

A Survey of 2 Corinthians

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Introduction

2 Corinthians contains many notable verses--verses that many of us know by heart (see **Memorable Texts** below). Yet the meaning of the book is less than obvious to most of us for at least three reasons. First, the book's structure is disjointed. The author leaps suddenly from one thought to another, only to return to the original idea paragraphs later. Second, the letter's content is, at least in some portions, rather complex. Third, the relationship between author and readers is assumed but not fully explained within the book.

Memorable Texts

Chapter 1

- 3 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort;
- 4 Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

Chapter 4

- 7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.
- 8 We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;
- 9 Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed;
- 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;
- 18 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.

Chapter 5

- 17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.
- 21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Chapter 6

- 14 Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

Chapter 9

- 6 But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.
- 7 Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.

Chapter 10

- 4 (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;)
- 5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;

Chapter 12

- 9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Background Information

Author

According to Craig S. Keener, “virtually all scholars agree that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians.”¹ Paul identifies himself as the writer twice in the letter (1:1; 10:1). The introduction to the letter (1:1-2) is consistent with Paul’s style. Furthermore, the letter’s historical context is consistent with Pauline authorship.²

Recipients

The recipients are identified as “the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia” (1:1; cf. 1:23; 6:11). Howard F. Vos observes that Corinth was “Greece’s most splendid commercial city, [. . .] located just S of the narrow isthmus connecting central Greece with the Peloponnesus. Its strategic situation made it the mecca of trade between the East and West. [. . .] The city derived rich income from the transport of cargoes across the narrow isthmus (a distance of less than five miles).”³

Corinth was noted for its immorality. Donald H. Madvig explains:

“The temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, stood on its highest peak. The thousand female prostitutes who served there contributed to Corinth’s reputation for immorality. In fact, it is to this evil trade carried on in the name of religion that Strabo, the geographer, ascribed the prosperity of the city. The degree to which Corinth was given over to vice is apparent as early as the time of Aristophanes by the coining of the word *korinthiazomai* (lit. ‘Corinthianize’), meaning ‘practice immorality’; similarly ‘Corinthian girl’ (Gk. *Korinthia kore*) designated a prostitute. That the situation continued into Paul’s day is evidenced by the evils he attacks in his Corinthian letters.”⁴

Historical context

A proper understanding of 2 Corinthians presupposes knowledge of Paul’s contact with the Corinthian church. This contact came in the form of personal visits and correspondence. Many conservative scholars

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 491.

² The harmony between Acts, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians identifies Paul as the author of the latter two books. Timothy and Silas (Silvanus) appear as Paul’s partners during his Corinthian ministry (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor 1:19). Paul’s Ephesian ministry (Acts 19) is consistent with references to Ephesus in 1 Corinthians (15:32; 16:8). The presence of Aquilla and Priscilla in Ephesus is substantiated by Acts (18:24-26) and 1 Corinthians (16:19). Apollos’s ministry in Corinth is established in Acts (18:24-19:1) and 1 Corinthians (3:4-6). Paul’s departure from Ephesus to Macedonia is narrated in Acts (20:1) and 2 Corinthians (2:12-13; 7:5).

³ Howard F. Vos, “Corinth,” in Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, edited by R. K. Harrison, Howard F. Vos, and Cyril J. Barber (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 255.

⁴ Donald H. Madvig, “Corinth,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4th ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-88), 1:773.

agree that Paul visited Corinth three times and sent the church four letters. Following is a summary of these events:⁵

- Paul first visited Corinth during his second missionary journey, probably arriving in 51 AD. He ministered there for about 18 months (Acts 18:1-18).
- Paul returned to Palestine by way of Ephesus. Eventually he settled in Ephesus for an extended period of ministry (Acts 19). At some point in this process he wrote the Corinthians a letter that has not survived (1 Cor 5:9).
- Having learned of ongoing problems in the Corinthian church, Paul authored the letter we know as 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 1:11; 16:17). In it he addressed the church's tolerance of sinful members, its partisan spirit, its disorderly public worship, and other weaknesses.
- Paul then sent Timothy to correct the problems in Corinth. When this mission failed, Paul paid Corinth a painful visit (2 Cor 2:1).
- Paul followed this visit with a third, harsh letter (2 Cor 2:3-4; 7:8-12). (This letter has also been lost.) He dispatched Titus to minister to the Corinthians, perhaps even carrying the harsh letter.
- Paul eagerly waited to find out how the church would respond. He eventually met Titus in Macedonia, and was overjoyed to discover that the church had repented. Around 54 or 55 AC he penned his fourth letter (2 Corinthians), seeking reconciliation with the church and appealing for them to contribute to a collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.
- Paul subsequently visited Corinth for a third time (2 Cor 12:14; 13:1) to collect the church's offering.

