The Book of 2 Corinthians

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Cover Photo: The large columns in the background of the photo are from the Temple of Apollo at Corinth, viewed from the ruins of the city.
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For Additional Study

Melvin Curry has written a commentary on the book of Second Corinthians entitled *A Commentary on Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. It is published by the Guardian of Truth Foundation. Many students may want to supplement their study by reading the commentary.
Paul’s Initial Work in Corinth

The book of Acts relates the work of the apostle Paul at Corinth. When Paul arrived in Corinth, he met Aquila and Priscilla, two Jewish Christians who had been forced to leave Rome because of the decree of Claudius (Acts 18:2). Because both were tentmakers, they worked together. Like many gospel preachers, Paul found it necessary to work with his hands to support himself in the preaching of the gospel (Acts 18:1-2; 1 Cor. 4:12). He taught in the synagogue, persuading Jews and Greeks that Jesus was the Christ. Later Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia bringing a contribution with them (2 Cor. 11:8-9; Phil. 4:15). When Paul pressed the Jews, they resisted his teaching. Paul and his brethren withdrew from the synagogue and turned to the Gentiles. He worked in the house of Justus, a Jewish convert whose house adjoined the synagogue (Acts 18:7).1

The first ones converted at Corinth were the house of Stephanas, “the firstfruits of Achaia” (1 Cor. 16:15). Paul later converted Gaius (1 Cor. 1:14), with whom he resided during a subsequent visit to Corinth (Rom. 16:23). Generally, Paul’s gospel was received by the common people. “Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble” were called (1 Cor. 1:26). Some of those who were “called” were involved in such sins as fornication, idolatry, adultery, effeminacy, homosexuality, stealing, coveting, drunkenness, reviling, and extortion (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Not all converts came from the common people; there were exceptions. Paul converted Crispus, a chief ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:8). From Paul’s work at Corinth, we see that the gospel is for all men, not just for the white middle or upper middle class.

When opposition toward Paul intensified, the Lord spoke to him in a vision reassuring him that God had many people in the city and instructing him to continue his work. Paul continued working in Corinth and surrounding areas for 18 months (Acts 18:11; cf. Rom. 16:1-2).2

When Julius Gallio was appointed governor of Achaia (52-54 A.D., see Conybeare and Howson, 326), the Jews, under the leadership of Sosthenes, used the occasion of his appointment to bring charges against Paul. They charged that “he persuadeth men to worship God contrary to the law” (Acts 18:13). Before Paul could speak his defense, Gallio dismissed the charges on the grounds that he was not interested in their religious controversies. The Greeks drove them from the judgment seat and beat Sosthenes, “and Gallio cared for none of these things” (Acts 18:17).3 After tarrying in Corinth for a good while, Paul departed for Ephesus.

Later Work With Corinth

Paul’s work at Corinth was not ended when he departed for Ephesus. When he left Corinth, Aquila and Priscilla went with him (Acts 18:18). After Paul departed from Ephesus for Antioch of Syria, this Christian couple met Apollos, a very capable preacher who only knew the baptism of John. They

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1 In 1898, a stone was found at Corinth bearing seven letters which, when restored, read “Synagogue of the Hebrews,” thus confirming that there was a synagogue in Corinth and that houses did “join hard to it.”

2 During this time, he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Romans.

3 A Sosthenes is mentioned in the introduction to 1 Corinthians. He was well known to the Corinthians, so he may have been the ruler of the synagogue who brought charges against Paul. In that case, another significant conversion occurred from among the Jewish leaders at Corinth.
taught him more perfectly the way of the Lord. Apollos moved to Corinth where he labored with the saints (Acts 18:26-28).

On his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Ephesus. He labored there for three years teaching, not only in Ephesus, but also in surrounding cities (Acts 19:10; 20:31). During these three years, Paul had several contacts with Corinth. When word of the church’s problems reached Paul, he made a short visit to Corinth, probably at the beginning of his second year in Ephesus (Coneybear and Howson, 375; this conclusion is based on these passages: 2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14, 21; 13:1-2). This visit to Corinth was a depressing trip because he had to confront their problems.

