

New Testament Survey – 2 Corinthians *New Testament Survey – Lesson 21 (Part 1)*

I know a couple, who are good friends, going through a tough time. This week we were exchanging emails, and I was trying to find out how they were doing. The reply I got was tough.

My friends said they were having a really hard time at work, they were struggling with extended family issues, and they were struggling with immediate family issues. Not one issue either, but multiple issues. My friends were also facing significant financial setbacks.

Beyond these blockbuster problems, my friends have serious spiritual challenges accompanying the issues. Some involve forgiving people hard to forgive. Some involve trusting in God where he seems to be absent. Some involve trying to unite in a marriage where each sees many problems and solutions different than the other.

How we handle those times in life where the world seems to be cratering around us and upon us speaks not only to our faith but also to our habits. Do we “check out,” finding some physical relief from alcohol or drugs? Do we turn abusive and take out our frustrations on others? Do we get passive/aggressive? Do we fall apart? Do we go numb and live life going through the motions?

The email exchange let me know there was little I could practically do at this point beyond pray. As I prayed and thought through the many concerns, I kept coming back to one thing: Paul and 2 Corinthians.

In our surveying the New Testament, we have reached a point of study where Paul was ministering from Ephesus, exchanging letters with and sending envoys to the church at Corinth in an effort to fix some problems at the church. Paul’s letter we call 1 Corinthians was one of several letters sent toward this end. Unfortunately, that letter did not solve the problems.

I find it both insightful and encouraging to study what was going on in Paul’s life and how he was responding to it. Like the life of my friends, much was at issue and the stakes were high. Paul was not simply dealing with the problems at Corinth. Those problems were on top of many other difficulties pressing against Paul at that time.

As we read and understand the 2 Corinthians, and its context provided both internally and through other Scriptures, we see this was a time of great physical

and spiritual difficulty for Paul. Unfortunately, instead of supporting him in prayer as friends, the Corinthian church had festered into a huge problem itself. What should have been a source of aid and encouragement, turned into its own source of turmoil and difficulty. For Paul, the adage was true: when it rains, it pours.

I admire Paul. Paul did not “check out.” Paul confronted his issues head on – praying about them, working through them, being honest and up front as he sought godly resolution to the many matters pressing in. Paul deeply believed and trusted that God was on his throne, and nothing – NOTHING – was going to change that.

2 CORINTHIANS – BACKGROUND

In class, we have just finished covering 1 Corinthians. Paul wrote the letter while on his third missionary journey in Ephesus. We will not rehash the information on Corinth that we covered earlier. Instead, we will concentrate on Paul’s interaction with the Corinthian church that leads to 2 Corinthians. Here we will begin to glimpse some of Paul’s problems:

1. The Corinthian Problem

Paul cared deeply for the church at Corinth. He originally came to Corinth on his second missionary journey, and he stayed there 18 months, longer than any other church he had established to that point. After Paul left the church, Apollos and perhaps Peter, came to the church and taught for a brief period. The Corinthians divided themselves over their affection and allegiance to each preacher. Paul regretted this and tried to solve it by sending messengers and letters to the church. We know that Paul had written an early letter to the church (see 1 Cor. 5:9 referencing a letter some scholars call “Corinthians A.”) That letter is no longer available (it is not “extant”).¹ Out of concern, Paul wrote a second letter (“Corinthians B”) that we call 1 Corinthians and is in our Bibles. This letter continued to address a number of problems that had developed in the church

After Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, the problems continued to fester. Acts 19:22 and I Corinthians 16:10 seem to indicate that Paul sent Timothy and Erastus to Corinth. 2 Corinthians 1:1 indicates that Timothy returned to Paul in Ephesus, with the problems still not solved. So, Paul seems to have made a personal visit to the church, as indicated in 2 Corinthians 2:1. Some scholars dismiss whether or not

¹ Some scholars believe that the earlier letter, Corinthians A, is not lost, but has been incorporated into the letters we have (I and II Corinthians).

Paul actually made such a visit because there is no indication in Acts, and such an arduous trip would, they assume, be noted. I believe Paul's letter is accurate on its face, and believe such a trip did occur. Those thinking otherwise should remember that Corinth was just a two-day sail from Ephesus. Paul could have easily made that visit during the 2 to 3 years that Paul was in Ephesus. The timing would not take long at all. As for Luke's failure to include the visit in Acts, he does make it clear that Paul was working in the surrounding areas and Luke does not itemize or explain any of them (Acts 19:26).

This additional visit of Paul to Corinth did not solve the problems either. Paul found the visit "painful" and even called it such to them,

But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth... For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you... 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 Cor. 1:23-2:4).

After the painful visit, Paul returned to Ephesus where he wrote a "sorrowful" letter (II Corinthians 2:1-4), which scholars call "Corinthians C."² We have an indication that Paul also sent Titus in an attempt to help the situation (2 Cor. 12:18). While all these struggles were occurring in the Corinthian church, Paul was having another set of difficulties in Ephesus.

