2 Corinthians – an overview

Summary – Notes from www.enterthebible.org

Paul's relationship with the Corinthian congregation has deteriorated. In 2 Corinthians, the apostle seeks to rebuild his relationship with the Corinthians, to defend his own integrity as a trustworthy and competent servant of Christ, and to refute what he perceives as the claims by other evangelists of background and gifts that are superior to his own. Paul also encourages the Corinthians to continue collecting funds for the Jerusalem churches. To do these things, Paul makes extensive use of autobiography, writing both about hardships and mystical experience. His tone changes dramatically throughout this letter, shifting from well-reasoned argument, to appeals for affection, to attacks on opponents. Because of the changes in tone as well as puzzling jumps between topics, many interpreters believe that what we call 2 Corinthians is actually a combination of multiple letters from Paul to the Corinthian church.

So What?

Second Corinthians offers a real-life window on a strained relationship between a church leader and the people whom he loves. In this letter, we see an anxious apostle hoping to restore the relationship he had with churches he founded, even as he tries to avoid being drawn into a contest with other teachers over who has the most impressive skills and credentials. To do this, he discloses much about his own devotion to the Corinthians, his hardships in ministry, and the reconciliation God has accomplished for them all in Christ.

When was it written?

After Paul had left Corinth and was living and working in Ephesus (see 1 Corinthians 16:8), he had a letter exchange with the Corinthians. First Corinthians is left from that exchange. At the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes that he expects to visit Corinth. At the beginning of 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of being reluctant to make "another painful visit" (2 Corinthians 2:1). It seems likely, then, that 2 Corinthians was written within several months of 1 Corinthians, after the visit alluded to in 1 Corinthians 16:5-7. All of this probably took place in the early 50s.

What’s it about?

Paul writes in order to mend a broken relationship with the Corinthians and to urge them, even though they are currently hosting teachers who disparage Paul, to remain loyal to Christ, to Paul, to the gospel Paul preached, and to the promise they have made to provide for the church in Jerusalem.

How do I read it?

Read 2 Corinthians the way you would read a letter from someone who was choosing words very carefully so as not to do further damage to a strained relationship, and who at the same time was having difficulty keeping emotions in check. Paul's estrangement from the Corinthians, along with the arrival of teachers in Corinth who threaten his place of leadership in that church, are key to understanding this letter.

Read it also noticing how quickly every topic becomes theological. Whether it is a discussion of travel plans or an explanation for why Paul refused money from the Corinthians, always Paul views the issue not "according to human standards," but rather in terms of God's reconciling work in Christ and God's entrusting the ministry of reconciliation to Paul and his coworkers.

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Outline: (New Interpreters Bible Commentary XI)

# **2Cor. 1:1-9:15 An Appeal for Affection and for Funds for the Jerusalem Church**

## 1:1-2, Salutation

## 1:3-11, Blessing of God

## 1:12-14, Paul’s Principled Conduct

## 1:15-2:4, Travel Plans & Painful Letter

## 2:5-11, The One Who Caused the Pain and Paul’s Forgiveness

## 2:12-13, Paul’s Anxiety for Titus

## 2:14-6:10, A Treatment of Paul’s Ministry

### Paul’s Place in God’s Purposes

### Paul’s ministry of a New Covenant

### Paul’s Ministry Sustained through Affliction and Mortality

### Paul’s ministry of Reconciliation

## 6:11-7:4, Paul’s Direct Appeal for More Affection

## 7:5-16, Reprise of Concern and Reassurances of Confidence

## 8:1-9:15, The Macedonians as Model, the Collections and the Corinthians’ Participation

### Macedonia, Ministry, and the Corinthians

### No Command but Advice: Finish what you Began

### Titus and Others as Warrantors of Probity

### Steps to Ensure that the Corinthians are Ready

### Sowing and Reaping Bountifully

# **2 Cor. 10:1-13:13, Paul’s Preparation for a Showdown Visit**

## 10:1-6, Paul’s Readiness to do Battle

## 10:7-11, Consider What you Know

## 10:12-18, Boasting Within Limit

## 11:1-15, Betrothal and Betrayal: Paul and the Opponents

## 11:16-12:20, The Fool’s Speech: Paul’s Boastful Comparison

### Bearing with fools

### So to Boast

### Boasting and Deliverance through the Damascus Wall

### The Man in Paradise with a Thorn/Stake in His Flesh

## 12:11-13, Apostolic Commendation and Confirmation

## 12:14-18, Paul’s Final Self-defense

## 12:19-21, Preliminary Assessment and Differing Expectations

## 13:1-10, Ground Rules and Challenge

## 13:11-13, Concluding Admonitions and Grace

Bible Study:

**Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7**

When we face affliction/troubles what does God do for us?