He also wrote a letter that is not extant in which he instructed the church not to keep company with immoral members (1 Cor. 5:9). Soon after this letter was sent, Paul intended to visit Corinth on his way to Macedonia. On his return trip from Macedonia, he hoped to visit a second time with the brethren in Corinth before going to Judea (2 Cor. 1:15-16). For some reason, his plans had to be changed. His second plan was to first go to Macedonia and then to Achaia to raise a collection for the poor among the saints. He sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia and from there to Achaia to prepare these brethren for his arrival to collect their funds (Acts 19:21-22).

In the meantime, saints from the house of Chloe arrived in Ephesus reporting the problem of contentions in the church (1 Cor. 1:11). Soon afterwards, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus arrived in Ephesus with a letter from the church at Corinth asking Paul questions about certain problems (1 Cor. 16:17; 7:1). Paul wrote 1 Corinthians which he sent by the hands of these three men. In this letter he instructed the Corinthians to receive Timothy when he came (1 Cor. 4:17).

Several serious problems had developed at Corinth including the following as evidenced by 1 Corinthians: (a) Divisions (1-4); (b) Immorality (5); (c) Brothers going to law with one another (6:1-8); (d) Fornication (6:12-20); (e) Marriage problems (7); (f) Problems relating to using one’s liberties (8-10); (g) Insubordinate women (11:2-16); (h) Problems relating to the Lord’s supper (11:17-34); (i) Problems relating to spiritual gifts (12-14); (j) Denial of the resurrection (15). First Corinthians was written to address these problems.

After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul left Ephesus and traveled to Troas (2 Cor. 2:12-13). At some point Timothy, whose name is mentioned in the salutation of 2 Corinthians, joined Paul, but apparently did not bring news about the state of affairs at Corinth. Paul’s concern for Corinth caused him to leave prematurely even though a door for the gospel was open. He then traveled to Macedonia. Titus soon joined him there and he learned from him that the Corinthians had received his teachings and acted on them (2 Cor. 2, 7). However, an element had arisen in the church at Corinth that was undermining Paul’s authority as an apostle and his influence among them (2 Cor. 10:1-2, 9-10). These men were “false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:13). Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia (probably Philippi) directing the church in how to deal with these men and warning them of his imminent coming.

Date of the Book
Paul wrote 1 Corinthians shortly before Pentecost in the year A.D. 56. The book of 2 Corinthians was written later in the same year or early in the following year from Philippi.

The Outline of the Book
The book of 2 Corinthians falls into three distinct divisions: (1) Paul’s explanation for not coming to visit the Corinthians as he had promised and an extended discussion of the Christian ministry (1:1-7:16); (2) The collection for the poor (8:1-9:16); (3) An attack against the enemies of the cross (10:1-13:14).

4 Some place this second visit after the writing of 1 Corinthians (Meyer 411).
Greetings and Explanation for Not Visiting Corinth

Chapter One

The first chapter of 2 Corinthians falls into the following divisions: (a) Salutation (1:1-2); (b) Preamble of Thanksgiving and Hope (1:3-11); (c) Defense of His Conduct With Reference to His Intended Visit (1:12-2:17). This last section begins the first part of the epistle that covers 1:12-7:16 that could be described as “Paul’s Explanation of His Change of Plans.”

Salutation (1:1-2)

Paul begins most of his letters with the same style (cf. 1 Cor. 1:1-3; Rom. 1:1-7; Gal. 1:1-3; etc.). He emphasizes that he is an apostle by the will of God (1:1). He did not usurp the office; rather, God selected him to be an apostle. Timothy was present with him at the time 2 Corinthians was written.¹

The letter is written to the church of God at Corinth “with all the saints which are in Achaia.” This last phrase would indicate that Paul intended for other churches to read the epistle (cf. Col. 4:16).

He wishes them “grace” and “peace” from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.²

Preamble of Thanksgiving and Hope (1:3-11)

This section reminds us of the eulogies to God that appear in Ephesians 1:3-14 and 1 Peter 1:3-5. The apostle expresses his praise to God and describes him as follows: (a) The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; (b) The Father of mercies; and (c) God of all comfort (1:3).