2. The Ephesian Problem

Paul stayed in the Ephesus area for almost three years, and his time there was hard and demanding. We have some indication of this from Paul's second letter that we call 1 Corinthians. In that letter, where Paul wrote of the importance of the resurrection, Paul indicated this issue was very important to him personally. As he did so, he gave us a glimpse into how difficult his time was in Ephesus,

What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32).

Not all scholars are convinced Paul actually fought with beasts in Ephesus. Some think his reference is best understood figuratively. However, as far back as Hippolytus of Rome (170-235), the assertion has been that Paul actually fought

² This letter is no longer extant. Some scholars believe it also is integrated into the Corinthian letters we have.

with beasts at Ephesus.³ Those scholars who think differently believe Paul was using the idea of “wild beasts” to indicate religious adversaries. This is something we see in a Hebrew commentary dating from Paul’s era on the Old Testament book of Habakkuk, known as the *Habakkuk Peshar*, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁴ Either way, it is apparent that Paul’s time in Ephesus included some most difficult and fearful periods.

As Paul’s time in Ephesus (Asia) drew to a close, it was propelled to a difficult finish as, “about that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way” (Acts 19:23). Paul was the target of a riotous crowd, but it was two of Paul’s companions that were accosted, not Paul. Paul tried to go into the midst of the crowd. We know that the theater where the events were being held seated 20,000 people. While we don’t know if it was full, clearly, this was a major event fraught with danger. The disciples physically kept Paul from going into the riot, and ultimately Paul left not only Ephesus, but also the surrounding areas of Asia.

We do not have full details of these events. Paul spoke of the intensity referencing them in his letter to the Corinthians,

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.⁵ For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death (2 Cor. 1:8-9).

Additionally, a number of scholars believed that Paul was imprisoned for a time in Ephesus. Some think it was a part of the time fighting the wild beasts. Others believe it might have been associated with the riot and events toward the end of Paul’s stay there. For some, this was seen as the imprisonment from which Paul wrote Philippians.⁶

³ Hippolytus of Rome wrote of Paul and his rescue from the beasts in his *Commentary of Daniel* (3.29) relating Paul’s rescue to Daniel’s rescue from the lions in Dan. 6:22. Hippolytus himself was martyred for the faith in 235. Scholars also point to Paul’s closing notes to Timothy where he spoke of being rescued from the “lion’s mouth” as indicia of the literalness of the reference to the Corinthians (2 Tim. 4:17).

⁴ See, 1QpHab 11:16-12:5, and Hab. 2:17.

⁵ Ephesus was the provincial capital of Asia.

⁶ See, Riesner, Rainer, *Paul’s Early Period*, (Eerdmans 1998), at 212ff; Knox, John, *Chapters in a Life of Paul*, (Peeters 1987), at 61; Ludemann, Gerd, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles*, (Fortress 1984), at 263; Jewett, Robert, *A Chronology of Paul’s Life*, (Fortress 1979), at 103.

While we are not able to answer all the questions about these events, we are able to see that this was a most trying and difficult time for Paul. It was a time that would drive many of us to throw in the towel, if not do something even more escapist!

Not so Paul. He continued on mission, moving to where he thought God wanted him, while he used his resources (people and letters) to address the issues that did not seem to resolve easily.

While Paul was waiting for Titus's return, Paul left Ephesus and went to Troas. Before Titus arrived, Paul went on to Macedonia. While Paul was waiting for Titus in Macedonia, Paul started writing 2 Corinthians (see 2:13; 7:5; and 9:2). That places the epistle as being written in 56 A.D. Paul wrote about his plans and interactions with the church (1:1–2:4), the theology behind Paul's gospel message and our eternal life (2:5–5:10), and Paul's ministry (5:11–7). While Paul was writing (chapter 7-ish), Titus arrived and brought Paul good news about the Corinthian church's willing submission to Paul and his teaching. We can see a change in tone in Paul's letter as he finished the letter covering the contribution for the Jerusalem church (8–9) and reaffirming his apostleship and authority (10–13).

THE PERSONAL NATURE OF LETTER

Not surprisingly, the conditions of Paul's life at the time make this letter both personal **to** Paul and personal **about** Paul. One scholar has noted, "If you want to really get to know Paul, spend time in 2 Corinthians."⁷

Why is that so? Think about it. You see more deeply into a person when he/she is under attack and responds to critics. In 2 Corinthians, Paul spends a great deal of time defending himself from a variety of assaults. We do not have the benefits of reading or hearing the negative material circulating about Paul and his ministry, but by using a bit of deduction, we easily learn some of what his adversaries said.

