

INTRODUCTION AND 2 COR. 1:1 – 2:13

By Ashby L. Camp

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Introduction

I. Occasion of the Letter

A. Paul first preached the gospel in Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18). He stayed in Corinth a year and a half (or a little longer), probably from early A.D. 50 to the fall of 51, and won many pagans and a number of Jews to Christ.

B. After seeing the church well established, Paul sailed from Cenchrea to Caesarea, stopping off at Ephesus where he left Priscilla and Aquila. He then spent some time with his home congregation in Antioch.

C. In 52 Paul began his third missionary journey and probably arrived back in Ephesus in the fall of that year. He had a very fruitful ministry and was there until the first part of 55 (about 2 1/2 years - Acts 19).

D. While at Ephesus, Paul learned of some problems in the Corinthian church and wrote them a letter (referred to in 1 Cor. 5:9) in which he forbid them to associate with immoral people. This letter has not been preserved. 1 Corinthians was probably written in early 55, after Paul had received more reports and a letter from the church.

E. 1 Corinthians seems to have corrected most of the practical abuses Paul addressed in that letter. For example, nothing is said in 2 Corinthians about abuses of the Lord's Supper or litigation between believers.

F. When Paul sent 1 Corinthians, it was his intent to remain in Ephesus until Pentecost (late May) and then to visit Corinth by way of Macedonia (16:5-8). After sending it, he decided to visit Corinth twice, once on the way to Macedonia and once on the way back (2 Cor. 1:15-16). He intended to sail from Corinth to Judea with considerable money from Macedonia and Achaia (including Corinth) for the relief of the saints in Jerusalem. When he formulated those plans, however, he felt no urgency to get to Corinth. After all, he was in no hurry to leave Ephesus since the "great door for effective work" (1 Cor. 16:9) was still open there.

G. Paul then learned, perhaps when Timothy returned (1 Cor. 4:17, 16:10-11; 2 Cor. 1:1), that conditions at the church in Corinth had deteriorated, due in part to the arrival of Judaizing intruders from Palestine who presented themselves as leaders (2 Cor. 11:4, 13-15, 22). So Paul made an emergency visit to Corinth, which turned into a distressing confrontation, the "painful visit" of 2 Cor. 2:1.

H. We don't know the details of that painful visit, but it appears that during that time at least one of his opponents had attacked him in deeply insulting ways (2 Cor. 2:5-8, 10; 7:12). This was a crisis because the struggle between Paul and his detractors for the congregation's allegiance was a struggle between the true and a false gospel. For whatever reason, Paul left Corinth and returned to Ephesus.

I. During the emergency visit, Paul, in keeping with his new plans, told them that he would again visit them soon on his way to Macedonia. The visit was such a disaster, however, that Paul decided it would be best to put that visit after rather than before his trip to Macedonia. This opened Paul to charges that he was fickle.

J. After returning to Ephesus, Paul sent Titus to the Corinthians with the "severe letter" referred to in 2 Cor. 2:3-4, 7:8-12. Paul assured the Corinthians of his love for them but also laid down the standards he expected in the churches and sought to determine if they would meet those standards (2:9). He demanded the punishment of the ringleader who had maligned and opposed him so maliciously (2:3-9, 7:8-12). This letter was not preserved.

K. Titus also had the responsibility to organize the collection for Jerusalem (8:6) to which the Corinthians had initially been willing to contribute. Their participation in this would not only bless the poor in Jerusalem but would signal their fellowship with Paul and the apostolic church.

L. During all this, Paul was facing extreme danger in Ephesus (1:8-10), but we don't know any details. Shortly after the riot recorded in Acts 19:23 - 20:1, Paul left Ephesus for Troas (2:12-13), where he hoped not only to preach the gospel but to meet Titus returning with news of Corinth. When Titus did not show, Paul headed for Macedonia (2:13), apparently in keeping with a contingency plan he had with Titus.

M. In Macedonia, Paul encouraged the Christians (Acts 20:1-2) and organized the collection for the Jerusalem believers (8:1-4, 9:2). The Macedonian churches were themselves facing "the most severe trial" and "extreme poverty" (8:2). When Paul got there, Titus had still not shown up, so Paul still had no idea how his severe letter had been received in Corinth (7:5).

O. Titus soon arrived, and Paul's distress turned to joy because the church had responded positively to Paul's words (7:6-10). Paul probably started writing 2 Corinthians soon after receiving Titus's encouraging report, but it seems likely that he received more bad news about the church before completing it. There is a change of tone in chapters 10-13 that suggests Paul had news of a counter-offensive that had been launched against him by the Judaizing intruders. He doesn't state that he received new information between chapters 9 and 10, but that would have been obvious to the Corinthians by his specific references to the new charges against him.