1. Comforted to comfort (1:3-7). Paul tells the Corinthians how God had comforted those traveling with him in order that they might be able to comfort others (1:4). They had experienced the sufferings of Christ but had also received abundant consolation (paraklēsis: “exhortation, admonition, encouragement; consolation, comfort, solace”) through Christ (1:5). Whatever suffering they endured was for the consolation and salvation of others (1:6). Their patient endurance of suffering would encourage others to persevere and their comfort would bring others comfort. Consequently, Paul was confident that the Corinthians would persevere — that they would endure the same sufferings of Christ as he endured and receive the same comfort he received.

2. Paul’s sufferings in Ephesus (1:8-11).³ Paul relates what he had suffered in Asia, without being very specific about the sufferings. The situation was so bad that Paul gave up all hope of living (“we despaired even of life” and “we had the sentence of death in ourselves”). This desperate situation made Paul trust in God rather than relying on human strength and ingenuity (1:9). God delivered him from death (1:10). He was confident that the same God in whom he trusted would go on delivering him.

3. Paul’s thankfulness for the Corinthians’ prayers (1:11). Paul recognized that the saints at Corinth were helping him by praying for and with him. He now asked that his deliverance would move them to abundant thanksgiving to God.

Defense of His Conduct With Reference to His Intended Visit (1:12-2:17)

This subdivision begins the heart of the letter and continues from 1:12 through 7:16. The first break in the section goes from 1:12-2:17 and discusses Paul’s

¹ When 1 Corinthians was written, Paul had sent Timothy on a journey toward Corinth. He told them to receive him if he should come (1 Cor. 16:10). Now Timothy is back with Paul. What happened in the interval is not certain. Did he go to Corinth? How was he received? These are unanswered questions. We only know that Timothy did not bring Paul news that eased his concern about the Corinthian problem.

² The Greeks usually saluted one another with chaire (grace) and the Jews with shalom (peace). Paul “Christianized” the greetings by wishing the church grace and peace from God.

³ The manner in which Jesus and God are joined in this greeting shows the deity of Christ. The fact that Paul extends greetings from the Father and Son shows his role as their ambassador.

⁴ The sufferings that Paul endured at Ephesus are also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:32; 16:8-9; Acts 19:23-41.
intended visit to Corinth. According to 1:15-16, Paul intended to leave Ephesus, travel to Corinth (for a first visit), go north from Corinth to Macedonia (Thessalonica, Philippi, etc.) and then return to Corinth (for a second visit) before leaving for Judea. How and when Paul communicated these plans to Corinth is uncertain. When he wrote 1 Corinthians, his plans had changed. In 1 Corinthians 16:5-6, he wrote,

Now I will come unto you, when I shall pass through Macedonia: for I do pass through Macedonia. And it may be that I will abide, yea, and winter with you, that ye may bring me on my journey whithersoever I go.

Now Paul’s intention was to leave Ephesus to go to Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, etc.) and then travel south to Corinth where he would spend the winter. In the spring, he hoped that they would help him on his journey to Jerusalem. Because of this change in his plans, he was charged with being fickle. This section defends his conduct in changing his plans.

1. Paul’s conduct was sincere (1:12-14). Even though changes occurred in his plans, they were not sinister plans. He had a clear conscience (1:12). He was not dictating his course by fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God. He had no hidden agenda; what he wrote was forthright (1:13). One should not look for hidden motives by reading between the lines. Paul recognized that some (“in part”) acknowledged his good intentions and rejoiced in Paul’s good works, even as he rejoiced in theirs (1:14).

2. Paul's plans were changed (1:15-17). Paul acknowledges that his plans had changed (1:15-16), but denied that he was guilty of fickleness in changing his plans, as some in Corinth were charging him. He was not a man who said “yes” out of one side of his mouth and “no” out of the other.

3. Paul’s gospel was not changed (1:18-20). Rather than immediately defending his change of plans, Paul emphasizes that the content of his gospel message was unchangeable. The gospel rested on the faithfulness of God — “God is true” (1:18). Consequently, the word (the gospel) was not changed (1:18). The gospel of Christ, which was preached by Paul, Timothy, and Silas, was “yea.” All the promises God had made to man were fulfilled in Christ. He is the “Amen.” The fulfillment of God’s promises through Christ was unto the glory of God.