What is our role?

**Read 2 Corinthians 1:23 - 2:4**

What is going on in this passage? Why did Paul not visit again?

**Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-18**

According to verse 1 – why do we not lose heart? (see also v 16-18)

Which verse spoke most powerfully to you in this reading? Why?

**Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21**

How do you interpret the “new creation”? Is it a personal new creation or something wider in which those who are in Christ are participants?

**Read 2 Corinthians 6:1-10**

What would it look like to accept the grace of God in vain?

What is the connection between holding to the Christian faith and the sufferings that Paul endured?

**Read 2 Corinthians 8:7-15**

What is Paul asking for in this request? What verses stand out the most to you?

**Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-9**

Another common verse used for Stewardship. What do you hear in this passage?

**Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

What do you make of the levels of heaven?

Why is Paul “boasting” about this?

What do you suppose is the point of talking about the “thorn in the flesh”?

Introductory Issues: from www.enterthebible.org

•    **Authority of Paul as an apostle.**  Part of the critique that Paul is responding to in 2 Corinthians is that he is an authoritarian, especially in his letters. Paul certainly expects his letters to be received with as much deference and obedience as his presence would inspire. In this way, his letters are an extension of his apostolic authority. In 2 Corinthians 10:8 and 13:10, Paul explicitly defends his use of authority on the basis of the fact that it comes from the Lord. Furthermore, he says, he uses that authority for building up the Corinthians rather than tearing them down.

•    **Boasting.** Paul speaks of boasting in nearly every chapter of 2 Corinthians. In his day as well as ours, boasting would be a dangerous rhetorical move in public speaking since one's audience may be distanced by proud statements of one's success. Paul is in the difficult position, however, of needing to argue for his own authority and competence as an apostle while holding fast to his conviction that the one who boasts should "boast in the Lord" (see 1 Corinthians 1:31 and 2 Corinthians 10:17).

Paul resolves this tension three different ways in 2 Corinthians. Sometimes he boasts in the Corinthians, the church he founded, rather than himself (2 Corinthians 7:4, 14; 8:24). Sometimes he boasts in his own weakness, thereby bearing witness to Christ's power within him to accomplish what he has accomplished (2 Corinthians 12:9). Sometimes he gives in and boasts about his own experiences, but when he does, he admits that he is "speaking as a fool" (2 Corinthians 11:21).

•   **Integrity of 2 Corinthians.**  Most New Testament scholars believe that the letter we know as 2 Corinthians is actually a blend of two or more fragments of letters that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. Chapters 8 and 9 are oddly repetitive if they were originally part of the same letter, and they seem to say different things about the status of the Macedonians' collection. Paul's angry tone as he defends his ministry is very different from the pleading tone of his appeal for affection. The early central theme of God reconciling the world to God's self and entrusting Paul and others with a ministry of reconciliation is not mentioned or alluded to in 2 Corinthians 8-13. The letter of 2 Corinthians as we have it is probably a patchwork of multiple letters. Even so, no consensus exists either about how many letters may be represented or where precisely the one fragment ends and another begins.

•   **"Letter of Tears."**  In 2 Corinthians 2:4, Paul refers to a letter he wrote "out of much distress 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." This letter, which was likely written between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians and after a visit from Paul, is lost to us. Whatever it contained, Paul wants the Corinthians to know that his motives for sending the letter were honorable, even if the letter caused pain also among its recipients.

•**Opponents of Paul in 2 Corinthians.** We do not have sources beyond 2 Corinthians that describe the opponents Paul speaks of in this letter, so the evidence is thin for who these people were or what they taught. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul's comment about letters of recommendation leads to speculation that teachers had followed Paul's departure and had arrived with such letters or had asked what Paul's letters of recommendation had included. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul compares his background to theirs, saying that like him, they were Jewish Christian teachers. We know almost nothing about their teaching. What we know about their practice, namely, that they were criticizing Paul and treating the Corinthians shabbily, we know only from Paul's report.