II. The Church

A. It was predominantly Gentile but quite diverse. It included Jews, Greeks, Romans, slaves, and freedmen.

B. In the words of Gordon Fee (p. 4):

Thus, the picture that emerges is one of a predominantly Gentile community, the majority of whom were at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder, although there were two or three wealthy families. As former pagans, they brought to the Christian faith a Hellenistic worldview and attitude toward ethical behavior. Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors . . .

2 Cor. 1:1 – 2:13

I. Introduction - 1:1-11

A. Salutation (1:1-2)

1. Paul is an apostle of Christ by the will of God. He was chosen to be God's instrument for spreading the gospel, particularly to Gentiles. His authority derives from the Lord himself (10:8, 13:10).

2. Paul doesn't write to the "church of Corinth" but to the "church of God in Corinth." Congregations are local representatives of God's universal church.

3. "Saints" are simply "holy ones," meaning Christians, God's people. Achaia is the Roman province in which Corinth was located.

4. "Grace" refers to God's unmerited favor; "peace" refers to the peace that comes to man as a result of his having peace with God.

B. Gratitude for divine comfort (1:3-7)

1. God had comforted Paul and his companions in all the hardships, dangers, persecutions, and anxieties he experienced in carrying out his apostolic commission (1:8-10, 4:7-12, 11:23-29). God sometimes comforts by relieving the hardship (e.g., 1:8-11, 7:5ff), but other times he does so by convincing us that everything will be fine in spite of the hardship (i.e., provides the strength and encouragement to endure - see, 1:6).

2. There is a solidarity between Christ and his people such that his sufferings overflow into our lives. This world is opposed to Christ. As Jesus told the disciples in Jn. 15:19, "If you belonged to the world it would love you as its own. As it

is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you."

3. But just as we share in Christ's suffering because the old age persists, we share abundantly in his comfort because the new age has dawned.

4. One result of our divine comfort is that we are able to comfort others in their affliction through the comfort we have received.

a. The testimony of God's comfort in your life during trials is itself comforting to others as they undergo them. It is a "flesh and blood" reminder of God's ability and willingness to provide the grace and strength they need.

b. In v. 6 Paul applies this general statement specifically to the Corinthians. His comfort was for *their* comfort, i.e., that he might comfort them with the comfort he had received. He explains that they experience this comfort when they patiently endure the "same sufferings" that Paul and his companions suffer. Their sufferings may have been relational conflicts resulting from being a Christian in a town immersed in paganism and licentiousness. They would be "the same" as Paul and his companions in the sense they were produced by their allegiance to Christ.

5. In Paul's case, not just his comfort but his afflictions as well were for the "comfort and salvation" of the Corinthians. His preaching ministry, which was accompanied by afflictions, made it possible for them to share in God's comfort of his people in the messianic age.

6. Paul concludes his thanksgiving section by telling the Corinthians his hope that they will endure in the faith is firm, a hope that is undergirded by the knowledge that God indeed supplies comfort as they share in the sufferings of Christ.

C. Deliverance from a deadly peril (1:8-11)

1. Paul now lets the comfort he received overflow to them by telling them his own recent experience of affliction and comfort. We can only guess at what Paul is referring to by "hardships in Asia." A good guess is that it was tied to Jewish opposition to Paul that was stirred up by the riot in Ephesus mentioned in Acts 19:23-41.

a. Alexander may have played a leading role in stirring up the Jews (Acts 19:33), for one by the same name is mentioned in 2 Tim. 4:14 as having done great harm to Paul.

b. In his address to the Ephesian elders, Paul refers to having been severely tested by the plots of the Jews (Acts 20:19).

c. Acts 21:27-28 mentions Jews from the province of Asia stirred up the crowd in Jerusalem against Paul.

2. Whatever these hardships were, the situation was so bad that Paul was convinced in his own heart that he was going to die; his missionary career was going to be cut short with urgent projects left incomplete. Humanly speaking, his situation was absolutely hopeless; there was no way out.

3. Paul says that their sense of certain death was permitted to help shift their confidence from themselves to God who raises the dead (which, figuratively, is what happened to Paul).

a. Confidence in our own wisdom and ability to handle life is an illusion that will lead us to assert our own way over God's. The impotence of one's own wisdom and ability is most clearly exposed on the threshold of death, the point of utter helplessness.

b. God was at work in Paul's horrible trial to bless him spiritually. He is alive and involved *now*.