4. The same God who fulfilled His promises is the one who sealed the Corinthians and gave the earnest of the inheritance (1:21-22). God is the one who establishes both “us” (Paul and his companions) and “you” (the Corinthians) in Christ.

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5 This may be an allusion to the Holy Spirit’s directing his travels, even as He did in Acts 16:6.

6 Paul is denying that he had the character fault of one who makes promises he has no intention of keeping.

7 “Yes means their fulfillment. Christ gave the affirmative answer to all that God had promised in the Old Testament. Paul believed that the history of salvation came to its culmination in the redemptive meaning of the cross event” (Fred Fisher, Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians 293).

8 Compare John’s description of Christ as the “Amen” in Revelation 3:14.
They had received the same grace. Here is what God had done: (a) Established them (1:21); (b) Anointed them (1:21); (c) Sealed them (1:22); (d) Given them the earnest of the Holy Spirit (1:22).

The word “earnest” (arrabōn) means “money which in purchases is given as a pledge that the full amount will subsequently be paid” (Thayer 75). The Holy Spirit is God’s pledge of complete and final payment. The Holy Spirit’s work in the first century Christians, as demonstrated by the miracles that were visible to all, was God’s “earnest.” As one received the word of the Spirit in his heart and saw its impact in the change in his life, he received God’s earnest in his own heart.

5. Paul’s explanation for why he changed his plans (1:23-24). Paul called God for a witness that what he was writing was true. The reason Paul gave for changing his plans was to avoid another painful visit in Corinth (1:23). He quickly adds that he had no intention of “lording” it over their faith, but that he only intended to help their joy and help them to stand (1:24).

Questions
1. What is the significance of Paul’s apostleship being “by the will of God” (1:1)?
2. Who were the recipients of this letter (1:1)?
3. Why did Paul praise God in 1:3-4?
4. What does receiving comfort enable one to do (1:4)?
5. List some examples of people who have endured sufferings and received comfort who are thereby enabled to comfort others who are going through similar sufferings.
6. Describe the seriousness of Paul’s sufferings in Asia (1:8-9; 1 Cor. 15:32; 16:8-9; Acts 19:23-41).
7. How did Paul’s sufferings make his spirit grow (1:9)?
8. What part did the Corinthians play in Paul’s deliverance (1:11)?

9 There is a play on words between “Christ” (Christos, the anointed one) and “anointing” (chrisas). Compare the concept of “anointing” in 1 John 2:20, 27 — “But ye have an anunction from the Holy One, and ye know all things. . . . But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.”

10 To be sealed carries the following ideas: (a) Ownership (cf. 2 Tim. 2:19); (b) Security (cf. Eph. 4:30); (c) Confirmation (cf. Rev. 7:3; John 3:33). To be sealed means that one is God’s own, he is secure in the care of God.

11 Note Paul’s oath in this passage. There is no difference in what Paul does in calling God to be a witness than what happens when a person “swears” under oath in a court room. Jesus’ condemnation of “swearing” was aimed at those whose word could not be trusted (see Matt. 5:33-37; 23:16-22). Consult a concordance on “swear” and note its use in the Bible to see that swearing “to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” is not a sin.

Greetings and Explanation for Not Visiting Corinth
9. How much “help” through prayer do we give the evangelists we support?

10. What charges against Paul underlie his response in 1:12-13?

11. What was Paul’s answer to those charges (1:12-13)?

12. Give the details of Paul’s travel plans (1:15-16; 1 Cor. 16:5-6).
   a. His initial itinerary:
   b. His changed itinerary:

13. What charge did the Corinthians make against Paul because he changed his plans (1:17)?

14. What does Paul affirm about the gospel in 1:18-20?

15. List the things that God is said to have done for us in 1:21-22:
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 
   d. 

16. What explanation did Paul give for changing his plans (1:23-24)?

17. Why did Paul add that he was not trying to have “dominion over your faith” (1:24)?