

2nd Corinthians

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia (1:16, 2:13, 7:5, 9:2) a few months after 1 Corinthians, in the time frame of Acts 20:1-2. The riot in Ephesus had shifted his planned travel schedule, and then communication issues and hostile plots caused other changes along the way. 2 Corinthians stresses obedience and pleasing the Lord, and substantially contains Paul's apostolic resumé with many references to his own difficulties in serving the Lord. 2 Corinthians is a very personal letter revealing much of Paul's own motivation and struggles. The opening "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus" sets the tone for much of the letter's purpose, affirming Paul's apostolic authority and teaching.

Like 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians is addressed to "the church of God" at Corinth, the unified body of Christ as a whole, a theme that was stressed in 1 Corinthians.

Note the description of God in 1:3-4. Followed by a reminiscence about personal suffering for Christ's sake in 5-11. Notice the "beyond our strength" comment in v8 followed by affirming relying "on God who raises the dead" (the theme of 1 Corinthians 15). If we have only our own strength, we are doomed to failure. Note the appeal for help through prayer in v11.

Paul's disrupted travel plans in 1:1-16 can be oddly assuring to us, that even an apostle didn't know what lay ahead and made his plans as James said, "if the Lord wills..." (James 4:15).

Notice the affirmation in 1:20 that the whole of God's promises come to fruition in the Son of God, Christ Jesus. He is the unifying theme of the whole Bible. "Amen" (v20) is an Old Testament Hebrew word (1 Chronicles 16:36, for example, or Psalms 106:48) expressing agreement, or affirmation. Jesus used the word frequently, generally rendered "truly" or "verily" in English translations.

The anointing and seal of ownership (1:21-22, the Holy Spirit) references numerous promises of God, such as Ps 133/Acts 10:38, Ezekiel 9:4, 11:19, 36:26, SoS 8:6, Ps 51:10...

Paul had the authority and power in Christ to compel obedience or punish disobedience, but sought to persuade instead (1:23-24, 12:20-21).

Paul's aim whether in person or by letter was not to cause distress or pain (1:23-2:11), but through some measure of difficulty to bring about obedience to the Lord. Note Paul's own pain for the sake of the brethren in 2:4.

The penitent individual in 2:5-11 is probably the man the church was to hand over to Satan in 1 Cor 5. Apparently the strategy of exclusion had succeeded and the time had come to welcome him back with love and forgiveness. Any other response would give opportunity to Satan, v11.

Paul's exit from Ephesus toward Corinth and Macedonia would naturally take him to Troas (2:12). Though he found a God-given opportunity for fruitful work there he was uneasy about Titus and Corinth (Titus had been sent by Paul from Ephesus to help in Corinth). A lack of communication led Paul to walk away from opportunities in Troas and proceed to Macedonia (the same route he'd followed in Acts 16:11ff). There he did encounter Titus and from there he wrote this letter.

The illustration of a triumphal procession relates to a victorious Roman general parading into the city with captives in his train. Some in the train marked for death, some festooned with garlands of victory. Paul identified with both, following the triumphant Christ he was in a victory parade adorned with fragrant life, but to the world the scent was perceived as that of death. The preachers of the gospel were spiritually alive and victorious, and yet facing hatred and physical death at every turn. The pertinent question in 2:16b is answered in 3:5. "Who is sufficient?... our sufficiency is from God." This is a lesson of dependency every Christian needs to learn.

What matters for Christian life isn't written laws, but hearts overwritten by the Spirit of God (3:3). See the previous comments at 1:21-22, and connect this to Jeremiah 31:31ff and Hebrews 8:7ff. 2 Cor 3 is almost a synopsis of Romans 1-8. If what we find in Christ is mainly a list of rules, we've missed out on what it means to trust him and be born again, of water and Spirit. Christians share increasingly in the glory of the Lord as we become more like him and allow his Spirit more room in our hearts. The allusion to Moses is in that time after the golden calf debacle when Moses met with the Lord apart from the people and came away from those

meetings with a glowing face that faded over time (Ex 34:29ff).

Hope (in Christ) should embolden believers (3:12).

Sharing the glory of the Lord is a transformational work (of God's Spirit) in progress, 3:17-18.

Rejecting marketeering or duplicity (2:17, 4:2), Christians should present God's word in a straightforward and accurate way. There is no benefit to the gospel to build on any sort of deception or misrepresentation, no matter how attractive duplicity for a "good cause" may sometimes seem. And, it isn't "our" job to sell ourselves to the world, but to present the good news of Christ (4:4-5) even to eyes blinded by the god of this world (see Paul's mission statement in Acts 26:15-28). Bringing light into hostile darkness may seem daunting, but God provides the light and thus the motivation and the strength (4:5).

