



A Summary Of 2 Corinthians

Introduction

Paul's final letter to Corinth is very different from 1 Corinthians. Something terrible had happened, and his pain is felt from the very opening lines. In this letter he goes down deeper into sorrow and hurt, and what to do about it, than he does anywhere else, and he emerges with a deeper, clearer vision of what it meant that Jesus himself suffered for and with everyone and rose again in triumph. The letter itself comes through the tragedy and out into the sunlight, and has a lot to teach its readers as they make that journey from time to time themselves.

Second Corinthians is actually the fourth letter that Paul sent to the church he founded in Corinth and he wrote it from Macedonia in AD55/56 while on his way from Ephesus to Achaia.

The central theme of 2 Corinthians is the relationship between suffering and the power of the Spirit in Paul's apostolic life, ministry and message. He is stating that those in Corinth who were refusing to accept his apostolic authority were indeed rejecting Christ, for Paul was always faithful in his proclamation of the Gospel.

Corinth was a church in trouble. Paul thought he had dealt with a number of issues in the church through the letter he wrote from Ephesus, and known as 1 Corinthians. When Timothy returned from Corinth to meet with Paul, he informed him that the Corinthians were almost in rebellion against him, so Paul travelled to Corinth, only to be rejected by them. Instead, of staying to win them over, Paul made a humiliating withdrawal and wrote another, this time tearful and stern letter to them. He sent Titus to Corinth to see what their reaction was. This letter is now lost.

When Titus returned to Paul in Macedonia, he informed Paul that many of the Corinthians had repented of their behaviour towards Paul, although there were still some who opposed him who, it seems, were most likely Jewish converts from Palestine. Paul then wrote this letter.

Chapter One

Paul's opening greeting immediately establishes his apostolic authority and the intended nature of the church as the family of God in Christ Jesus.

He speaks openly of his trials and suffering, clearly stating that it was only by the grace of God that he had survived. Such a statement is not one of weakness but of strength, for reliance on God is the key to successful ministry.

Paul then addresses three apparent complaints that the Corinthians held against him: that Paul's letters were hard to understand; that Paul had reneged on his plans to visit them; and that he had a domineering attitude toward them and wanted to show who was in charge.

Chapter Two

Paul concludes his reasoning for his change of plans by outlining the need for him not to come to them again at that time. He speaks of the letter that he wrote disciplining them for their attitude towards him and their lack of action against those stirring up trouble against him. As their apostle, Paul was acting out of love for Corinth and not for any desire to have power over them.

However, he is also clear that those who needed to be disciplined by the church for their actions should also be reconciled in love. It is the corporate responsibility of the church to punish wrongdoing, to excommunicate in the case of persistent sin and to reinstate the repentant.

Instead of travelling back to Corinth, Paul went instead to Troas to minister there. This change of plan was in response to the changing situation in Corinth and Paul's overwhelming desire to avoid causing them any further pain. Instead of going personally, he had sent Titus to them and was awaiting his return before writing this letter to them ahead of a further visit by Paul. However, he cut short his ministry in Troas due to his concerns for Corinth, heading on to Macedonia to be reunited with Titus as soon as possible.

Chapter Three

This chapter is the first part of a longer argument, which builds up step by step through to the great climax in 6:3-10, explaining to the Corinthians that the life and work of a genuine apostle of Jesus really is a glorious thing, even though it may not look like it to them.

Paul opens this chapter by indicating that he and his team did not require the standard letters of introduction or recommendation, such as was normal for itinerant preachers or travelling philosophers in that era, because their work was accredited by the Holy Spirit and could be seen in the result of their work.

Paul then turns his attention to the superiority of the new covenant over the old. He does not say there is anything wrong with the old, just that it has been surpassed by a better one. It appears that some of Paul's opponents had been proclaiming the old ways as being the right ways, using the Law of Moses not in a legalistic sense but portraying the teaching of Moses in a spiritual context.