4. Paul expects that God will continue to deliver him for some time, assuming that the Corinthians (and others) will join in praying on his behalf. Paul repeatedly asked for prayers (Rom. 15:30-32; Eph. 6:18-20) because prayer makes a difference!

5. And the result of their praying will not only be his continued deliverance but that thanksgiving will flow to God from many when he says "yes" to those prayers.

II. Paul's Conduct Explained - 1:12 - 2:13

A. Introduction (1:12-14)

1. Paul says he is proud of the fact, which he knows at the core of his being, that he and his companions conducted themselves with frankness and godly sincerity in their dealings with the world in general and with the Corinthians in particular. They did not act in keeping with worldly wisdom, meaning they were not devious and insincere, but in keeping with the grace of God.

a. God's grace given to them in Christ motivated them to act as God would have them act.

b. Reliance on God's grace in their ministry freed them from the need "to cheat," to try to produce results by underhanded means. They would do what was right and leave the results to God.

2. Paul firmly denies the insinuation, apparently smoldering in some quarters of the church in Corinth, that his letters were duplicitous, that he wrote one thing but really intended another.

a. NIV is not the best on v. 13. Paul says, "For we do not write to you anything other than what you read or indeed understand."

b. He says he what he writes he means, nothing more and nothing less. In modern parlance, his letters have no subtext or hidden agenda. There was nothing between the lines (other than what you read) nor were the lines themselves misleading (or indeed understand).

3. Just as the Corinthians have come (through Titus's visit) to a partial understanding of the actions and intentions of Paul and his companions, he hopes they will come to understand completely (through what he goes on to write) that he and his companions are their boast, the noble messengers through whom they were included in Christ, just as the Corinthians will be their boast on judgment day.

a. Paul elsewhere mentions that when he is called to account before God his source of pride will be the fruit of his apostolic ministry, those who have been brought to faith in the gospel through his faithfulness to his commission (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:19-20; Phil. 2:16, 4:1).

b. The implication is that they will not come to this complete understanding for which Paul hopes until the points at which they continue to misunderstand his actions and intentions are cleared up. He sets out to do this in the following paragraphs.

B. Canceled Visit Explained (1:15 - 2:2)

1. Instead of returning to Corinth as he had intended, Paul had sent the severe letter by way of Titus. The congregation generally received that letter well, but some had been offended, thinking it was too harsh. So there was still an undercurrent that Paul was undependable and indifferent to the feelings of the church. Since this affects his credibility as an authentic apostle, he tackles these issues.

2. Being confident that mutual appreciation and respect existed or would result, Paul had planned a double visit to benefit the Corinthians, on the way to and coming from Macedonia. He was neither divided about the matter ("yes and no") nor uncommitted to the decision (fickle). This was not some worldly ploy to gain an advantage by telling them what they wanted to hear.

3. To stress the point, Paul says that God is a trustworthy witness to the fact their word to the Corinthians was neither equivocal nor insincere ("yes and no"). God testifies to that in the fact he entrusted them to deliver the gospel of Christ, the ultimate in committed and unequivocal messages, God's definitive "yes" to all his promises.

a. Jesus is the one in whom all of God's promises are "yes" in that he is the door to the blessings and rewards of the consummated kingdom. In Jesus is the fulfillment of the promised Messianic age.

b. This is why, in corporate worship offered to God through Christ, Christians joyfully acknowledge this truth by saying "Amen" (which expresses agreement) when it is uttered (e.g., when Christ is praised). In so doing, we glorify God for his faithfulness.

4. Paul then cites (vv. 21-22) the fact that it is God who makes him and his companions, along with the Corinthians, stand firm in Christ, and who has consecrated them (anointed) and sealed them with the down payment of the Holy Spirit. His point seems to be that they, like the Corinthians, are God's possession and can be counted on to act accordingly, i.e., not to be fickle or double-minded.

5. In v. 23 Paul calls God as a witness that it was in order "to spare" the Corinthians that he changed his plans to return to them on the way to Macedonia.

a. Having said that, he hastens to clarify (v. 24) that he does not mean that he and his companions exercise lordship over their faith. Apparently some in Corinth thought Paul's group was guilty of "playing lord." They are not lords themselves but only servants of the Lord who work together to bring joy to the Corinthians.

b. As evidence of their working to bring the Corinthians joy, Paul cites the fact the Corinthians have (through their work, most recently the severe letter) stood firm in the faith. Alternatively, their standing firm in (NIV says "by") the faith is why Paul et al. continue working for their joy (they are fitting objects of apostolic ministry).