Jars of clay in 4:7 were the common and ubiquitous storage containers of the day. If you wanted to keep something for a long time, a jar of clay was what you put it in. To this day hidden treasures from antiquity turn up, buried in jars of clay to keep them safe. We have the precious treasure of God's Spirit and the glory of Christ within us. This is a treasure God will preserve (see 2 Timothy 1:12, 14), no matter what severe tests we may experience in the body (4:8-12). Paul wrote of his personal very real suffering to motivate readers to take the same view.

One of Jesus' frequently expressed goals was to bring glory to the Father. Christians in turn are to be motivated to enlarge thankfulness "to the glory of God" (4:15), living by faith.

2 Cor 4:16-18 remind us again of the process of transformation and renewal described in 3:17-18. Note the "renewed day by day" and the great importance of what is "unseen" as our focus of attention.

2 Corinthians 5-9

Paul referred to our bodies as "jars of clay" in 4:7 and "transient" in 4:18, so the allusion to a tent in 5:1 carries forward the same idea, a temporary structure that houses something glorious. Like the tent (tabernacle) Israel built in the wilderness (Exodus 25-40), God dwells in this

tent in our midst, and promises to build for us an eternal house in the heavens (remember how God promised to build a house for David when David wanted to build a house for God, 2 Samuel 7). Christians long to be with God, and long to have the uncorrupted immortal heavenly body. The event alluded to in 5:4 was discussed at some length in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58. Our assurance that God will give us eternal life in immortal bodies is the presence of the Spirit here and now (compare 5:5 and 1:21-22, and consider 1 John 3:24, 4:13).

The theme of 4:16-18 is restated in 5:6-7. Looking to what is unseen, walking by faith rather than by sight, trusting God in all circumstances. To die (be away from the body) for the disciple is to be at home with the Lord (5:8, and Philippians 1:23), which is better than the current groaning (5:2, and Romans 8:18-30), but the best is when the immortal body is fully realized when Jesus comes and we appear before his judgment seat (5:10). Contrary to many popular teachings of this generation, everyone will stand before the judgment seat. Not to determine who belongs to the Lord, that's established already with the guarantee Paul already mentioned (5:5), but the passing of sentence, the reading of the will, the acknowledgment by all in heaven and earth that God's judgment is righteous and good. What we do does matter for eternity.

5:11 affirms another motivation to lead others to Christ (by persuasion, not deception or compulsion); namely the "fear of the Lord" which is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10). The Lord is creator, redeemer, and judge and recognizing his truly disturbing awesomeness provokes a response of obedience and urging others to obey as well. This fear isn't terror, because "the love of Christ compels us" (5:14), knowing that the maker of the universe died for our sins, for everyone's sins (5:14-15).

The doctrine of regeneration, new birth (5:17-19) into God's family, is a serious statement of the miracle of not merely forgiveness but a new relationship with God and having his Spirit in our hearts.

We can read 5:20 as especially pertinent to Paul himself, in company with other chosen messengers and witnesses, but part of Paul's purpose here is to motivate Christians to follow his lead, to think as he thinks. The "for our sake" in 5:21 surely has broad application to Christians, and the impetus of behaving as an ambassador of Christ, representing him to a

skeptical and hostile world, should prompt each of us to “be reconciled to God,” to accept God’s purposes and trust him.

Jesus who personified holy God in the flesh was “made to be sin” to make our reconciliation possible. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” For us.

1 Corinthians 6 continues the theme of being reconciled to God and becoming the righteousness of God in a corrupt world with an appeal to live the life God’s grace has given us. Paul’s own efforts, both his sacrifices and joys, efforts to make sure people know God’s invitation to new life, are magnificently described in 6:4-10. Those personal experience in Christ lead into directing the church of connect with Paul as a fatherly guide (6:11-13) and separate themselves from the world (6:14-7:1).

