paul by God? (4).
5. Make use of Colossians 1:24 and First Peter 4:12–16 to explain "the sufferings of Christ" (5).

Divine Purpose of Affliction and Comfort (6–7)

1. Paul points out that both the affliction and the comfort experienced by him (and his colleagues) is for the sake of the Corinthians. How would that be true with regard to the afflictions (6a)? (cf. 4:7–15).
2. How then would the comfort ministered to them work for the benefit of the Corinthians? (6b).
3. What made Paul’s hope for the Corinthians steadfast or firm? (7).

An Illustration of the Divine Comfort (8–11)

Affliction in Asia (8f)

The particulars are not explained. But Acts 19:23–41 certainly illustrates the potential for danger in Asia. Five descriptive expressions are piled one on the other to characterize the affliction experienced in Asia. Summarize by answering the question: How bad was it?

Divine Purpose (9)

1. The details of the situation are not important. The divine purpose is. Why did God permit Paul to be brought so low?
2. What in the situation would serve that purpose?
3. What encouragement can this passage be in times of affliction?

Deliverance and the Hope of Deliverance (10)

1. In the desperate circumstances (8–9), nothing was left for Paul and his coworkers but to trust “in God who raises the dead.” What was the outcome?
2. What in verse 10 indicates that God’s purpose in these circumstances (9) was realized and that they had learned the lesson God wanted to teach them?²

² Paul knew the experience in Asia was not the end of his afflictions. When this letter was written from Macedonia he knew trouble awaited in Jerusalem. Soon after, he wrote to the Roman Christians from Achaia, asking them to “strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; that I may be delivered from them that are disobedient in Judea” (Rom. 15: 30f). As he left Achaia a Jewish plot forced a change in his travel plans (Acts 20:3). Soon after, he told the Ephesian elders at Miletus that the Holy Spirit was warning him in every city that “bonds and afflictions”

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Corinthian Help (11)

1. In what way were the Corinthian Christians expected to help Paul?
2. What else were they expected to do?
3. What attitude toward the Corinthians is implied in verse 11?³

**Ground of Paul's Expectation:
The Sincerity of his Conduct (1:12–14)**

These verses are a transition passage. They relate to the preceding verse as supplying a reason for Paul's expectation that the Corinthians would petition God on his behalf and then give thanks for his deliverance. That expectation is founded upon the conscious sincerity of his behavior toward them.

But the short passage also leads up to the defense of his integrity against the charge of fickleness in the following verses.

General Integrity (12)

Greek *kauchesis* (glorying) refers to the act of glorying or boasting; in other words, a claim Paul can make. What claim could he make, which gave reason for his expectation that the Corinthians would be supportive of him (as in 11)?⁴

remained for him (Acts 20:23). All along the way to Jerusalem he was warned of danger awaiting him (Acts 21:4, 10–14). But God had delivered him before and he had hope “that he will also still deliver us.” Sometimes God delivers from death, as in Asia; sometimes he delivers through death (2 Tim. 4:18 with 6–8). But he always delivers those who trust him.

³ Paul expected them to support him in his trials by prayer for his deliverance [as he made request of the Romans (Rom. 15:30f)], and then send up thanks to God once he was delivered. They would be his partners both in affliction and in comfort. This expectation represents strong confidence in their attitude toward him, despite the efforts of false teachers to take this church from him.

⁴ Such boasting is not bad. Paul is making a claim that any preacher needs to be able to make. One cannot serve the Lord effectively without being able to make this claim with regard to integrity.

In the grace of God stands in contrast to in fleshly wisdom. Grace is more than the quality in God by which sins are forgiven and salvation provided. It also provides gifts for ministry. Consult such passages as Romans 12:3, First Cor. 1:4–7; 3:10; 15:10; Eph. 3:7, 8 for the usage here.

Special Application to his Letters (13)

Consider what Paul means when his claim to general integrity (in 12) is specially applied to his writing (in 13a). Do people sometimes say or write one thing when they mean another, perhaps with some sort of hidden meaning?⁵

Paul's Hope with Regard to the Corinthians (14)

What hope does Paul hold with regard to the Corinthians?⁶

⁵ Compare the charge against Paul, to which he responds in 15ff.

⁶ That we are your glorying, i. e. men to boast about rather than to disown. The whole presentation here is more understandable when we realize that Paul had enemies in Corinth, who were out to undermine and discredit him and to take this church from him. See 3:1; 5:12; 10:1, 10; 11:12f; 12:11–18 for evidence.

Even as you also are ours. It was no one way street. They were his boast (cf. Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19f), and he wanted them to feel the same toward him.