Text: 2 Corinthians
Title: Introduction to 2 Corinthians
Truth: We learn about the background of 2 Corinthians and its first two verses.
Date/Location: Original 7/10/2005; Rev. & exp. September 7, 2025 at FBC

Introduction

The book of 2 Corinthians was somewhat of a mystery to me for a long time. But a careful study of it in context with Acts and the historical situation that unfolded at Corinth yields a great spiritual benefit. We learn that the Corinth church was plagued with problems. This was to be expected from a church coming out of licentious paganism. Paul exhorted the church to fix the problems.

Following is an outline of the contact that Paul had with the church at Corinth, starting from its founding.

Paul's Visits and Letters to Corinth

Date	Acts	Event
49 A.D.	18:2	0. Emperor Claudias commanded all Jews to leave Rome. Aquila and Priscilla move from Rome to Corinth.
Fall 50	18:1-17	1. Paul planted the church at Corinth on his second missionary tour. He stayed there 18 months. We can pinpoint the time because we know the starting time of Gallio's proconsulate, July 1, 51 A.D. (Acts 18:12).
Spring 52	18:18-21	2. Paul left Corinth via Cenchrea, stopped at Ephesus, sailed to Caesarea, went to Jerusalem, then to Antioch.
52/53 to 55/56	18:23, 19:1-22	3. On his third missionary journey, after going through Galatia and Phrygia, Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years (cf. Acts 20:31). During this time, he had much contact with the church at Corinth.
~53		4. **Paul wrote** to Corinth the letter referred to in 1 Cor. 5:9-13. That letter spoke of the need to separate from sexually immoral people but the church misunderstood it.
~54	19:1	5. Word came to Paul through various sources about the situation in Corinth. Chloe's family brought him news (1 Cor. 1:11); Apollos may have given him information (1 Cor. 16:12) since he was in Corinth

Date	Acts	Event
		while Paul was in Ephesus; and the Corinthians wrote to Paul (1 Cor. 7:1; see "now concerning" passages in 8:1, 12:1, 16:1) probably sending their letter with Stephanas and company (1 Cor. 16:17).
~54	19:22	6. **Paul wrote** 1 Corinthians in response to the problems he heard about. Timothy was sent with Erastus from Ephesus to Macedonia and on to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10-11) but it was unclear whether he would arrive before or after Paul's letter.
~55		7. Paul also made the "sorrowful visit" to Corinth sometime during his three-year stay in Ephesus. It is not mentioned in Acts; but since 2 Corinthians mentions his upcoming third visit (12:14, 21, 13:1-2), this second visit had to take place somewhere between Acts 18:18 and 20:1. Some person in Corinth did Paul wrong during this visit (2 Cor. 7:12).
~55		8. After returning, **Paul wrote** the "severe letter" to straighten things out. This is different from 1 Corinthians, though some take it that way.* Titus probably delivered the letter (2 Cor. 12:18).
~56		9. Paul could not wait to hear back from Titus about the results of his trip, so he went to Troas and then Macedonia to find Titus (2 Cor. 2:12-13; 7:5-16). Titus has good news: the church has responded positively to Paul's letter and the offender has been chastened. Still, there are other problems that the Corinthians needed to be helped with: Paul's change in travel plans, the "false super-apostles" who were wrecking Paul's work in Corinth, and the plans for gathering a collection in support of the poor saints in Jerusalem.
56	20:1	10. **Paul wrote** 2 Corinthians from Macedonia after he met Titus (2 Cor. 7:5; 8:1; 9:2-4). Part of the letter prepared them for his upcoming third visit to fix some more of the problems in the church.
56	20:2-3	11. Paul came to Corinth for the third time (2 Cor. 13:1) and stayed for three months.

Date	Acts	Event
56	20:2-3; Rom. 16:23	12. Paul wrote the letter to the Romans from Corinth during this three-month visit. We know he was there since he mentioned Gaius (1 Cor. 1:14, though Gaius was a common name) and Erastus, the city treasurer (Romans 16:23, see also 2 Tim. 4:20). An inscription with Erastus' name in it has been found in Corinth. Rom. 15:26 indicates that his trip was a success as far as the collection went.

Credit for much of this outline goes to Dr. William Combs, who taught a very helpful course at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary on 2 Corinthians.

* How do we know that the "severe letter" is different from 1 Corinthians?

1. 2 Cor. 7:12 talks about the one who did the wrong, yet no mention is made there of sexual immorality, which was the problem in 1 Cor. 5.

2. It seems also from the same verse that Paul is the victim, and not the church at large, which was the case in the case of 1 Cor. 5.

3. The severe letter was written in place of another painful visit (2 Cor. 1:23, 2:1, 3), but 1 Corinthians gives no indication that it was written in place of a visit.