The command not to be “unequally yoked with unbelievers” is a broad principle for Christians living in this world. Partnership with unbelievers, whether in romantic entanglement or business affairs or entertainment or goal achievement is at best risky behavior. The world and the Christian aren’t serving the same God or seeking the same outcomes for the same reasons. The words of 6:14-7:1 reflect back on the discussion of sexual immorality in 1 Cor 6 and idolatry in 1 Cor 8-10. The citations from Leviticus 26:12 and Isaiah 52:11 bring to mind God at the beginning walking in Eden, and God making a nation of a family he brought out of Egypt, and God calling his scattered people out of Babylon, and God promising to send a servant who would willingly die for the people. God wants “us” to be in his presence, and to be in us, and for us to be his family forever. Loving the world and the things of the world sabotages these divine purposes (see also 1 John 2:15-17). God has called us to be holy, we are made holy by the blood of Jesus and the sanctification of the Spirit, and we are to make choices that pursue the completion of God’s holiness in us (7:1).

As Paul appealed to the affections of the Corinthian church in 6:11-13, he continued that appeal in 7:2ff. Some there had taken his prolonged absence because of travel issues mentioned in the 1st two chapters as an affront, and so he explained at more length in 7:2-6. In Macedonia Paul found Titus, or vice versa, and was assured that there were things to celebrate in Corinth. In his discussion of grief experienced because of some strong chastening in his messages to the church, Paul described the 2 kinds or outcome grief/sorrow/regret can produce (7:10). We have

examples of sorrow that produced discontent and death in the stories of Esau and Judas Iscariot and King Saul, as opposed to sorrow that prompts a change of heart and change of direction, as in Peter or Paul or David.

The happy results of Titus work with the Corinthian church in 7:13-16 led into a discussion of the need to continue on the right path and ardently finish the collection referenced in 1 Cor 16:1ff. Paul was writing from Macedonia (8:1) and presented those churches (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and perhaps others) as outstanding examples of generous giving. Some of those folks had been hit hard financially and otherwise for their profession of Christian faith (Acts 17:9, 1 Thess 2:14, for example), but they enthusiastically shared in the gathering of funds to help the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

Note the motivation to be generous Paul described in 8:9, 14; 9:4, 6-7, 10-12. Paul wasn't promising wealth through giving, this isn't a "prosperity gospel," but money given to the Lord is an investment in real value and produces thankfulness and glory to God which is beyond wealth.

The effort to make sure the gift was honorably and transparently handled in 8:18-24 is a model for churches in every generation to make sure funds given for God's work are administered with full accountability and unquestionable integrity.

Note that Paul compared Christian funds to manna freely distributed by God with his reference to Exodus 16:18 in 2 Cor 8:15.

What is the indescribable gift of God in 9:15? Note the phrase that precedes the verse.

2 Corinthians 10-13

A running theme in chapters 10-13 is the real power and authority versus the illusion of power in the flesh. Paul previously cited some of his arduous experiences as an apostle to demonstrate his right to instruct others, and similar demonstrations permeate the conclusion of the letter.

Paul did not want confrontation in dealing with fellow believers (or anyone) but would uphold necessary truth in whatever way was required (10:1ff), including pleading or confrontation.

Paul and all Christians are engaged in a battle (10:3-6), and it's important to know the nature of the battle and the weapons deployed. Ideas and truth are in conflict with opinions and deception, centered on the knowledge of God. The weapons or methods of the flesh cannot win these battles. Remember 2 Cor 6:7, 4:18, and consider John 18:36-37, Ephesians 6:10ff, 2 Timothy 2:4.

Notice the description of divine authority, and especially its purpose in 10:8 and 13:10. God given authority, from the very beginning (Genesis 1:28, 2:15), is always for building up and improving, not for harm or destruction. Sadly, in world of sin, sometimes chastening and discipline are necessary.

Paul affirms here in 10:9-10 and 11:6, as alluded to elsewhere, that he wasn't an eloquent speaker (like Apollos) and didn't have an impressive appearance, though his letters are "strong." But, God's authority and approval are not grounded in appearance or skills the world admires (recall Moses, Ex 4:10ff; and David, 1 Samuel 16:7; and Jeremiah, Jer 1:7-8; and the other apostles, Acts 4:13).

Several times in 10-12 Paul wrote of "boasting" which is generally a negative behavior, but it was necessary to review his credentials both as an apostle and particularly as the apostle who first brought the gospel to Corinth. His self-defense, rather than the direct defense of the gospel he preached, was necessary because of divisive elements in the church that would favor false teaching over Paul's truth.

The marriage of Christ and the church in 11:1-2 is a recurring definition of our growing relationship, which calls for fidelity in trust. Eve's deception by the serpent (11:3, Satan, the devil) was a diversion from her devotion to her husband and to God, and was disastrous. Letting ourselves be drawn to false promises in a distorted gospel is analogous to infidelity.