Character

Unlike other of Paul's epistles, 2 Corinthians is not primarily theological. Rather, it is intensely personal, intimate, reflecting Paul's mixed emotions toward the Corinthian church. David K. Lowery states, "No letter of Paul's is more personal and intimate in nature than 2 Corinthians."⁶ Merrill F. Unger agrees: "The distinctive elements of Pauline theology and eschatology are clearly seen throughout. However, the letter is not doctrinal or didactic, but intensely personal. Its absorbing interest is a recital of the events with which the apostle and the Corinthians were struggling at the time."⁷

2 Corinthians reflects the mental and emotional state of its author. Therefore, it appears less organized than other of Paul's letters, such as Romans and 1 Corinthians.

Outline & Themes

David K. Lowery has commented on the structure of 2 Corinthians: "All of Paul's letters have sections which digress or are discontinuous, but in no letter is this tendency so evident as in 2 Corinthians. The circumstances under which it was composed likely contributed to this [. . .]."⁸

The overarching theme of 2 Corinthians is ministry. In this letter we see as nowhere else the apostle's heart for serving the Lord by serving the churches. Moreover, there is a significant emphasis on divine

⁵ This summary is derived from Acts, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians, as well as the following sources: David K. Lowery, "2 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*, New Testament ed., edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983), 551-552; Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 4th ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 83-94; Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, rev. ed., revised by Walter M. Dunnett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester, Eng.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 291-293, 296-303.

⁶ David K. Lowery, "2 Corinthians," 552.

⁷ Merrill F. Unger, "Corinthians, Second Epistle," in Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, edited by R. K. Harrison, Howard F. Vos, and Cyril J. Barber (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 256.

⁸ David K. Lowery, "2 Corinthians," 553.

empowerment for and validation of ministry. God makes ministry possible despite internal weakness and external hardships.

I. *Integrity*: Paul's defense of his ministry (1:1-7:16)

Themes

- Comfort in suffering (1:3-7)
 - 3 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort;
 - 4 Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.
 - 5 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.
 - 6 And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation.
 - 7 And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation.

- The glory of the gospel ministry (3:5-9)
 - 5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God;
 - 6 Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.
 - 7 But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away:
 - 8 How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?
 - 9 For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.

- Perseverance through trials (4:7-9, 17-18)
 - 7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.
 - 8 We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;
 - 9 Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed;
 - [. . .]
 - 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;
 - 18 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.

- Purposeful ambassadorship (5:17-21)
 - 17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.
 - 18 And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;
 - 19 To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.
 - 20 Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

21 For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

- Integrity in ministry (6:3-10)

3 Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed:

4 But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses,

5 In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings;

6 By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned,

7 By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left,

8 By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true;

9 As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed;

10 As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

II. *Generosity*: Paul's appeal for the Jerusalem offering (8:1-9:15)

Themes

- Cheerful giving (8:1-5; 9:6-7)

1 Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia;

2 How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.

3 For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves;

4 Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.

5 And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.

[. . .]

6 But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.

7 Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.

- Financial accountability (8:16-21)

16 But thanks be to God, which put the same earnest care into the heart of Titus for you.

17 For indeed he accepted the exhortation; but being more forward, of his own accord he went unto you.

18 And we have sent with him the brother, whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches;

19 And not that only, but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and declaration of your ready mind:

20 Avoiding this, that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered by us:

21 Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.

III. *Authority*: Paul's defense of his apostleship (10:1-13:14)

Themes

- Suffering for Christ (11:22-28)
 - 22 Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I.
 - 23 Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft.
 - 24 Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.
 - 25 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;
 - 26 In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;
 - 27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.
 - 28 Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

- All-sufficient grace (12:7-10)
 - 7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.
 - 8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.
 - 9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
 - 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Life Lessons

2 Corinthians contains many practical lessons for shepherd and congregation alike. The following truths are heavily emphasized:

- *God allows us to suffer to prepare us to minister to others.*
- *We can be confident in ministry by reflecting on the greatness of the gospel; by relying on God to sustain us through adversity; and by purposing to serve faithfully as Christ's ambassadors.*
- *We should freely give our financial resources to support Christian ministry.*
- *Spiritual leaders who conduct themselves in integrity are worthy of respect and obedience.*