Paul then turns his attention to a comparison between Moses and a Christian minister. Moses was a great leader of his people, a man of God and revered by the Jews. Even though Jesus was the fulfilment of the Jewish expectation, the hardest audience of all to reach with the Gospel has always been a Jewish one because of this transition away from the Mosaic Law to the new covenant.

Paul's train of thought in vv.12-18 has long been considered obscure. In part this is because he is dealing with two different but related criticisms. It appears that he was accused at some point of professional arrogance; vv.12-13 and v.18 address this matter. It also seems that his opponents were pointing out his lack of success among his own people; vv.14-17 deal with this issue. Interestingly, Paul does not deny either charge.

Chapter Four

Paul once again makes it clear that his work is not about him for he is just a servant, a clay jar, and all the suffering and hardship he willingly endures is for the sole purpose of having Jesus revealed to the world. It is the message contained within the common jar that is of greatest importance.

The Gospel is not about a different god, someone other than the world's original creator, but about the same creator God bringing new life and light to his world, the world where death and darkness have made their home and usurped his role. Paul summarises God's command in Genesis 1, in order to say: what happened to me on the Damascus Road, what happened to you when you believed, and what happens whenever anyone turns to the Lord is a moment of new creation. The truth of the Gospel is simple and Paul does not need rhetoric or fancy speech to proclaim it.

Paul concludes the chapter by indicating that the ministers of the Gospel go through all these trials and hardships, yet they continue to speak out in order that others, like the Corinthians, can live in the hope the Gospel brings. That should result in thanksgiving by all.

Chapter Five

Verses 1-10 are one of the most researched and written-about passages in Paul's writings, and for a good reason. Paul is tackling the topic of the Christian hope beyond the grave, and more specifically, what happens to the believer at the point of death.

Paul clearly believed there is the certainty of physical resurrection and transformation (vv.1-5), the confidence that death begins a journey in the realm of sight (vv.6-7), and the assurance that death places Christians in the presence of Christ (v.8). All this is confirmed by the deposit of the Spirit within believers, guaranteeing what is to come.

Paul attributes his changed perspective of God to two things that he did for him. First, he reconciled Paul to himself through Christ, and second, he gave him the ministry of reconciliation. Paul then goes on to speak of this ministry as ordained by God with the purpose of uniting all believers to himself. Paul wants

that same spirit of reconciliation to exist between his ministry team, the Corinthians and, indeed, all other believers.

Chapter Six

Paul begins with what at first sight seems to be an evangelistic call, then defends the paradoxical character of his ministry (vv.3-10), going on to make an urgent appeal for the Corinthian's affection (vv.11-13), and follows this with a command to sever damaging alliances with unbelievers (6:14–7:1).

Chapter Seven

Verses 3-16 are very representative of the Pauline closing section. This is Paul's final attempt in these chapters to get his readers to accept the legitimacy of his ministry and open their hearts to him. The tone is conciliatory and confident. His intent in writing is not to condemn them but to help them see that they are in his heart to live or die. Expressions of joy and benefit predominate in this chapter.

There is also a glimpse into the reality of Paul's life, and indeed the Christian walk, in that it is not one of endless joy and perfect peace but that there can be turmoil and stress to be found in certain situations. This reality should give readers of this chapter hope that they are not alone in the darker moments of life and that others, including the great man Paul, have suffered the same stresses and strains that they have.

Yet the outcome is one of pure joy as Paul receives the long-awaited news from Titus that the Corinthians have come to realise the hurt they had caused Paul, had repented of their errors and keenly wanted to restore their relationship.

Chapter Eight

Although the collection for the poor in Judæa had been the Corinthians' idea initially, and had been started a year or so earlier, it had stalled until Titus' recent visit. Paul wanted them to resume the collection.

His encouragement comes in the form of indicating that giving is a gracious act that originates with God, with Paul citing the poorer and afflicted Macedonian churches as an excellent example of those that have given generously, despite their trials and hardships.

Paul concludes the chapter by commending Titus to them once again. He was well known to the church in Corinth, as he had only recently visited them, but Paul wants to make it clear that Titus' affection for them is genuine and that he wanted to come to them because of the joy it would bring him in doing so.

