

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 8 – 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians is a very different letter from 1 Corinthians and was written on Paul's third missionary journey to prepare the church in Corinth for his next visit. It is very personal, very emotional and full of tears, and in it, for reasons we shall see later, the apostle Paul is most defensive regarding his own actions and ministry.

Paul was the one who planted the church in Corinth in the first place, knew a lot of what was going on there, and even years after leaving the area continued to keep close contact with those Christians through travelling companions. In fact, we know of at least four letters that he sent them. The first receives a brief reference in 1 Cor. 5:9-11; the second would then be the letter we know as 1 Corinthians; the third is referred to in 2 Cor. 7:8,12 (a letter which Paul later regretted writing for a time, though it did eventually produce some very positive results); and that leaves us with the present letter known as 2 Corinthians as the fourth. These are the letters that we know about, at least, two of them are lost, and of course there may well have been others which have passed into obscurity.

It has to be asked why the apostle wrote the Corinthians so many letters. It was really because of all the troubles that they encountered in their fellowship and their inability to deal with them effectively. Here in 2 Corinthians, however, there is something of a turning point and Paul wants to acknowledge that. Titus has just come to him with a glowing report from Corinth. Revival has broken out in that church, the majority of these members have repented of their sins and are now friendly toward Paul, and it is fitting that he should tell them how he rejoices with them in this new path they have undertaken. He still has some concerns, though, and especially in regard to the ongoing opposition of a few of their members, that very vocal minority who have been influenced by false teachers.

Without question, this had been a most difficult letter for Paul to write. At times, the burden of his heart cries out over the logic of his head, and, as a result, it lacks the clarity of thought which marks so many of his other letters. We just do not know enough of all that was going on in that church at that time. Paul feels uncomfortable in writing so much about himself, certainly, yet he feels compelled to express what must be said lest this church in Corinth be torn apart by error.

The apostle had been accused of being indecisive, planning a trip to Corinth but failing to make it there, when in fact he did not want to confront these believers with a heavy heart only to make them sorrowful (1:15-2:2). He was also accused of harbouring grudges, when in reality he rejoiced over the repentance of the man who had wronged him and asks the congregation to forgive this man as he himself has done (2:3-11). He has been accused of one thing after another by the false teachers, the Judaizers pretending to be Christians, who have worked their way into the Corinthian church, who are stirring up as much trouble for Paul as they can in order to exercise their own influence on this body of believers.

Paul moves on next to defend his ministry, to which some have responded in faith, others in unbelief, and for that he takes neither credit nor blame. How people respond to the preaching of the Word is the Lord's own work. The Christians in Corinth, however, are themselves Paul's letter of commendation, a most convincing testimony of his apostleship (2:14-3:6). He contrasts his ministry to that of the Judaizers, who cling to their own understanding of the old covenant, but are effectively blind to everything God is doing because they see nothing of the glory and grace of Christ in the new covenant (3:7-18).

The Judaizers may not like the fact that Paul preaches a gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone and in Christ alone, and so they oppose him at every point, but they are the ones blinded by the god of this age (Satan). The apostles, on the other hand, count themselves as nothing and are willing to suffer every adversity in order to preach Christ and give all glory to God. Slandered as they may be, they do not lose hope; they know that such afflictions work in their favour and add to their eternal glory as they keep focused, not on what they see and is passing away, but on what God has promised and is forever (chapter 4).

Paul goes on to explain the substance of this hope and their willingness to suffer, that to be absent from the body is for the believer to be present with the Lord. This is a reference to the intermediate state of heaven, in which state the believer's spirit is fully provided for until the end of the world, and at that time his body will be awakened and reunited with his spirit to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Whether the apostles live or die, therefore, they are committed to serving and pleasing the Lord; they recognize that they are accountable to Him, not to men (5:1-11).

Paul further explains the driving power of this hope, namely, the atoning sacrifice of Christ which constrains His people to commit everything to Him. Every believer is a new creation, someone reconciled to God in Christ and no longer who he used to be in Adam. The Lord has committed to the apostles this ministry of reconciliation which makes them ambassadors for Christ crying out to sinners to be reconciled to God. For this very reason Paul and the other apostles have gone out of their way, sacrificing their own temporal wellbeing, in order not to offend but to commend themselves as the ministers of Christ (5:12-6:10).

As a byproduct of being reconciled to God, believers are not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers, a principle which extends to every area of life. Two people who are pulling in different directions, after all, if bound together like an ox and a donkey under the same yoke, can only pull each other apart. Let believers, rather, bind themselves only to other believers in business and in marriage, in every mission and social enterprise. Since our reconciliation to God calls us to be reconciled also to one another, Paul asks that the hearts of those believers in the Corinthian church still harbouring animosity toward him may be opened again to receive him and the other apostles (6:11-7:4).

The wonderful thing is that the hearts of many in that church had recently been so opened. Paul makes reference here to the revival which had broken out among them, clearly a work of the Holy Spirit and cause for rejoicing. The apostle had not wanted to make them sorrowful. The thought that he might have done so greatly troubled him. But then, when he and Titus saw that theirs was not a worldly sorrow which led to despair but a godly sorrow which led to repentance, a godly sorrow which produced such spiritual fruit they had never seen in them before, they were comforted and beside themselves with joy (7:5-16).

In light of this revival and of all that the Lord had given them, Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians of the pressing financial need of the poor Jewish saints in Jerusalem. They had started a collection for them sometime earlier, but that task was interrupted and the time has come to complete it. Paul seeks to encourage them to give by setting before them the open-hearted generosity of the Macedonian churches. Indeed, we all need to keep before us the example of Christ Himself who gave His own life for His people, and to remember that God loves a cheerful giver (chapters 8 & 9).

Paul returns at this point to the accusations which had been laid against him by the false teachers and to his rigorous defence of his apostolic calling. He had been accused of being weighty and powerful in his letters, but weak and contemptible in person. He pointed out the meekness of Christ and his own preference for that gentle approach. At the same time, he assured these enemies of truth in Corinth that, if they did not repent before he got to them, they would see this harsher, more demanding side of him when he arrived (chapter 10).

They also tried to undermine him for not accepting wages for his ministry. Though he accepted such wages from other churches, he did not want to receive them from this congregation in Corinth because, for all their troubles, he did not want to be an added burden to them. He eventually saw this as an error on his part, though, something that was not well understood and appreciated by the Corinthians, and he now asks to be forgiven for it (12:13). He continues to boast of his infirmities rather than any of his supposed strengths because he wants to distinguish himself from the Judaizers (chapters 11-13).

One of the very practical lessons we might draw from all this, believer, is that we must oppose evil, we must call it out for what it is so that those who are weak and most vulnerable may be dissuaded from pursuing it. Another such lesson is that it is not wrong to defend ourselves if we have sought to do what is right and exemplary, if we have done it to the glory of God and to the benefit of others.

You may even be an unbeliever and have little or no knowledge of what path you ought to follow. Do not settle for the first argument you hear (see Proverbs 18:17). It is often the case that someone who speaks disparagingly of others is really telling you more about himself, revealing the biases of his own desperately wicked heart, than anything about that other person. Ask yourself these questions: What is his interest in saying these things? If he claims to be a Christian, is he promoting Christ or just himself? Does he really care about truth, or is his goal to win the argument at any price? Does he in his whole way of life seek to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly before God? (see Micah 6:8).

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