

2 Corinthians

Leon L. Combs, Ph.D.

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Introduction and Chapter One

Introduction

The authorship is not in doubt as it is confirmed twice (1:1, 10:1) and accepted by even most critical scholars. It is a book often overlooked by pastors and lay people but a very important book for all to study. He reveals many of his inadequacies, which cause us all to examine ourselves. Below I repeat the introduction that I gave at the beginning of my discussion of the book of 1 Corinthians for those who may not have read that commentary.

Corinth was completely destroyed by a Roman general in 146 B.C. and then rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. Corinth had a strategic location as the city was located on the narrow stretch of land that connects the Peloponnese with the rest of Greece as seen below and in the picture to the right. Corinth was located in a very favorable place to be a major port city and indeed it had been such. It had two ports and for a long time it was a rival to Athens. In 146 B.C. Corinth was leveled to the ground by the Roman general Mummius and the site lay desolate for a century. But in 44 B.C. Julius Caesar reestablished the city and gave it the status of a Roman colony. In 27 B.C. it became the seat of administration for the Roman province of Achaia. Soon it reclaimed its past glory and its former reputation for sexual promiscuity. The isthmus was narrow so traffic crosses the city in two perpendicular directions. It crossed from north to south along the road and it crossed from east to west across the isthmus. Since water travel was very dangerous, commercial goods were unloaded on one port, carried by slaves over the isthmus to the other side and then reloaded onto boats to continue the travel. Under Nero there was an unsuccessful attempt to build a canal across the isthmus and it was only in the last century that the canal was completed and it is still there today. Today there is a canal across the region as shown below.





The Corinth Canal cuts through the Isthmus.



Acrocorinth; beyond to the north is the Gulf of Corinth

Situated on a 2000 foot granite mound (shown above) is Acrocorinth, which was used as a place of defense and of pagan worship. It was large enough to hold all of the inhabitants of the surrounding area in time of war and it was also the place of a famous temple for worship of Aphrodite, a goddess of love. There were usually about one thousand priestesses at the temple, whose purpose was worship through sexual relations. The area was known for its excesses in everything so Paul had walked into an extreme din of demonic activity during his third missionary trip.

On his third missionary journey Paul met a couple with whom he established a long friendship. In Judaism it is forbidden to pay a teacher for teaching so they had to have a trade with which to financially support them. Paul was a tentmaker as was this couple so it was fortuitous (!!!!!) that the couple and Paul were together here and Paul would have some digs. It seemed that the spread of Christianity in the Jewish community led to so much dissension that Claudius ordered all of the Jews out of Rome. It is impossible to determine if the couple had become Christians before leaving Rome but it is very likely that they had been converted in Rome.

In classical Greek the phrase “act the Corinthian” means to practice fornication and the phrase “Corinthian companions” meant a group of harlots. The temple of Aphrodite (Venus is the Roman name) on the acropolis of Corinth even gave religious sanction to sexual promiscuity. At one time there were ten thousand temple prostitutes there. In the reestablished Corinth under Roman rule the city still had considerable sexual misconduct but not to the level of its previous existence. This background helps us understand why Paul had to keep after the Corinth churches for the difficulty they had in maintaining their sexual conduct that the gospel required.

Turning to the subject of this particular letter, we know some background for his writing it. When Paul was in Corinth earlier he had been accused of worshiping God in ways against the Jewish teachings (Acts 18). Gallio (the governor) ruled the charge an internal dispute and dismissed the charges against Paul and then, after staying a few more days, he left Corinth. Later he received news of some disturbing events in the Corinthian church and he wrote a letter confronting those issues (1 Cor 5:9). After receiving more bad news he then wrote the first letter to the Corinthians. Although his letter helped somewhat, more problems arose as false teachers came to Corinth and led away many of the congregation from the teachings of Paul and the Gospel. Paul then left Ephesus and visited Corinth where he was badly treated probably by one of the false apostles who openly insulted him. The church did not discipline the person and Paul returned to

Ephesus where he wrote a letter to them that has not been preserved (2 Cor 2:4). Paul later met with Titus who informed him that most of the Corinthians had repented and turned their loyalty back to Paul (2 Cor 7:7). But Paul knew that the false apostles were still in Corinth and he went to Macedonia (maybe Philippi) where he wrote this second letter probably in A.D. 56.