Chapter Nine

Paul states that his reason for sending Titus and his two companions is to ensure that the collection is completed, for if the Corinthians failed to do so it would reflect badly on them and Paul in the eyes of the Macedonians, who had faithfully completed their own collection as a result of Paul's contagious enthusiasm for the cause and its outcomes for the giver.

Paul concludes his appeal by pointing to the benefits the Corinthians will reap as a result of generous giving. He crafts his arguments in the OT and uses the agricultural analogy of the benefits of sowing abundantly in order to reap an appropriate harvest. The same applies in terms of spreading the Gospel; the more generous the giving, the greater are the rewards.

Paul identifies four beneficiaries of charitable giving: the giver (vv.8-11), the recipients (v.12), God (vv.11-12), and the church (vv.13-14). These verses may be just a sketch, but they are a sketch of nothing less than the whole picture of what it means to be God's people.

Chapter Ten

Although the tone of Paul's letter seems stern, he is appealing to the mainstream congregation to realise that his achievements in Corinth are his authority of apostleship and that everything he does, says and writes about is done with the sole intention of building up the church of Christ.

In vv.12-18 Paul cuts to the heart of the problem by showing the Corinthians what the opposition is really after. It is not, to be sure, the spiritual welfare of the Corinthians. Their real goal is, instead, to expand their sphere of influence by encroaching on the territory of others and going beyond the boundaries God himself had established.

Chapter Eleven

Paul asks the Corinthians to indulge him playing the fool for three key reasons:

1. His divine jealousy for the Corinthians' purity in Christ.
2. Their willingness to put up with an aberrant message.
3. That Paul is in no way inferior to his rivals.

Paul goes on in vv.6-12 to deal with two specific areas of inferiority that his opponents have pointed to: his speaking ability and his refusal to ask for their financial support. Paul's tone is severe, labelling these imposters as super-apostles and charging them with making proclamations of another Jesus, a different Spirit and a different Gospel to the ones he taught. At the same time Paul elevates the Corinthians for accepting the true Gospel. Their elevation was made possible by Paul's own lowering.

Following an attack on the style of leadership of the false apostles and the lack of wisdom shown by the church in accepting them, Paul goes on to list his own ministerial achievements and sufferings. The list includes heritage (v.22), service record (vv.23-25), dangers and deprivations (vv.26-27), pastoral concerns (v.28), and daring escapades (vv.31-33). The basic categories are, undoubtedly, not those of Paul's own choosing. Since he was forced into this exercise in futility, one can be fairly sure that these categories were prompted by the claims of his opponents and the expectations of the Corinthians.

Chapter Twelve

Paul brings his argument to a climax in this chapter with regard to the boasting of his opponents. They had clearly claimed to have some form of spiritual experiences that had impressed the Corinthians. Paul had been gradually building up to an experience of his own that would surpass anything they could have claimed - being snatched up into heaven! Yet Paul makes it clear that it has nothing to do with his strength but weakness, and takes it upon himself to show how even the most exalted spiritual experiences are to be understood within the framework of the Gospel.

Paul then puts in a final appeal to the Corinthians to remember how Paul had so clearly demonstrated his apostolic credentials through the work he had done with them, calling on them to realise that he was more than equal to his opponents. They are to disengage from any gossip or idle speculation about Paul that was clearly being rumoured by his opponents. He wants those who are not supportive of him to consider the implications for his third visit to them for he did not want to come to discipline them but to build them up.

This letter has the sure touch of someone who prays for his people, loves them unreservedly, and remains personally open to them, involved with them, vulnerable before them.

Chapter Thirteen

Paul completes this letter with one final reminder that the church must overcome its sinful nature before Paul arrives otherwise he will have no option other than to implement the Lord's discipline on those who refuse to repent of their sins.

Paul concludes with a final call to unity in Christ and a rare, yet all encompassing Trinitarian benediction for the whole church.