Reading both letters together gives insight into those things that hurt Paul and caused Paul to write as he did. We know that Paul felt a fatherly role to the church itself (1 Cor. 4:15). We also know that Paul established the church and stayed there longer than he had at any other church at the time, save his "home" church at Antioch (Acts 18; 1 Cor. 3:6). After Paul left, the Corinthians received teaching from others, some godly, some not necessarily so (Acts 18:27; 2 Cor. 11:3-6; 13-15). The result of these other teachings left the church divided in loyalty and doctrine (1 Cor. 1:10-12). The church had serious problems with some believing

⁷ Conversation with Charles Mickey.

they were superior to others in the church and to Paul himself (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5). Paul confronted these problems in letters and made the painful, quick visit to Corinth that caused Paul and the Corinthians grief (2 Cor. 2:2). Paul never wrote off the church; Paul kept reaching out in pain and love. Paul tried teaching the church correct doctrine and practice, while confronting his critics.

Out of this turmoil emerges 2 Corinthians in which Paul defends himself, as well as his ministry, his lifestyle, and his apostleship. Yet, as Paul gives this defense, he does so recognizing that God is his ultimate defense. In this way, 2 Corinthians provides insight into a man who feels compelled to defend himself and his ministry, but who also accepts the suffering and slander that comes to followers of a suffering and slandered Messiah.

Consider Paul's reactions to the great hardships and pressures referenced earlier. As noted, Paul and his companions, "felt the sentence of death" in their hearts (2 Cor. 1:9).

Yet it was from this distress, that Paul learned and lived several truths:

- As part of Christ, we receive not only the overflow of His comfort, but also the overflow of His suffering (1:5)!
- We have the patience to endure suffering from the comfort of God and his saints (1:6).
- From our suffering comes a reliance on God (1:9).
- Our hope for deliverance comes from God, our deliverer (1:10)!
- Prayer for those suffering does help (1:11).

This was Paul at his most personal and his best. This letter, then, in a very personal way, gives us Paul's teaching as he put his hand to the plow and proceeded on mission with the calling over his life.

Before we get into the substance of 2 Corinthians, we should note a few things about the form of the text.

THE TEXT

2 Corinthians reads very differently compared to 1 Corinthians. Whereas 1 Corinthians is orderly, practical, and, by and large, moves logically step by step, 2 Corinthians is anything but such! While 1 Corinthians is orderly, 2 Corinthians seems out of order. There are huge breaks in thought and big insertions off subject. While 1 Corinthians is targeted to answering questions the church posed and other specific problems, 2 Corinthians is much more centered on Paul and his teaching, rather than the church and its practices. 2 Corinthians is also more theological than practical.

One Letter or Many – the Unity of the Text

The text of 2 Corinthians has frustrated numerous scholars over the years because of its stop and start nature. In a number of places, the tone and content seem to change drastically. For example, Chapters 1-9 have a warmer tone, while chapters 10-13 are harsh (see Kistemaker, 2 Corinthians New Testament Commentary, p.7). Also, the passage from 2:14 to 7:4 can seem like an insert if one looks at it closely. Scholars note that 2:13 (immediately before the “insert”) reads,

So I said good bye to them and went on to Macedonia.

Verse 2:14 then starts a whole new train of thought. However, in verse 7:5 (after the “insert”), Paul returns to his thought in 2:13 saying,

For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest...

This “start/stop” nature and these abrupt changes move a number of scholars to dissect this letter into parts, an approach called the “partitive theory” of Corinthians. These are not always scholars who are dismissive of Scripture’s authority for the church. Many recognize that whether the book is a whole or whether the church saw fit to combine several of Paul’s writings into one, we are still reading what the Apostle Paul wrote, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and brought together in Scripture by that same Spirit.

Having made that note, there are good reasons to see this letter as a composite whole, even though it starts and stops, changing subjects at times with no apparent reason. We need to remember that Paul was not writing on a word processor. For that matter, he did not even have an eraser! Paul wrote on scrolls that were expensive and limiting in their use! Unlike a book where one might tear out a page that does not fit or a notebook where one may reorder the pages to make better sense, a scroll is written without such editing from start to finish.

We should also remember that Paul did not write the letter all at once, he clearly took a good bit of time composing it. He wrote while traveling, dictating one portion here, and another portion there. He could easily have set the letter down for a month and then resumed it. It seems very likely that he would have written a good bit of it with Titus gone. Then, once Titus returned, we see a change in writing as Titus brought Paul the latest. That apparently happened when Paul was writing what we designate as chapter 7. In that event, it is fair to assume Paul would not throw away the scroll on which he had been writing to rewrite the first part. Paul would just add on to the scroll with the news Titus brought.

In short, the partitive theory offers students and scholars an alternative understanding for the ebb and flow of the context of the letter. By the same token, there are other legitimate reasons to understand the contextual flow. So, our key will be to follow Paul's train of thought, however it came to us!

The Themes

Different scholars have sorted through 2 Corinthians in an effort to catalogue the various themes in the letter. Depending upon which scholar you read, you will find lists of themes ranging from apostolicity, Christology, the trinity, the resurrection, and the second coming (eschatology), suffering and glory, covenant and transformation, dwellings on earth and in heaven, reconciliation and righteousness, and trust. Such a wide range of scholastic opinions on themes is not surprising since the letter is written in the disruptive manner noted earlier. This is also seen in the structure of the letter.