6. This parenthetical reference to the Corinthians' joy leads Paul to expand on the reason for his change of plans (2:1-2). He wanted to spare them (and himself) the agony and frustration of another sorrowful visit. If he had come to Corinth as planned, it would have been "with grief," meaning the grief of more misunderstanding and distrust rather than the kind of grief that leads to repentance.

7. Moreover, because his own joy is, to some extent, dependent on that of his congregations, to have inflicted this kind of spiritually unproductive grief on the Corinthians would have dried up a source of his own happiness.

C. The "Tearful/Severe Letter" (2:3-11)

1. Motivation of the letter (2:3-4)

a. Instead of making a return visit on the way to Macedonia as he had planned, Paul wrote the "severe letter" rebuking them for not coming to his defense when he was maligned and demanding that they show their spiritual mettle by punishing the person

responsible. His purpose was to remove the friction between them by having them reassert their allegiance to him, so that when he did pay them another visit it would be a happy one.

b. He wrote it with confidence that they still had good will toward him (that his joy was their joy), even though they had not responded to the attack against him, and that they would respond positively to his message.

c. Paul wrote to them out of anguish over their spiritual welfare and shed many tears in the process. He knew that his words would inflict some pain, but he was no way lashing out at them or trying to even the score. He wrote what they needed to hear in the hope they would realize how much he truly loved them.

d. Christian love compels us to correct our erring brothers and sisters, but this is never easy to do. A man named Farmer puts it this way in his book *The Healing Cross*:

Love meets its most searching test when it is faced with the necessity of deeply estranging the loved one in order to bless him. And the more the love is pure and intense, the severer the test is, the more fierce the temptation to keep friendship at the cost of truth. When love is crying out for fellowship, it is the hardest thing in the world deliberately to pursue a course which you know for the time being will destroy it.

2. Appeal to forgive the disciplined offender (2:5-11)

a. Paul's letter had called for the Corinthians to punish the one who had attacked him. In v. 5 he makes clear that the attack was not purely a personal matter between himself and the offender. It was not simply a private dispute but an issue that involved the integrity of the entire congregation.

b. The same thing happens today when groups reject Paul's apostolic authority and slander him as a woman hater or closet homosexual. Paul's apostolic authority is much bigger than a mere personal matter.

c. The Corinthians responded to Paul's directive and disciplined the offender, probably meaning that the group as a whole had disfellowshipped him. The offender suffered as a result, and presumably was brought to repentance, but some apparently wanted to continue or even increase his punishment. Paul instructs them to forgive this man and to encourage him by confirming their love for him. This would serve to assure him of God's forgiveness. The goal is not to overwhelm him in grief but to redeem him.

d. In v. 9 Paul says that he wrote to test their spiritual mettle, to see if they would acknowledge his divinely given apostolic authority. By disciplining the offender, they stood the test and proved their obedience in all respects (see, 7:11-12). Now by ending the punishment they would be doing the same.

e. In v. 10 Paul assures them that the one they forgive has his forgiveness also. In other words, they need not worry that he might not approve of the reinstatement of the one who hurt him so badly. In fact, he had already forgiven the man. He downplays the degree of personal wrong by adding "if there was anything to forgive" in order to downplay the magnanimity of his mercy.

f. Furthermore, his forgiveness had been given for their good, that is, for the very purpose of facilitating the reconciliation, and in conformity with the judgment of Christ. A failure to reconcile with the penitent offender would have been to play into Satan's hands by allowing him to make off with one of the community's members.

D. Assurance of His Concern for Them (2:12-13)

1. Paul assures his readers that, despite appearances to the contrary (i.e., change of plans and "severe letter"), he cares very deeply about them. After facing mortal danger in Ephesus, Paul left for Troas primarily to preach the gospel, and the Lord opened a door for him there (i.e., provided an opportunity for an effective work).

2. Despite the promising mission, when Titus did not show up in Troas with news of the Corinthians' response to Paul's letter, Paul was restless. So deep was his concern for the church in Corinth at this point, that he left the promising mission field of Troas and went to Macedonia (apparently in keeping with a contingency plan) to learn as soon as he could how Titus had been received. (Note: Paul spends a week in Troas on the return leg of his missionary - Acts 20:7-12).

3. Paul picks up his rendezvous with Titus in 7:5ff, but before doing so, he writes several chapters on the nature of his apostolic ministry (2:14 - 7:4).