•    **Third heaven.**As he talks about the extraordinary vision and revelation given to "someone," Paul says he was transported to the third heaven and paradise. In Jewish and Christian writings of the time, "heaven" and "paradise" both describe a place above the earth where God reigns and where God's people are safe from harm. Other New Testament writings also speak of layers of heaven or of "heavens" in the plural. (See, for example, Luke 21:26, Ephesians 4:10; Hebrews 1:10; 4:14.) As Revelation 2:7 describes "paradise," it is a garden, comparable to the garden of Eden. Paul is claiming to have been granted a vision of this place while he was yet alive, on earth.

•    **Thorn in the flesh.** In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul speaks of a "thorn in the flesh" that effectively tempered his elation at having seen and heard life in heaven ahead of time. Paul does not explain anything about the reality to which he refers. The description, "in the flesh," has led to speculation that Paul is referring to a physical ailment. Paul's report that he appealed for relief from this "thorn" multiple times has led to further speculation that he is speaking of a chronic condition. Beyond these generalizations, however, we have no information about what exactly Paul is describing.

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**Theological Themes:**

•   **Exchanging sin for righteousness.** In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul describes an exchange between Christ and believers, saying, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In his letters, Paul describes the work of Christ in a few different ways. For instance, in Romans 5, Paul says that just as Adam's practice of disobedience had an impact on all other people, so Christ's practice of righteousness avails for other people. In Philippians 2, Paul describes Christ as one equal with God who emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death. The two ideas are present together in 2 Corinthians 5. Here Paul says that God changes Christ's status so that Christ identifies with the human plight of sin. The result is that humans may identify with Christ's status as righteous before God.

•   **Generosity.** Two of the thirteen chapters of 2 Corinthians concern a collection of funds for the poorer churches in and around Jerusalem. At the end of Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians, he makes two theological points: (1) God will provide the means by which the Corinthians may be generous, and (2) the very act of sharing possessions with others who are in need is a way of thanking God for the provision one has received.

•   **Glory.** In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasts the glory of the giving of the law at Sinai (see Exodus 34) with the glory of the new covenant of which Paul is a minister. In the first case, the glory of God was so obvious in Moses' face that it was shining. He veiled his face so as not to frighten the people of Israel. Paul extends the metaphor of God's glory transferred to humans as God interacts with them so that, in Christ, it is not just leaders whose faces are shining with God's glory but "all of us" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

•    **Holy Spirit as "first installment."** In 2 Corinthians 1:22 and 5:5, Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as a "first installment" or a "guarantee." Paul understood the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers to be something like earnest money given in the present time, anticipating that time when "what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Corinthians 5:4). Fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23), present now among God's people, is a good faith gesture on God's part and at the same time only a fraction of what is promised to those in Christ.

•    **New covenant.**There is very little language of a "new covenant" in the Bible. Outside the book of Hebrews, the language is only in Jeremiah 31:31-34, in reports of the institution of the Lord 's Supper (Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25), and in 2 Corinthians 3. In 2 Corinthians, Paul is interpreting the words of Jeremiah in terms of the work of God in Christ. As Jeremiah had quoted God saying that God would write the covenant on human hearts, so Paul says that the Corinthians are themselves a "letter of Christ" written "not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3).

•    **Reconciliation.** Second Corinthians includes one of the simplest, most elegant statements of the Christian gospel: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Corinthians 5:19). In Paul's thought, sin is a power that enslaves humans and is intent on separating them from God. God, in Christ, breaks the hold that sin has on humans and reconciles humanity to God's self.

•    **Suffering, endurance, and comfort.** In his discussion of general affliction (2 Corinthians 4:7-11) as well as his disclosure of a thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), Paul's words provide comfort to readers who are enduring suffering. It is true that the good news that Paul proclaims is glorious. Those in Christ are being transformed "from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18). It is also true, at the same time, that the glory of God exists alongside much in the lives of believer that afflicts, perplexes, and persecutes. To be "in Christ" is to participate in the death of Jesus as well as in his life (see 2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

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