The Structure

The letter does not lend itself readily to an outline. We will break the text into these divisions for our review:

1. Paul's plans and interactions with the church (2 Cor. 1-2:4);
2. The theology behind Paul's gospel message and our eternal life (2 Cor. 2:5-5:10);
3. Paul's ministry (2 Cor. 5:11-7);

4. The contribution for the Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 8-9); and
5. Reaffirming Paul's apostleship and authority (2 Cor. 10-13).

1. Paul's plans and interactions with the church

Paul addressed the letter to the church in Corinth. Unlike 1 Corinthians, Paul added all saints in Achaia (Greece) as recipients. We have already set forth much of Paul's personal comments about Paul's personal issues earlier. Paul also divulged some of his plans in this section, explaining how his plans had recently changed.

Originally, Paul planned on visiting the Corinthians twice while on his swing through Macedonia. Paul changed those plans, and not because Paul was wishy-washy or made plans lightly. Paul explained that God does not flip-flop on things – nor did he. Rather, Paul decided not to make another “painful visit” to spare the Corinthians the grief (2 Cor. 1:23-2:2).

2. Paul's gospel message and eternal life

Paul affirmatively declared his forgiveness of all who caused him grief from his last painful visit (2 Cor. 2:5). In light of the problems of the Corinthian church that we read of in 1 Corinthians, it is not surprising that Paul's next visit to the church turned out to be painful!

Paul explained that he went on to Troas to preach but Titus had not yet returned; so, Paul had no peace of mind. Paul's heart troubled him over the church and how it was doing. He was bothered by the visit and the pain/grief it involved. Even the apostle Paul could not put those troubles out of mind!

Although, in the midst of his distress, Paul remembered the important lesson that we are who we are because of God. We do not live life apart from him. That makes us,

the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing (2 Cor. 2:15).

The aroma Paul left was important to him; so, Paul was never one to

peddle the word of God for profit (2 Cor. 2:17).

Paul ministered a new covenant, not one written on tablets of stone, like the Ten Commandments, but a new covenant written by the Spirit on the hearts of men. This new ministry of a new covenant was a world apart from before.

The earlier covenant was written on stone and brought death. The new covenant of the Spirit was one of life and glory. While receiving the old covenant, Moses had to veil his face because the glory of the Lord was so great it affected Moses himself. Now, Paul says if the old covenant was surpassed with a more glorious covenant, then how bold we can be with our covenant!

Paul notes that the veil Moses wore was much like the veil that non-believing Jews wear to the new covenant. The greatest glory is that shown in the new covenant. Yet, just as the Jews could never see the glory reflected in Moses because of the veil, the Jews wore a veil that kept them from seeing the glory of the new Covenant.

Believers, however, are different! We have unveiled faces and behold the glory of the Lord, even as we are being transformed ourselves into that glory (2 Cor. 3:7-18).

Because Paul had this ministry of this covenant of glory and life, Paul walked plainly in truth of word and action. He needed no pretense or show. He needed no deceit or secrets. He had a glorious word of truth – a covenant that sets men free to live eternally with God. He had the clear light of the good news that Jesus died and was resurrected on mankind’s behalf. This was a word that Paul gladly preached. For this is a shining light from God into our hearts. It is the light of the Lord Jesus himself (2 Cor. 4:1-6).

In spite of having this glorious light and covenant, Paul explained that the suffering that we incur shows that the power and light we have is not our own but comes from God. This allowed Paul and all believers to understand that our sufferings and our bodies that fall apart (“earthen vessels”) serve as reminders that *inwardly* we are being renewed. Inwardly, we are already seeing the start of what time will manifest to us fully – namely, the glory of our heavenly dwelling with God. There will come a day for all believers when we will be clothed immortally with the heavenly body God has made for us. While we groan and suffer now, we have confidence that our eternity is secure in the hands of a mighty and loving God. God secured his eternity in our hearts by placing his Spirit there (2 Cor. 4:7-5:5).

This brought Paul to the logical conclusion that we are better off after death as we join God for eternity. Nevertheless, while here in this earthen vessel, we serve him faithfully. We gladly live to please our king before whom we will stand when

life is over! At this ultimate judgment, we will receive our due from God for the things we have done on earth – whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:1-10).

3. Paul's Ministry

Paul spent the first 4 1/2 chapters speaking of his plans with the Corinthians, his suffering, his new covenant message, and the bodies of clay we now live in, and the heavenly bodies that await us in glory. Paul explained that we have a new covenant of glory written on our hearts. Paul then took this teaching about Christ in us (the new covenant written on our hearts) and the promise of a glorious resurrection body that awaits believers, and applied it to his teaching and ministry.

