

Second Corinthians

Paul started the church in Corinth and, after leaving, wrote a letter to the church that some call the “lost letter” mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9. Then, while Paul was in Ephesus, he received two different reports of some problems in the church and wrote the letter that we know as 1 Corinthians to correct those problems. But, unfortunately, that letter didn’t fix all the issues.

Writer: The Apostle Paul

Date of writing: Around 55 AD.

Original Audience: Followers of Jesus in the city of Corinth who mainly were not Jewish.

The Reason for the Letter:

2 Corinthians is a very personal letter from Paul. Some people in the Corinthian church are questioning Paul’s authority and ministry. Paul is defending his ministry and trying to fix his relationship with the Corinthian church.

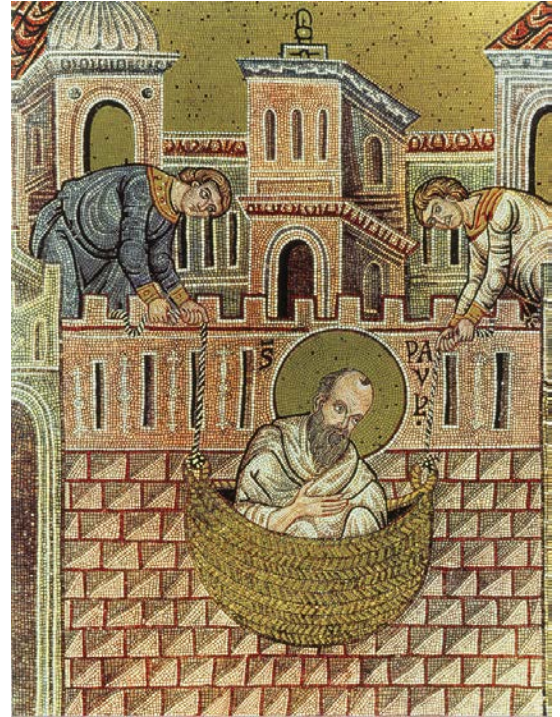
The Main Message of the Letter: 2 Corinthians is unlike any other letter in the New Testament. Most of the letter is Paul defending himself. Paul is defending the choices he has made in his ministry and even in his travel plans. He also defends his choice not to take money from the church to serve as an apostle. The

Corinthian church is comparing Paul to other ministers and public speakers. Paul teaches that a person’s worth or authority is not based on how they look or speak but on what is inside them. Paul says we are like weak jars of clay with treasure inside; this is “to show that his all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (4:7).

Finally, he defends himself against those he calls “super-apostles” who have recently come with letters of recommendation and charge for their services. The “super-apostles” may boast in their strengths, but Paul chooses to boast in his weakness. Paul teaches that God’s power is made perfect in human weakness (12:9). Therefore, he says, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). Inside this personal letter where Paul is defending himself, we can learn much about God’s power, the church, and what it means to be a servant of God.

Outline of 2 Corinthians:

1. Introduction and thanksgiving (1:1–11)
2. Paul’s defense of his ministry (1:12–2:13)
3. Paul is a minister of the new covenant (2:14–4:6)
4. Paul’s ministry shows the power in weakness (4:7–6:10)
5. Paul wants holiness and love in the church (6:11–7:16)
6. Paul’s request to complete the collection of money (8:1–9:15)
7. Paul versus the super-apostles (10:1–13:10)
8. Letter closing (13:11–14)



Super-Apostles

Paul calls the outside teachers who have come into the Corinthian church “super-apostles” (11:5; 12:11). Paul calls them that because these newly arrived teachers claim to be superior to Paul. However, throughout the letter, Paul shows that these outside teachers aren’t “super-apostles.” They aren’t even real apostles! Instead, Paul says, “such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ” (11:13).

Thorn in My Flesh

While Paul talks about boasting in chapter 12, he says, “Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me” (12:7). What was the “thorn in Paul’s flesh?” We don’t know, but people who have studied the Bible have suggested three possibilities: 1) Paul suffered from personal anxiety or spiritual temptation. 2) Paul had a physical illness like severe headaches, an eye problem, or a problem with his speech, like a stutter. 3) Paul was saying “thorn” to mean the persecution he faced from Jews. Whatever it was, God told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So, Paul decided to boast in his weakness so that Christ’s power would be with him (12:9).

The Collection of Money

At the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul tells the church in Corinth to set aside money each week to help the poor in Jerusalem and Judea (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). In 2 Corinthians chapters 8-9, Paul writes much more to encourage the Corinthians to give generously to those in need. Corinth was a wealthy city, and Paul says, “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality” (8:13–14). Paul plans to go to Jerusalem with some people from the Corinthian church and give a gift to the believers there. Paul adds that the churches in Macedonia have given sacrificially and encourages the Corinthians to do the same, saying, “This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God” (9:12). Paul talks about the collection for Jerusalem in Romans 15:25-27 and Galatians 2:10.

2 Corinthians can be a confusing letter to understand. As you study, consider the background information provided in this study guide. Read through each passage in this letter many times and imagine the situation. Think about how Paul might be feeling when writing this letter. Consider how the Corinthian believers would feel reading this letter. Discuss the following questions:

1. What do we learn about God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit?
2. What do we learn about people like the Corinthian believers and Paul?
3. Is there anything you need to start doing or stop doing?
4. Who else needs to hear this Scripture?

Paul’s Co-Workers

Like most of Paul’s letters, 2 Corinthians is a letter not only from Paul. According to the style during Paul’s time, the writers introduce themselves at the beginning of each letter. 1 Corinthians is from Paul and Sosthenes (1 Corinthians 1:1). 2 Corinthians is from Paul and Timothy. Sosthenes and Timothy are two of Paul’s many co-workers. In 2 Corinthians, we also hear about a man named Titus. Titus was another co-worker of Paul, and Paul sent Titus to the church in Corinth in his place. Later in the New Testament, there are three letters written by Paul to Timothy and Titus. Paul was always teaching and training others to do the work he was doing. So Paul taught Titus and Timothy and sent them to teach others.