

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 45

II Corinthians – Part One

I. BACKGROUND

We have just finished covering I 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 Second Corinthians.

Paul originally came to Corinth on his second missionary journey. During the 18 months he stayed, Paul established the church there among Gentiles and Jews. After Paul left the church, Apollos and perhaps Peter came to the church and taught for a brief period. Paul continued to keep up with the church through messengers that went back and forth. Paul wrote an early letter to the church (some scholars call it "Corinthians A") that is no longer available (it is not "extant").¹ Out of concern, Paul wrote a second letter ("Corinthians B") called I Corinthians in our Bibles.

After Paul wrote I 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. II Corinthians 1:1 indicates that Timothy returned to Paul in Ephesus, but the problems were not solved. So, Paul seems to have made a visit (which he termed "painful") in II Corinthians 2:1. 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 sent Titus in an attempt to help the situation.

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 II 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 7ish!), Titus

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).

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

arrived and brought Paul good news about the church's willingness to submit to Paul and his teaching. Accordingly, Paul finished the letter covering the contribution for the Jerusalem church (8–9) and reaffirming his apostleship and authority (10–13).

II. THE TEXT

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

A. *One Letter of Many? Unity of the Text*

The Text of II 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 warm 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. These folks 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 stats 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, called the "partitive theory" of Corinthians. We will not delve into detail on this theory, for that would be greater than our task of Biblical literacy! But, we will add a note 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, starting and stopping and changing subjects at almost any time. 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.

If we also remember that Paul did not necessarily write letters all at once, then we can see this letter taking a good bit of time for him. He clearly wrote while traveling, dictating one portion here, and another portion there. He might 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, Titus returns while Paul is writing what we deem 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!

B. The Themes

Different scholars have sorted through II Corinthians in an effort to catalogue the various themes in the letter. Alfred Plummer set out themes of: apostolicity, Christology, the trinity, the resurrection, and the second coming (eschatology). Kistemaker sets out themes of: suffering and glory, covenant and transformation, dwellings on earth and in heaven, reconciliation and righteousness, eschatology and Christology, and trust and apostolicity.

Each of these scholars grouped these threads found in the letter in a useful overview of the letter's content. Each of their commentaries is worthy of study and review. We will note some of the passages for these themes as we go through the letter itself.

C. *The Letter*

The letter does not lend itself readily to an outline. We will use the outline set forward earlier in the Background section of this lesson:

1. Paul's plans and interactions with the church (1-2:4);
 2. The theology behind Paul's gospel message and our eternal life (2:5-5:10);
 3. Paul's ministry (5:11-7);
 4. The contribution for the Jerusalem church (8-9); and
 5. Reaffirming Paul's apostleship and authority (10-13).
1. Paul's plans and interactions with the church (1:1–2:4)

Paul addresses the letter to the church in Corinth. Unlike I Corinthians, Paul adds all saints in Achaia (Greece) as recipients.

Paul explains that in the midst of his troubles and distress, he received great comfort from God. God's compassion and comfort enables Paul to comfort others (3-5). Paul's distress stemmed from great hardships and pressures. Paul and his companions "felt the sentence of death" in their hearts (1:9).

From this distress, Paul noted several truths:

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

From verse 12 forward, Paul discusses how his plans 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 explains 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 (1:23-2:2).

2. Paul's gospel message and eternal life (2:5 – 5:10)

Paul sets forward his forgiveness of any who caused him grief from that last painful visit (2:5). In light of the problems of the Corinthian church that we read of in I Corinthians, it is not surprising that Paul's next visit to the church would be painful!

Paul explains 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" (2:15). The aroma Paul left was important to him; so, Paul was never one to "peddle the word of God for profit" (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 (3:7-18).

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

In spite of having this glorious light and covenant, the suffering that we do 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 (4:7-5:5).

This brings 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 (5:1-10).

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Suffering Comes.
2. God Comforts.
3. So Do Believers.
4. Be a Good Aroma!
5. Walk in the Glory of his Light.