4. Paul initially regretted sending the severe letter (2 Cor. 7:8); he would not have regretted sending 1 Corinthians, a letter which he knew was inspired (1 Cor. 14:37).

5. The tone of 1 Corinthians does not seem to be too "severe."

6. The passage of several years from the writing of 1 Corinthians in 53 to the writing of 2 Corinthians in 56 gives a lot of time for events to transpire which are not recorded in Acts 19, especially for a church that is "high maintenance."

I. Background Supplied by 1 Corinthians

While we can read between the lines and get a vague idea of some of the content of the letters Paul wrote before 1 Corinthians and between 1 and 2 Corinthians, we have unhindered access to 1 Corinthians.

A. The church had a lot of problems. They were plagued with divisions or factions, so no unity. They had sexual immorality and were thus not marked by purity. They had used secular law against one another and had a philosophy that they figured could let them be Christians but continue to indulge their fleshly pleasures.

B. They also had a number of questions for Paul, which he answered in this letter. They asked about marriage and divorce. Should we be married? Is divorce permissible and under what circumstances? What about my young virgin daughter, should she be married? They wanted clarification about whether they should eat food offered to idols. They were a bit confused about the roles of men and women in the Christian church. There were problems in their practice of the Lord's Table. They were off the rails in terms of gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly in over-use of certain gifts and downplaying of others. Some in the church were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead, just like is happening today. And they needed some help with the raising of funds for the offering.

C. We probably would rank some issues as more serious and some as less serious, but the reality is that the Corinthian church was in a bit of a mess. We should not expect a church to be without flaws, even difficult ones. But as it receives instructions and purifies itself via the removal of members who do not belong, and adds members who do, then it becomes more like the mature body of Christ that it is supposed to be.

II. Outline of 2 Corinthians

I. Introduction, 1:1-2. See below for some comments on this section.

II. The Apostle's Ministry, 1:3-7:16. He was truly an apostle ministering the gospel honestly.

III. Teaching about the Financial Offering, 8:1-9:15. The church should abound in the grace of giving.

IV. Defense of Paul's Apostleship, 10:1-12:13. He has a divine grant of authority that is aimed at building up the church.

V. The Apostle will Return to Corinth a Third Time, 12:14-13:10. The situation was still somewhat serious, and Paul had to straighten out some more things.

VI. Closing Greeting, 13:11-14

III. Opening Verses of 2 Corinthians

The introduction to the letter has the usual form that we are accustomed to: author, recipients, and greeting. But do not let familiarity with this form put you to sleep!

A. Author

1. **Paul**. This is his Roman name. His Jewish/Hebrew name is Saul. Many people think that Saul's name was changed at his conversion, something like Abram's name was changed to Abraham. But Acts 13:9 only says "Saul, *who also is called Paul*." It says nothing of a renaming. It was common to have both a Greek and a Hebrew name in that culture, and to use the appropriate name depending on where or with whom you were at the time. The reason Saul appears early in Luke's record is because he was fully immersed in Hebrew religion and culture. After being called by God as the apostle to the Gentiles, Luke used that name likely because Paul himself did as he spent much time in the Gentile world.

2. **An apostle of Jesus Christ**. As with most of his letters, he asserts his apostolic credentials immediately. As we will see, there are huge doubts among some at the Corinthian church about his apostleship. If he is not an apostle, then he misrepresented himself to them.

   The term *apostle* in a technical sense means one specifically chosen by Christ (not by oneself!) to be His representative. Such a one had to have seen the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:21), had to work the signs of an apostle, and in the cases of Matthew, John, Paul, and Peter, received revelation destined to be Scripture. Most of the apostles had also participated with Jesus in His earthly ministry from John's baptism forward to the ascension. I cannot be dogmatic that Paul even observed Jesus's ministry, but he met the other qualifications, the most important seeing the resurrected Jesus and being directly selected by Him. Because no one after the first generation of Christians can meet these qualifications, and no one has seen Christ or been provably, directly appointed by Christ, there are no apostles today. This makes sense because God used the apostles to build the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), and the foundation has long been finished. No new foundational material is being added.

3. **By the will of God**. Acts 9:15 tells us this plainly, and Paul reminds us here that he is not an apostle by his own choosing. He did not take the honor of that office to himself, but was appointed by Christ (like the priest in Heb. 5:4). To argue against Paul's apostolic status amounts to arguing against God! It also undermines a substantial portion of the New Testament. You can see therefore how Satan would do what he could to advance the argument that Paul is *not* an apostle, to cast

doubt on that section of God's word. But we are wise to his devices and cannot dismiss the apostle Paul from the New Testament.