Paul wrote that his motivation for teaching – and his motivation for a plain and transparent life – was the fear/awe Paul has for the Lord. Paul lived his life to convey the truth of a crucified Messiah to men. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know he was not writing out of pride. Paul is not “trying to commend” himself to the Corinthians “again” (2 Cor. 5:12), which was evidently something he had been accused of earlier. Apparently, some opposing Paul were proudly following those with “good visibles” (rich teachers? handsome teachers?) as opposed to proudly following Paul and those with good hearts!

Evidently, the charges against Paul go beyond his physical and material shortcomings. Some even charged that Paul was out of his mind! So, Paul explained that if he and his companions are indeed “out of our mind, it is for the sake of God!” Importantly, however, Paul added that if he was in his right mind, which no sane person should dispute, then all Paul’s actions were “for you [the Corinthians]” (2 Cor. 5:13).

This is a marvelous question many have noted over the centuries. Was Paul a crazy man? Why would Paul give everything up for a life of pain, hardship, emotional misery, and personal danger otherwise? There are three options: Paul was crazy, Paul was stupid and duped, or Paul had indeed encountered the Messiah. Paul clearly was not crazy, something we can still deduce by reading his many writings done over a decade of his life. As for Paul being stupid, or duped, there is no evidence of such stupidity or gullibility in his writings. He is repeatedly put to the test, and has no concerns that his experience and his miraculous works were anything less than real. That leaves the third option, for us and for the Corinthians: Paul was the real deal.

What was driving Paul? Christ’s love for Paul and for all of us compelled Paul. Christ’s love could never be clearer. The love was not merely spoken with words. Nor was it shown in simple affection or gifts. The love of Christ was

demonstrated in this world by the ultimate sacrifice – a physical death and resurrection. Christ for us. Christ in our stead. That love pushed Paul to do all he could to proclaim to mankind the love of mankind’s Savior.

Paul never viewed people or the world the same again. The world had been alienated from God, but could be reconciled through Christ. This was a real event that had happened in Paul’s lifetime. There were hundreds of witnesses, including Paul himself. This is why Paul saw a new creation in Jesus Christ of all believers. The old covenant was gone, but so was the old life.

Paul explained that the believer lives in a reconciled state of closeness to our God. Since God through Christ, had reconciled the world to himself, Paul became an ambassador through whom God made an appeal to men. Paul had a ministry of reconciliation, bringing the truth to people that a direct relationship with God was possible. People could now have sins forgiven, renewed with God’s unblemished righteousness. Paul was excited that God’s day of salvation spoken of in Isaiah 49:8 had arrived (2 Cor. 5:16 – 6:2).

This profound action of God among mankind moved Paul. Paul would minister and speak freely to the Corinthians to convey the wonderful truth of what God did in Christ and what it meant to humanity. Paul’s hardships paled in comparison to his participating in seeing God’s salvation bearing fruit in believers. So Paul gladly endured “troubles, hardships and distresses, beatings, imprisonment and riots; hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger” (2 Cor. 6:5).

Paul was first and foremost God’s servant. Those who would discredit him would discredit his Master, God. Paul was God’s servant in the face of the hardships, but also in his “purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report” (2 Cor. 6:6-8).

Paul was almost the opposite of how he was being portrayed. Paul was

genuine, yet regarded an imposter; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet living on; beaten and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything (2 Cor. 6:8-10).

This explanation and answer to his critics could only grow out of deep conviction in the truth of Paul’s mission and message.

The Holiness of Believers

After this defense, Paul seemed to pause and adjust to a slightly different subject. This may be one of the places where Paul put his pen down for a week, or a month, picking it up at a later time to write on something else that has occurred to him. He wrote of the necessity of separateness between believers and unbelievers.

We understand this section a bit more if we note the meaning of the word “holy.” The Greek for “holy” is ἅγιος (*hagios*). Its meaning echoes that of the Hebrew word for “holy,” (*qodesh*). Both words strongly convey the idea of “dedicated” in the sense of someone or something that was set apart. For example, certain people set apart for God’s service in the Old Testament were considered “holy.” In fact, the Jewish nation itself carried the term “holy” because it was a nation chosen by God, set apart from the other nations (Dt. 7:6). Even the Sabbath day was set apart as different from the other days, and hence was called “holy” (Gen. 2:3). These were “holy” because they were not “common,” but were separated from the common for dedicated and special use before God.

This is why the church and we believers are called to be holy. We are not your average fallen humans! We are set apart for God’s service; we are dedicated to God and his mission. The Holy Spirit dwells within us. We have within us Christ, our assurance of glory. And, so we are unique as a people among the nations of the world. We are holy!

