

2 CORINTHIANS

Date of composition: A.D. 57

Paul is in Ephesus when bad news arrives from Timothy who has just returned from Corinth after delivering Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians in the spring of 55. The news is serious enough that Paul plans to go immediately to Corinth, almost a year earlier than planned.

The crisis is the Corinthians' falling away into "**impurity, sexual sin and debauchery**" (12:21;13:2). Other problems include quarreling, jealousy, and the developing of factions (12:20). In the end Paul decides that his hasty return will only cause further grief for them as well as for him (2:1-2;1:6). Instead, Paul writes a letter—now lost—that is referred to as the *Severe Letter*: "**For I wrote to you out of much affliction 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**" (2:4).

In this letter that was sent between First and Second Corinthians, Paul sharply reprimands the Corinthian Christians. Then, Paul regrets sending it. Paul's fear is that his letter has damaged his relationship with the Corinthians. Months later Paul receives their response from Titus, which prompts Paul to write his Second Letter to the Corinthians in the winter of 55, as preparation for his third and final visit to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians is all about the Corinthians' attitude toward Paul. They are unhappy with Paul's perceived inadequacy in public speaking (10:10;11:5). They consider Paul to be weak and incompetent (3:5; 2:16). Public speaking (rhetoric) was a long established, highly esteemed profession. The power of an orator's speech was conveyed through delivery, which consisted of the modulation of the voice and the gestures of the body. And since the idea that "the face is the image of the soul" was rooted in Greco-Roman culture (the connection between outward appearance and inner character), the orator's emotions were portrayed as much through gesture and countenance as through language itself. A forceful style demanded vigorous delivery. The pitch of the man's voice and the movements of his body communicate emotions as surely as the arrangement of words on parchment. A weak presentation of the body was entirely inappropriate for the speaker in first-century Greco-Roman society.



They also don't like Paul's moral strictures. And they fault Paul for his failure to return to them sooner as he had promised (1:15-16, 23), sending a letter instead.

Adding to these complaints is the matter of the collection for the "Saints" (Jewish Christians) in Jerusalem (chapters 8-9), and Paul's refusal to accept financial support from the Corinthians. The Corinthians feel slighted that Paul has accepted money from the Macedonians but not from them (11:7-12;12:13-16).

However the most important problem for Paul are the recently arrived "**peddlers of God's word**" (1:17), "**false apostles**" (11:13), or "**superlative apostles**" (11:5) from Jerusalem that Paul refers to in his letter. These are Greek-speaking recognize Jesus to be the Christ, but who preach "**another Jesus than the one we preached**" (11:4).

Chapters 1, 2

Paul wants to restore his strained relationship with the Corinthians due to these "superlative apostles." For if the Corinthians reject Paul's authority as an Apostle, they come close to rejecting the authority of God in Christ.

Aware that his Second Letter will be read aloud to the assembled congregation, Paul stresses his union with the suffering people with references to “**our Father**” and “**our Lord**” (2-3). Jews of the first century A.D. believed that the coming of the kingdom would be preceded by much suffering.

Paul also wants his visit to Corinth to coincide with the finalization of the collection that he taking up among the Macedonians. He will leave Ephesus after Pentecost (spring), travel to Macedonia (large parts of Greece and Bulgaria today) during summer and fall, and arrive in Corinth before going to Jerusalem with the collection. Paul explains that he did not return directly to Corinth from Ephesus so as to spare them a “**painful visit**” (1:23-2:1). Paul wants his visit with them to be a joyous time.

So how did the Corinthians react to the *Severe Letter*? Paul must have been pleasantly surprised that after many weeks of anxious waiting, Titus brings news of their generally positive response. Apparently the Corinthians understood that Paul wrote out of love and concern for them, and not out of personal anger. Paul even uses the metaphor of burning incense that is the suffering Apostle’s self-offering for love of them (Leviticus 1:9, 13). Indeed, Paul states plainly that his purpose in writing the “Severe Letter” was to win in return their loving obedience for the good of the Church. Soon Paul sets out for Macedonia.