While Paul humbled himself in 1 Corinthians 15:8-9 as unworthy to be called an apostle, here in 2 Corinthians 11:5ff he necessarily affirms the authority and power he exercised as a true witness and apostle of Jesus Christ. He mentioned again his decision not to take money from that particular congregation or area (11:7-9=10, and recall 1 Cor 9), even while he was financially helped by churches in Macedonia (especially Philippi).

Paul stated his love for the folks in Corinth several times in this letter (as in 2:4, 6:6, 11:11, 12:15). His observable devotion and concern coupled with taking nothing from them was evidence of his veracity.

Never forget that Satan and his allies go to great lengths to present themselves in a positive way (11:13-15). Again, there will be a day of the Lord when justice is served.

The list of Paul's hardships and persecutions experienced in 11:22-29 refers to incidents that had taken place prior to Acts 20, when he wrote this letter. Over the next several years the list would have been greatly expanded with additional attacks, imprisonment, another shipwreck, and so forth. His travels for the gospel of Christ were more than rigorous, and beyond reason for ordinary purposes.

The highlighted distress of all that Paul mentioned is in 11:28-29. The burden of concern for the churches and their members was unbearable, were it not for divine strength in Christ (recall 3:5-6 and note 12:9). Elders and evangelists in particular should have some notion of this weight of concern for others entrusted to their care.

Paul's experience of fleeing in the darkness from Damascus rankled the man, who was no coward (11:30-33), but showed his priorities to serve the Lord and not salve his own pride. To Paul that flight (and others afterward) displayed his weakness in the flesh and dependance on God, which was the point of all his "boasting" in these chapters.

Chapter 12 continues the theme of boasting in the Lord with an assertion of "visions and revelations" Paul had experienced, but then he sidesteps to someone else's grand vision, apparently something like John's experience in Revelation 4ff. Many believe that Paul is alluding to a visionary experience of his own, but he denies that coming and going and attributes the vision he'd been told of to someone else's experience.

Paradise in 12:3, or the 3rd heaven in v2, must be the same as in Rev 2:7, which is where the tree of life is, as in Rev 22:1-5. Paradise is the Greek word (in the Septuagint that Paul often quoted from) for the Garden of God, Eden, in Genesis 2 and elsewhere. The place where God walked and talked with humans, where the tree of life was. The word paradise was

also used by Jesus on the cross (Luke 23:43) and the thief who had appealed to Jesus (and Luke the writer) would have understood being in paradise in the same way as Rev 2:7.

While Paul did not claim the vision he referenced in 12:2-5, he had visionary experiences of his own, v1, 6, but instead chose to focus on his own dependence on Christ, in 12:7-10. Learning to be content in weakness or suffering is a profoundly important lesson for Christians (12:10, and see Philippians 4:11ff, written 4+ years after 2 Cor). We don't know what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was, he didn't choose to describe it specifically, but it was difficult. That's obvious. Notice instead the lessons he taught with that reference. The struggle against Satan, the fact that Paul talked to the Lord (Jesus) seeking relief, the fact that he was persistent in those prayers until Jesus Christ gave him a firm answer, "my strength is made perfect in weakness." That's hard, but Paul learned to be content and affirm, "When I am weak, then I am strong."

Yet again in 12:11ff Paul affirmed his decision not to depend on financial support from Corinth. Apparently that was a sore spot with them, and thus there was an attitude problem he was intentionally addressing.

Paul also reminded them and us of his divinely received power as an apostle, which they'd seen (12:13). He was physically weak, but empowered as an apostle of Christ, and they knew it.

While Paul had affirmed genuine progress achieved through his letters and through the work of Titus in Corinth, he knew full well problems continued that had to be corrected one way or another, 12:20ff, and he very much hoped they would make correction so that he would not have to exercise his authority in a disciplinary way.

The priority of the Unseen in previous chapters is highlighted again in 12:3-4.

We don't know just when Paul made a 2nd visit to Corinth. The 1st is in Acts 18, the 3rd in Acts 20. Somewhere between there he worked in an apparently brief visit.

The directions for them in 13:5, self-examination, is important for every Christian. Not by way of boasting over someone else, but considering

whether we are productive or not, growing or not. Paul had previously commended self-examination in the context of the Lord's supper in 1 Cor 11.

Paul prayed for the maturity of the brethren in 13:9 and urged them to aim for it in 13:11. Partnership with the Lord is what Christian life is all about.