Paul wrote that as holy people, set apart from others, dedicated for God as his children and as his dwelling place on earth, we are to live differently. We are not to be “yoked together with unbelievers.”⁸ Light and darkness do not dwell together, so we are to “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body

⁸ This is a passage that is easily taken out of context by some to justify an “isolationist Christianity” where there is as little interaction with the world as possible. That is not a fair construction for two reasons. It loses the balance inherent in the immediate context itself. It is our unique calling and restored relationship that separates us from others. That results in a different lifestyle, yes, but not isolation. As Paul has already written, we are the aroma of Christ to those outside the church. Jesus taught the same when he taught that we were the salt of the earth. We preserve and flavor the world in the name of Christ. We are a light set on a hill, not because we are to be isolated from the world, but because we are what they see shining in the midst of the world’s darkness. Jesus sent us into the world to proclaim his message. It is the balance between being in the world for God’s purposes but not being of the world and its purposes.

and spirit.” We are to perfect being set apart for God (i.e. “holiness”) out of our reverence for God who dwells within us and makes us separate (holy) (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

Paul’s Joy and Stewardship

In chapter 7, Paul again returned to the theme of defending himself in the face of attacks we can no longer hear directly, but can still understand by the nature of Paul’s defense. Paul wrote that he had neither wronged nor exploited anyone. Paul was careful in writing his defense that the Corinthians understood that he was not scolding those who support him. In fact, he was greatly encouraged by them and would willingly die for them (2 Cor. 7:2-4).

At this point in Paul’s writing, Titus had returned to him with encouraging news of how the Corinthians felt and cared for him. Paul understood from Titus that his last letter hurt some Corinthians. Paul wrote that while he felt badly about hurting them, he was happy that the Corinthians’ sorrow had led to repentance. Paul explained that godly sorrow can lead to wonderful, life-changing things for a Christian. Their sorrow produced an earnestness to clear themselves, an eagerness to make things right, an alarm to issues, and a desire to see justice done. This reaction encouraged Paul (2 Cor. 7:8-13).

Titus himself was also encouraged and delighted at the Corinthians’ response to Titus and Paul’s message. Titus grew in affection from his time at the church (2 Cor. 7:13-16).

Paul then addressed the issue of the Corinthian contributions for the work of the saints. Jerusalem and its surrounding area were severely famine-stricken. Food was very expensive. Paul used this famine and the resulting starvation to bring funds from Gentiles in to the home Jewish church. No doubt this helped unite both giver (Gentile) and receiver (Jew) in Christ. For this contribution, the Macedonians (from where Paul was writing) were freely giving to God out of extreme poverty with overflowing joy (2 Cor. 8:1-5). Paul wanted the Corinthians to follow through on earlier commitments and similarly give earnestly to the work. Paul reminded the Corinthians of Jesus’ giving. As God, Jesus was rich, but he became poor on our account so we could become rich in our eternal destiny (2 Cor. 8:6-15).

Titus was returning to Corinth to collect the remaining gifts, and Paul emphasized that the money was being handled VERY carefully so neither God nor man could question or criticize how the gift was used (2 Cor. 8:16-24).

As Paul explained his heart on this issue of giving, he added an important admonition:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” (2 Cor. 9:6-8)

Closing Chapters

As we draw the Corinthian correspondence to a close, we see more clearly some of the slanderous and hurtful accusations hurled at Paul from within the confines of the church. Discovering some of these harsh insults, one marvels at Paul’s loving and controlled response – not one of vengeance, but one of truth, defense, and challenge. Paul constantly worked every event back to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As his letter drew to a close, we see most clearly that Paul practiced what he preached: Everything drew its significance and importance in reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nothing else mattered.

The closing chapters of 2 Corinthians also offer the challenge of understanding some of the more difficult verses in Paul’s writings. There are a number of issues including spiritual warfare, visions of paradise, unanswered prayer, and self-examination.

Paul’s Defense and His Fool’s Speech

Reading through chapters 10 and 11, one sees Paul’s obvious references to a number of things that have been said to him or about him. It is hard to make sense of a number of verses if we fail to realize that Paul was responding to and referencing accusations and insults hurled at him by others. For example, chapter 10 starts with Paul writing:

By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you – I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” when away!

The N.I.V. puts “timid” and “bold” in quotation marks to give us their interpretation that Paul is quoting what others have said about him.⁹

⁹ As noted in earlier lessons, ancient Greek did not have punctuation functioning like our quotation marks.

We would be remiss in understanding this passage if we were to read it as Paul affirming that he was timid before the Corinthians and bold when away. We do Paul's letter more justice by understanding that some Corinthians felt thusly about Paul, and Paul saw fit to respond to those beliefs.

Paul added emphasis to his coming defense appealing "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ." The meekness and gentleness should never be confused with timidity! Would those same Corinthians who labeled Paul timid be as quick to label the meek and gentle Son of God timid? We can assume not! Paul underscored this by saying his solution might well be to come back to Corinth and boldly confront several people there.

Paul could well confront his adversaries. Paul was not without the necessary weapons. But, the weapons Paul would bring would not be the world's weapons of war. Paul would not confront his adversaries with sword and shield, nor even fists. Paul saw the battle itself as something quite beyond the physical world and its people. To challenge someone to a dual would achieve nothing. In fact, it would miss the real point at issue.