Chapter 3

Paul considers the “superlative apostles” as counter-missionaries, that is, Jewish Christians who insist on the ways of the old covenant (Judaizers), which for them is still in force. But Paul says that the past glory of the old covenant is not applicable once the new has come. Pointing to Exodus 34:29-35, where Moses veils his face, Paul explains that Moses wore the veil to prevent the Israelites from seeing “**the end of the fading glory**” (3:13). Now though all who believe are “defaced,” they are still being transformed. Believers are able to see in the gospel that image in its perfection—the face of Jesus Christ; and are enabled not only to see that image but to be progressively transformed into it by the Spirit.

Chapter 4

Within himself Paul experiences the death and the life of Jesus; for God is leading Paul’s ministry from place to place of humiliation, replicating Golgotha wherever he goes. Dependent on God, Paul suffers for the Corinthians in order that the increasing grace of God may overflow to them.

In this way Paul sets out an overarching contrast between this age, which is temporary, and the age to come, which is eternal. In Paul’s time the Greek world had no positive response to the reality of death. Funerary inscriptions of the dead testify to the despair of the living toward the deceased. But the gospel message points to the “eternal weight of glory,” when the Final Judgment and General Resurrection occur and the present age and the coming age begin. Likewise in the human person, the outer person who belongs to the present age is wasting away, while the inner person who belongs to the coming age is being renewed. Like all who belong to Christ, within Paul is the hope of glory when all will be raised in the new resurrection. .

Chapter 5

Here Paul outlines the basis of the Christian faith: that our sins are exchanged for the “**righteousness of God**” (17, 21). Paul emphasizes the resurrection of the body—the “**new creation**”—because Gentiles within Greek culture separate body and soul. These new Gentile Christians must learn that a disembodied state is not yet complete; that final glory comes when we are fully clothed in the General Resurrection.

Paul stress the Final Judgment because the Corinthians are not serious about their responsibilities as Christians. Paul reminds them that while in the body they are not yet with the

Lord; that we walk by faith and not by sight. Therefore to “please the Lord” is to do good and avoid evil. All of which should spring from the joyous prospect of being “**with the Lord**” in the kingdom (8). Therefore all must die to self-centered living because to be in Christ is to be a new creation (17).

“**For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God**” (21). This verse is the heart of the entire letter. The righteousness of God conferred on those who are in Christ is the basis of their reconciliation to God. The astonishing reality is that these blessings, which have been thought to belong exclusively to the future, are – in principle and by anticipation – “now” the possession of those who are in Christ.

Chapter 6, 7

While Paul assures the Corinthians yet again of his sincere love for them, they challenge his apostleship and ministry. For Paul the Corinthians are his “children;” but they have proved to be fickle and disloyal, and worse—continue to indulge in sexual promiscuity.

Paul challenges them: “**do not accept the grace of God in vain**” (6:1). Quoting Isaiah 49:8, Paul declares that with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the very day of God’s salvation has dawned. And as evidence of his own and his co-evangelists’ integrity, Paul lists nine hardships and eight graces in ministry; which is to say, *Why go though all this if our motives were not pure?*

Again, Paul calls for the Corinthians to separate themselves from the temple cults, asking what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? They cannot have it both ways. Using images from Leviticus and Deuteronomy, Paul tells the Corinthians not to be “yoked” with unbelievers who are of a different kind altogether; that as you do not “**let your cattle breed with a different kind**” (Deuteronomy 22:19), or “**plow with an ox and an ass together**” (Leviticus 11:3), they must not share in the cultic worship of idols.