4. **Timothy our brother**. A beloved Christian brother and understudy who was with Paul at the time of writing. Timothy was not a co-author; only Paul was the human author. Timothy had gone to Corinth before (1 Cor. 4:17, 16:10) and was active in Paul's ministry traveling and preaching.

B. Recipients

1. **Church of God**. This phrase is used eight times in the NT (Acts 20:28, Gal. 1:13, 1 Tim. 3:5; and five times of the church in Corinth: 1 Cor. 1:2, 10:32, 11:22, 15:9; 2 Cor 1:1). It is instructive to think about this in terms of the Corinthian problem of divisions. The church belongs to God, and comes about because of the work of God, not due to Paul or Apollos or any person in the church or any false teachers that have come in to undermine Paul's teaching. See 1 Cor. 3:9. Therefore, the church should not be divided.

2. **At Corinth**. A large, cosmopolitan city of about half a million people, Corinth had a reputation for being a wicked place, somewhat like some of the large cities or college towns in the United States today. Sexual immorality was a problem with the temple to Aphrodite. The Corinthians had a huge emphasis on the idea of "knowledge" (1 Cor. 8:1).

3. **With all the saints in Achaia**. The region on the peninsula south of Macedonia (southern Greece) had other churches, like those in Athens (Acts 17:34) and Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1). Paul expected the letter to the Corinthian church to circulate among these nearby believers as well. Remember, just because the letter is not written directly *to* you, it can still be very much *for* you, which this one is.

C. Greeting

1. **Grace**. The unmerited, unsought favor of God poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior. Without it we could not attain new life, nor could that new life be sustained. This is modified from the traditional "Greetings" of Greek letters.

> It is grace at the beginning, and grace at the end. So that when you and I come to lie upon our death beds, the one thing that should comfort and help and strengthen us there is the thing that helped us in the beginning. Not what we have been, not what we have done, but the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. The Christian life starts with

> grace, it must continue with grace, it ends with grace. Grace, wondrous grace. By the grace of God I am what I am. Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. — David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

2. **Peace**. This comes from the normal Hebrew greeting (Shalom!) Without grace, we could not have peace with God that replaces enmity (Romans 5:1), nor could we have the peace that comes from God which overcomes our guilt and anxiety (Phil. 4:7).

> What peace can they have who are not at peace with God? — Matthew Henry

3. **From God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. This is fascinating because there is only one preposition "from." The deity of Christ is clearly implied, for no Jewish person would put anyone on par with God in the same breath unless convinced about the deity of Jesus Christ. There are also the titles *God* and *Lord* as well as *Christ*. All these are part of the proof that God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are two persons in the divine Trinity.

   I want you to note very carefully and consciously that there are some who claim that Jesus was just a mere man, not God. They want Him to be Lord but not God, or not even Lord. They say that church fathers "turned him into God" when in fact the early church Christians simply correlated Scripture with Scripture and figured out, like Paul (Romans 9:5) and Peter (2 Peter 1:1) and John and the other apostles, that the Son of God became a man, meaning He also is and always was God. The anti-Trinitarian teachers say He was not God (contrary to John 1:1), that He is not worthy of worship (contrary to John 20:28 and Luke 24:52[1]), and that He did not pre-exist the incarnation (contrary to John 3:13, John 17:5, and Col. 1:17). The point is that Jesus was a man, but not merely a man. He was "very God of very God" or, in the words of Scripture, "He was God." He is God. He is the reason we can have eternal life because He is perfect, infinite, holy, and made a vicarious sacrifice for our sins. If He were just a person like us, He would not have the power to save us from sin.

   The larger textual unit of which this is a part is saying that Paul wishes grace and peace to his readers. This is a wish for blessing from the apostle, but notice the grace and peace to you do not come from *him*. It is grace and peace to you from *God*. That is an entirely different

[1] And Matt. 2:11, 8:2, 9:18, 14:33, 15:25, 28:9, 28:17; Mark 5:6; John 9:38; Rev. 5:13.

level of blessing. It is a level of blessing available to all people who have a receptive faith in God and His Son Jesus.

Conclusion

It was God's will to commission Paul by calling him as an apostle of Jesus Christ. God deputized Paul to write to the Corinthian church with an eye at the same time to other Christians. After opening with a wish for grace and peace—which a good number of Corinthian people had tasted—he will discuss a number of matters for the troubled church. He will speak in defense of his own ministry; of the gospel and its frail vessels; of the destiny of the saved to be with the Lord and the judgment seat of Christ; of how to think about stewardship of money as a Christian; of apostolic authority (which runs into our desire to be our own authority); and of his upcoming visit that could be a "three strikes and you are out" type of situation. Paul was not messing around because this was the church—of God—not Paul's church or your pastor's church. This body represents God, and if it does not, it is in a shameful situation. But when it does work like God designs, it is a glorious thing, shining as it does as Christ's light on earth.

MAP