Chapter One

2Cor 1:1 “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia:

2Cor 1:2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul begins his letter in the usual style of giving the name of the author and stating his status as an Apostle of Christ Jesus. Since false Christian leaders often attacked the apostleship of Paul he states that he is appointed an apostle by the will of God. As we know he was personally chosen by Jesus (Acts 26:15-18; 1 Cor 15:7-10) and I believe that he was indeed the twelfth apostle rather than Mathias (my comments on Acts 1). Timothy was Paul’s protégé and close friend and was in Corinth when the first church was formed there. He wrote to the church members at Corinth and to an unknown group of saints, perhaps at a city, Cenchræa, about eight miles away (Rom 16:1). His greetings also usually contain his message of grace and peace to them from the Father and the Son.

2Cor 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort;

2Cor 1:4 who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

2Cor 1:5 For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

2Cor 1:6 But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer;

2Cor 1:7 and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.”

I have taught on this section many times because it is such a comfort to us who have suffered and to those who are suffering. Even though suffering can be very difficult, this passage helps us to understand some of the meanings in it. Paul also makes it clear that the comfort comes from God even though it may come physically through some human. The word for “blessed” literally means “to speak well of” and certainly the comfort and mercies that God gives to His children speaks incredibly well of Him. Only Sovereign God could affect situations so that the comfort that He gives us in our afflictions will also be used to comfort other children of God. It is also important for us to realize that the

comfort God gives us in our afflictions is not just for us. We are to constantly be looking for opportunities to “pass it on” as we encounter other children of God who suffer from similar afflictions. The sufferings in Christ are not just the ordinary sufferings that all mankind experiences in the world but are those specific in our obedience and service to Jesus. God does not promise persecution for the consequences of our unrepentant sins but for the persecutions of serving Jesus Christ. We are promised such persecution:

2Tim 3:12 “And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Sinning Christians can expect God’s discipline and not his comfort (Heb 12:5-11). We should not then feel like we are being persecuted in isolation for our life in Christ for such sufferings are in abundance to all of God’s children. But, just as the afflictions are common, the comfort is also common to all saints. We should patiently endure the sufferings for Christ because we know that God will also provide the needed comfort.

Remember that “hope” does not have the same meaning when used in a Christian context as it does in a worldly context. Our hope in the plan of God is firm for we know that God is sovereign over all events and, just as Paul was certain about the sufferings and comfort for fellow saints, we can be certain that we and fellow Christians will also have the comfort to more than balance any sufferings for service to Jesus Christ.

Rom 15:13 “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

2Cor 1:8 “For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life;

2Cor 1:9 indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;

2Cor 1:10 who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us,

2Cor 1:11 you also joining in helping us through your prayers, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed upon us through the prayers of many.”

Now, in context, we can understand why Paul wants these people to know of the affliction suffered by him and his fellow servants in their service to Jesus. He wants them to know that God delivered him from the many sufferings as an example to others that He will also deliver them from similar events. Going through horrendous persecutions also showed Paul and his fellow servants that their trust is not in themselves but in God who can even raise the dead. We will see some details of the sufferings of Paul later in this study. When our trust is in the God who raised Jesus from the dead and can raise anyone from the dead, we should remain calm in any situation. Our hope is placed on the plans of God and not on our own plans and strengths. Also we should note the place that the prayers of God’s children have on situations. Paul also urged the church at Rome to pray for him:

Rom 15:30 "Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me,"

A purpose of prayers is so that we can praise God when He acts in a situation in which we have been praying. Our prayers do not change God's mind or even bring situations to Him of which He had been unaware for God is omniscient. But our prayers focus our attentions on particular situations, change our thoughts and actions as we become more centered on God's motives, and then allow us to give God the glory for His actions in those situations.

James 5:16b "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

2Cor 1:12 "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.

2Cor 1:13 For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end;

2Cor 1:14 just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus."

Everyone has a conscience, which is the guide for moral behavior. Note that I said "moral" and not "ethical" behavior. A person's conscience develops in life as he accepts certain standards as acceptable guidelines for his conduct. Morals are behavior standards that are peculiar to some particular locale and can be very different in different parts of the world. Ethics are behavior standards that are not site-specific but are based in some external code that is the same in the entire world. To a Christian that external standard is the Bible but to a Muslim it is the Koran and associated writings. To an atheist the standards are whatever he chooses and so, in his case, ethics becomes equal to morality.

Titus 1:15 "To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled."

Of course Paul based his conscience upon the Word of God:

Acts 23:1 And Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day."

The goal of every Bible teacher is to help Christians have a God-fearing conscience:

1Tim 1:5 "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

We can be proud of the work that God does in us and through His work in our lives and that is what Paul means about having a proud conscience. He is defending his work toward them since the false apostles were accusing him of lies and deceptions. Paul had been accused of immoral behavior and of improprieties in interpersonal relations.