Chapters 8, 9

Paul urges the Corinthians to follow the example of their fellow Christians in Macedonia and be generous, because the report on the progress of the collection is not encouraging. At first Paul did not include the churches of Macedonia in the collection for the Jerusalem Christians, presumably on account of their own hardships and poverty. Yet the Macedonians beg Paul to allow them to contribute, for they know firsthand the pain of poverty and persecution. Because of their initiative and willingness to sacrifice, Paul urges Titus, along with two brothers who carry Paul’s letter, to go back to Corinth and complete the collection.

Chapters 10, 11, 12

Paul responds to criticisms of his earlier visit that he is too timid (10:12-16). Since the Corinthians are accustomed to ruthless methods of discipline in the Greco-Roman cities, Paul’s humility is perceived as weakness. They discount Paul as ineffectual when present and only powerful when absent, that is, by letter (10:10). For Paul’s critics observed that his letters had the ability to terrify because of their weightiness and strength. But Paul wants his “weakness” to be understood as gentleness (11:20).

Besides defending himself, Paul criticizes the “superlative apostles” who are trespassing in Paul’s field of labor. While these so-called “apostles” may confine their ministry to the synagogue (as Peter had), they are now moving into Paul’s field of ministry, that is, among the Gentiles. Paul contrasts these interlopers who need letters of recommendation with himself who received firsthand the Lord’s authority.

Paul portrays his ministry as a “betrothal.” When the father of the bride presents his daughter to her husband on their wedding day, he is responsible for the purity of the betrothed until he presents her as a virgin to her future husband. How outrageous, Paul writes, that outsiders

(“superlative apostles”) have come to court preaching “**another Jesus**” to sully the purity of the new Corinthian Christians (11:4).

Paul follows the betrothal image with that of Eve who was deceived by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Eve represents the church at Corinth, and the serpent those “ministers of Satan,” the “superlative” apostles (5) who have come preaching another Jesus (10:5, 14-15). And though Paul admits that “**I am unskilled in speaking**” (*idiotes*, a “layman,” “non-professional”), he is not unskilled “**in knowledge**” (11:6).

Paul’s so-called “Fool’s Speech” follows (“**But whatever anyone dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that.**” 11:21). Paul knows it is foolish to boast, and perhaps even wrong, but feels that the attitude of some of Corinthians forces him to assert himself (“**I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you.**” (12:11). At the same time, Paul does not want to appear like the “superlative apostles” who seek the trust of the Corinthians on the basis of credentials rather than trustworthy relationships. Even so, Paul argues that his credentials—flogging and beating with rods—are equal to anyone else’s for the sake of the gospel.

Flogging: after the offender has been found guilty, the minister of the synagogue stood on a raised stone inflicting the blows, forty minus one, using a redoubled calf strap to which other straps were attached. Thirteen blows were delivered to the chest and twenty-six to the back. On at least five occasions Paul receives this most severe beating permitted by the Jewish Scriptures.

Beating by rods: bundles of elm or birch rods are bound together to beat a man all over the head and body.

These false apostles who come disguised as true apostles of Christ (11:13) are like Satan who disguises himself as an angel of light (11:14-15). After insisting his equality with them as a son of Abraham, through a catalog of sufferings climaxing with the “**thorn in the flesh**” to ensure his own humility, Paul points to his weaknesses by which he claims superiority over them as a minister of Christ (12:7). Note: nothing is known of Paul’s “vision of heaven,” and Paul refuses to speak more of the extraordinary experience.

Chapter 13

Since unrepented sin is what led to his second visit, Paul hopes this letter will rectify the problems before he comes. Again, Paul signals his intention to come to them, referring to the third visit (12:19).

Paul turns from responding to the Corinthians’ demands for proof that Christ was speaking in him (13:3), to his encouraging that they prove to themselves that Christ is in them. Moreover Paul calls them to be united in their understanding of the faith. Since believers are already caught up in spiritual warfare, both within their own lives and for the hearts and minds of unbelievers, so they are not to be at war with one another. After some brief admonitions, greetings, and a benediction, Paul prays that “**the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit**” be with them (14).