So, Paul brought to "battle" weapons not of this world. His weapons were nonetheless VERY potent; for Paul's weapons had divine power to demolish strongholds. With his weapons, Paul demolished every pretension and argument. Paul had weapons to even capture thoughts and bring them into submission and obedience to Christ. Paul was anticipating punishing the disobedience of his adversaries, failing their change of heart and action (2 Cor. 10:1-6).

Paul pointed out that the Corinthians were not looking properly on the situation. They looked only at the surface of things rather than the full truth. So, the Corinthians would consider too much of themselves and their views merely because they "belonged to Christ." Paul points out the superficiality of this reasoning noting that, of course, he also belonged to Christ! Mere status as a Christian does not make one's actions or beliefs right (2 Cor. 10:7-8).

Among other insults some in Corinth levied against Paul was that Paul's

letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing (2 Cor. 10:10).

Paul says that these people should be careful. Upon his return to Corinth, they will find him in person as weighty and forceful as he is in writing! (2 Cor. 10:11)

Paul noted that these people were unwise in their self-boasting and self-commendation. Paul would not stoop to compare himself to those who were measuring themselves to themselves! These were people that were claiming with great pride who they were and what they did. Whether they were beautiful in appearance or enthralling speakers made no difference to Paul. Paul was “just” someone whom God entrusted with taking the gospel to Corinth and beyond! So, let the others commend themselves if they choose, Paul was happy to have the commendation from the Lord that was inherent in his calling and work (2 Cor. 10:12-18).

Paul struck a tone in chapter 11 that explained some of the previous sarcasm from his pen. Paul explains that he had a godly jealousy for the Corinthians. Paul felt the responsibility of presenting the Corinthians to Christ as a pure virgin before her wedding. Paul’s fear was that Satan would lead the Corinthians astray in their minds, replacing their pure and sincere devotion to Jesus with heresy (2 Cor. 11:1-4).

Paul’s concern was motivated in part by the arrival in Corinth of some self-proclaimed “Super Apostles.” These folks were not intimidating to Paul and he spoke of them bluntly. While Paul was not a trained orator¹⁰ or professional speaker, he certainly knew what he was speaking about! (2 Cor. 11:5-6). These men were false apostles and deceivers. They were not real apostles but fakes! That should come as no surprise because

Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:15).

Evidently, these super apostles came into Corinth proclaiming proudly their own accomplishments. This self-trumpeting was opposite to the approach Paul took with the Corinthians. Paul considered the super apostles fools. If the Corinthians wanted to consider Paul a fool, then Paul could also come in and proclaim his own greatness as well. Once Paul did so, no super apostle could compare in qualifications with Paul.

Paul was a Hebrew and Israelite.¹¹ In service to Christ, Paul had suffered numerous imprisonments, repeated floggings and beatings, multiple exposures to

¹⁰ At the time, Greek culture produced a specific training and job occupation of “Orator.” Lawyers, teachers, and politicians were all trained as “Orators.”

¹¹ By using both terms, Paul was likely referring not only to his heritage as a Jew (the term “Israelite”), but also the fact that his family records were secured throughout the captivities so the heritage could be traced (a “Hebrew”).

death, and three shipwrecks. Paul was in constant danger from bandits, from Jews, from Greeks, in the cities, in the country, at sea, and even in the church from false brothers. Paul went without sleep, hungry and thirsty, cold and relatively unclothed. More than all that, however, Paul carried the burden of caring for churches like Corinth (2 Cor. 11:21-29).

Those events seem pried from Paul's pen. He was clearly uncomfortable lest the words seem like bragging. To Paul, it seemed foolish to even write it. Accordingly, scholars often label this Paul's "Fool Speech." Yet, Paul felt compelled to write to demonstrate the foolishness of the Corinthians following some fake boastful self proclaimed apostles.

It is also quite interesting that when Paul wrote in a way that seems to boast his accomplishments, Paul did not write of what the world might put on a resume to impress folks. Rather than list prominent worldly achievements, Paul listed sufferings and personal weaknesses (2 Cor. 11:30). Why? We can understand that the weaknesses show the very work and sustaining power of God in Paul's life. No one continues or lives in such weaknesses, much less boasting in them, unless something greater is at work.

Paul's Defense and Thorn in the Flesh

Paul continued his defense in Chapter 12. Paul continued his "boasting," in spite of its evident repulsion to him, as Paul furthers his resume to the Corinthians.

Evidently, the super apostles credentialed themselves with claims of super natural visions and revelations. Paul then moved to this same subject for himself. In doing so, however, Paul shifted his form of writing to a form termed "arm's length" narrative. This form of writing has Paul talking from his own personal experience as though he was a third person. So, we see Paul writing,

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2).