In verse 13 Paul is telling them that he is not guilty of any wrongdoing or of deceiving or manipulating anyone. He said that his writings did not include any deceptions. We talk of people writing or talking “between the lines”, meaning that they are really saying something other than what they said or had written. Paul is telling them that he meant exactly what he said and he wants them to always know of his sincerity. He states in verse 14 that they did not all completely understand what he said. Understanding what someone wrote or said involves two possibly malfunctioning devices: a transmitter and a receiver. I cannot be responsible for what someone else thinks I said if I tried hard to be clear in my statement. Today we often read of people twisting statements made by someone or taking them out of context to twist the meaning. We need to all be careful to use language carefully and to carefully say what we mean. But it is no surprise when someone misinterprets our statements. Paul is trying to be clear to them so that he can deal with the false apostles.

Paul says that they should both be boasting about the work of God in each other. Paul’s reference to the day of the Lord is not the final judgment day but the day that each of them would have their salvation perfected in glorification. In other words, he is saying that they should not doubt the sincerity of each other until the day that they physically die.

2Cor 1:15 “And in this confidence I intended at first to come to you, that you might twice receive a blessing;

2Cor 1:16 that is, to pass your way into Macedonia, and again from Macedonia to come to you, and by you to be helped on my journey to Judea.

2Cor 1:17 Therefore, I was not vacillating when I intended to do this, was I? Or that which I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be yes, yes and no, no at the same time?

2Cor 1:18 But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no.”

Paul had great confidence in his conscience before the Lord but he based his judgment totally upon God’s eyes:

1Cor 4:4 “For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.

1Cor 4:5 Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.”

Because he knew that he had been faithful to God in his interactions with the church at Corinth he had intended to come to them twice as their faithful teacher. He had intended to come to them on his travels to and from Macedonia but his travel arrangements had to be changed as he will explain later in this letter. He had thus intended to teach and fellowship with them twice and to receive aid from them during those occasions. He had been accused of not letting his “yes be yes” and his “no be no” and he had now to defend

his character. One of my pet peeves is people not keeping their word for such is reflective of our character:

Matt 5:37 "But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; and anything beyond these is of evil."

James 5:12 "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no; so that you may not fall under judgment."

2Cor 1:19 For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us-- by me and Silvanus and Timothy-- was not yes and no, but is yes in Him.

2Cor 1:20 For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes; wherefore also by Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.

2Cor 1:21 Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God,

2Cor 1:22 who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.

2Cor 1:23 But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.

2Cor 1:24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm."

It seems that the false teachers also accused Paul of falsely teaching about Jesus so here he uses the full title: Son of God, Christ Jesus. This title clearly states that Jesus is fully God, fully man, and the promised Messiah. Silas was a prominent member of the Jerusalem church and was one of Paul's traveling companions on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:39-40). Timothy was Paul's very close friend and fellow Christian. He reminded the Corinthians that their teaching was never wavering concerning the status of Jesus. All of the salvation promises of God through Jesus were absolutely true and no true teacher would waver in their truthfulness. The word "amen" is a solemn agreement to the truthfulness of a statement and so Paul uses the word in verse 20.

He begins to conclude this section by saying that it was God who anointed the true missionaries and established them in Jesus Christ. He also states that they were then sealed and given the Spirit in their hearts as a pledge. All true believers are established in Christ at the point of salvation, which makes us one with Him:

John 17:21 "that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me.

John 17:22 And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one;"

Rom 12:5 "so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."

GAL 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

God also sets commissions upon each Christian for service (anointing) and seals each of us for our protection and as a pledge of eternal possession.

Eph 1:13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation-- having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, Eph 4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

2Tim 2:19 Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness."

Lastly he tells them the reason for his not coming at this point to Corinth and he pledges the truthfulness of this reason before God. He wanted to give them more opportunity to repent and to spare them the discipline they needed because of their rebellion.

1Cor 4:21 "What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness?"

He was hoping to receive a better reply from Titus and he reports later that he did receive an encouraging reply (7:6). He ends by saying that he is not questioning their faith for that is between them and God. Salvation is an individual matter. In the first letter to them he stated many sins that they were committing and he was looking for repentance from them and not judging their faith, just their faithfulness. Only if they refused to repent would severe church discipline be required. He then stated that he was a coworker with them, he wanted their joy to be full, and desired for them to stand firm in their faith.