Paul then went on to describe the experience. Yet, Paul did not give us the content of the revelation itself. In fact, Paul said that the inexpressible things he heard he was "not permitted to tell" (2 Cor. 12:4). In other words, the super apostles may claim some wonderful divine vision/revelation but such were not the basis for someone's claims of superiority. Paul reverted back to his earlier comments, that the weaknesses he endured and worked through were the best testimony of God in his life (2 Cor. 12:5-6).

Paul then discussed his infirmity, his “thorn in the flesh,” about which scholars make suggestions, but really have no definitive answers. The most popular seems to be that Paul had a vision issue (based on a number of passages in Acts, Galatians,¹² as well as Corinthians). It makes sense in an almost ironic manner that if Paul’s thorn in the flesh was a vision issue that Paul should segue to his thorn after speaking of the most incredible “supernatural” vision Paul experienced. The thorn was one that Paul had prayed for God to remove three times. The thorn remained to keep Paul from becoming conceited because of his “surpassingly great revelations” (2 Cor. 12:7). So, Paul kept his perspective about him as one who had great visions from God, yet earthly vision issues that would not leave.

Whether the thorn was vision related, Paul sought its removal multiple times to no avail. We should remember that Paul is writing this after a three-year stint in Ephesus where Paul was so famous as a healing vessel of God that the Ephesians even used Paul’s handkerchief and aprons for healing (Acts 19:11-12). Yet, Paul was never to see the healing of his own infirmity. From this, Paul derived a great lesson which he recorded for the Corinthians and which the Holy Spirit has seen fit to secure for us:

He [God] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9)

No wonder Paul delighted and spoke so clearly about his own weakness. It was to God’s glory that Paul worked in the midst of weakness. In the weakness, the power of Christ could work! (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

Paul ended chapter 12 expressing personal concern for the Corinthians. He wanted them to understand that his motivation for what he says and writes is a loving concern for them. Paul wanted the best for them and will give as a parent gives to a child for the Corinthians to be all they can before God.

Final Comments

With chapter 13, Paul brought his letter to a close. Paul reminded the Corinthians that two or three witnesses must establish testimony adequate for conviction in court. Twice, Paul visited the Corinthians, and the next visit would make three. That is sufficient warning that they better get in line! (2 Cor. 13:1-4)

Paul reminded them that Christ was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. Paul might have been laden with weakness, but he could and would come

¹² See the lesson on Acts and Galatians for a discussion of those texts.

in the power of God. Accordingly, Paul urged the Corinthians to examine and measure or test themselves. Paul did not want his next visit to be harsh. He wanted the Corinthians built up, not torn down 13:5-10).

So, Paul concluded urging the Corinthians to

aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, [and] live in peace (2 Cor. 13:11).

Paul closed blessing the Corinthians through the Trinity

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14).

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”* (Ps. 11:3).

This is one of my favorite Psalms. The Psalmist asks a question about the proper course of life when life itself is in doubt. The wicked had beset the Psalmist, and it was affecting every area of life. The question is a real one, but it is also one with an answer.

The answer recognizes, “The LORD is in his holy temp.” God does not sleep or ignore the world, “His eyes see” what is going on. In faith we hear the assurance that “the upright shall behold his face.”

This was Paul’s mindset in his own difficulties. He did not waiver from his conviction that God was in control. He knew that God would bring all things together for the best, even the difficulties that arise out of sin and sinful people.

This same confidence needs to be ours. Like Paul, we need to not simply give it lip service, but walk through life and its problems holding tightly to the Lord who will see us through.

2. *“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”* (2 Cor. 9:6).

This passage is worth more than a passing reading. This passage has several truths at its core. First, everything is God's. Anything we have, we have as a result of his blessings. Second, God does much of his work through the church. What he has given us is not for OUR purposes, but for HIS. Third, when we give to him and his works, we should give with joy, recognizing that what we give is what he entrusted to us. He gave it to us for us to use and give as HE sees fit. So, we are to give and watch him use not only what we give, but also the right attitude with which we give. Those who give generously and cheerfully are those to whom God can entrust more. God entrusts more because those are people who will use the greater sums for HIS purposes as well.

This passage is not teaching a blind "give to the Lord so you can get richer!" The goal is not getting richer. The goal is being a trust-worthy vessel God can use to get his work done. By the same token, Paul recognized and PRECEDED this passage with his clear conviction of his obligation to handle the gifts rightly before God AND man. Paul never used this teaching as a means to enrich himself or his lifestyle. Paul counted it an honor to live for God in want.

3. *"...aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, [and] live in peace"* (2 Cor. 13:11).

Paul's parting advice to the Corinthian church is marvelous advice to us. It was born out of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the fires and trials of Paul's own faith walk. It is Paul's directive for himself, just as much as it is his instruction for the growing believers in Corinth. It is an excellent charge for the believer today as we (1) aim for perfection, knowing our redeeming God is there as we fall short, as we (2) listen to Paul's appeal, these 2,000 years later in our study of Scripture, as we (3) are of one mind, singularly focused on being the body of Christ to a lost world, and as we (4) live in peace, internally and in our relationship with others.