

2 Corinthians: Paul Bears his Soul

by Steve Ray

(In this article I emphasize Paul and his apostolic calling along with the actual letter. In 1 Corinthians I emphasized the city of Corinth, the immorality and the actual letter.)

The water was cold and his legs were numb. His skin was wrinkled after the many hours of bobbing in the waves desperately clinging to a beam ripped from the ship as it capsized in the storm. It was dark and the moon was still hidden by the frightening storm clouds swirling low over the sea. But he was not concerned for himself, even though in dire straits. Far be it from this rugged traveler to worry about himself when he had the churches on his mind. God had called and the apostolic call was more important than his own comfort, even more crucial than his own life.

It was hard work—even harder than staying afloat in the waves. Separation by miles of mountains and seas made the internal struggle acute. The brethren in other cities and lands, exposed to temptations, divisions, pagan cultures, and sin were on his mind. His labor of prayer was intense. At times he longed for them as a parent longs for a lost child. His prayers were agonizing—and his prayers were heard.

Writing to one of these churches, the church in Corinth, Paul describes his labors, imprisonments, beatings—his sufferings external and internal. He humbly boasts, “Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor 11:24–28).

To another church north along the coast of the Aegean Sea, Paul again pours out his heart, informing them that he is “praying earnestly night and day” for them (1 Thes 3:10). Paul begins his letter of Second Corinthians by expressing this concern: “For I wrote 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 2:4). This is the life of Paul, former persecutor of the Church, now himself persecuted for their sake. Involved with taking the life of others, he now lays down his own life for others. Having watched Stephen pray while the rocks crushed his body, Paul now prays under the crushing weight of his apostolate and concern for the churches. Nowhere in the letters of Paul is he more intimate, more personal, or more vulnerable than in Second Corinthians.

About six months or a year earlier, Paul had written to the Corinthians to correct problems in the church: divisions, liturgical abuses, sexual sins and more. The letter had much effect, as this follow up letter demonstrates. After the opening of this epistle, Paul refers to a man who had been chastened for being sexually involved with his father’s wife

(1 Cor 5:1). The man had repented, experienced great sorrow and was in need of forgiveness and restoration to fellowship. Titus, a loyal fellow worker with Paul had just arrived in Macedonia, and Paul says, “He reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more” (2 Cor 7:7). Writing sternly—causing sorrow—had brought about repentance and healing. Paul’s second letter was primarily a glad letter.

Wandering a bit, intimately personal, and the least systematic of all Paul’s letters, there is nonetheless a structure to the letter. After a brief introduction, the apostle gives an account of his spiritual labors, revealing his affection for the believers there and displaying mixed emotions about a mixed response to his early epistle (2 Cor 1–7). In chapters 8–9 he gives a detailed explanation for sharing of our earthly means and requests them to contribute money to the suffering church in Jerusalem. He then becomes impassioned in a defense of his gospel and his credentials as an apostle (2 Cor 10–13), which is followed by a short conclusion.

While primarily a glad letter, commending those in Corinth, there were also new problems that had cropped up in this Greek city. It appears that some preachers had slipped in among the believers with a dangerous gospel and a challenge to Paul’s apostleship (2 Cor 11:3–4; 11:5, 13, 23). Like wolves they followed Paul around the Empire poisoning the sheep Paul had gathered into flocks—churches. What was this “different gospel” preached by Paul’s foes? Most probably the same legalistic Judaizing gospel so aggressively counteracted in Romans and Galatians. Did these Greeks and Romans need Jewish circumcision and a strict adherence to all the 613 laws of Moses before they could be Christians? Did the “simplicity of Christ” require obedience to the multitude of ceremonies and sacrifices of the Jews? Ah, says Paul, heaven forbid. Those who teach such things are “false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.” Paul compares them to Satan and says, “Their end will correspond to their deeds.” (2 Cor 11:13–14). Ouch!

To promote their twisted proclamation of Christ and bring the Corinthian church under their yoke, the enemies of the true gospel must first, of necessity, discredit Paul. Unhappily, it is a sad fact of history that true authority is often challenged with no shortage of naïve followers ready to jump on the bandwagon shouting slogans and waving banners. It happens today, as in Paul’s day with those who break with the Church, spurn her authority, start their own groups, or just as egregious or more so, some work their corruption and corrosion from within. Paul has no patience for such evil—his deep love and intense concern for the flock required action, stern words and discipline. Any father will understand.

Paul found himself defending by letter those who corrupted the gospel and challenged his authority in person. He was not one of the original Twelve, was he? He had not walked with Jesus, not eaten the last Passover with the Messiah. He had not witnessed the resurrected Christ on Easter Sunday, nor had he been baptized with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost with the others. He persecuted the first Jewish converts, even dragging them to prison and participating in their deaths. How could he be equated with the other apostles?

How could he claim apostolic authority from Christ? What were his credentials? And if that is not enough, let the ad hominem arguments fly! His opponents chided: “his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible” (2 Cor 10:10). Paul was at a disadvantage, but such was never a problem for Paul. He ably defends his special call as an apostle, the truth of his gospel, and his singular authority over the church in Corinth.

In the midst of his defense we have a remarkable passage, possibly the pinnacle of the epistle in which Paul opens his soul and even gives us a fleeting glimpse behind the curtain of time, recalling his sublime experience of being caught up into the third heaven—to Paradise. How many have wished he had told more—at least try to describe the indescribable! But alas, as we hold our breath waiting for Paul to expand on this ecstasy, we instead crash back to earth with the reality of the body and suffering. Paul is given a thorn in his side, possibly an eye ailment, to keep him from exalting himself—the grace of suffering which brings about an inner and spiritual strength. He was told by his Lord, “My grace is perfected in suffering”, you are strongest when you are the weakest;—ah, the frequent paradoxes of the faith! Paul knew them all.

The humble and rugged, yet mighty apostle looked beyond what the eyes could see (he had seen beyond what the eyes can see! (and he knew that “momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:17–18). It is important, nay crucial, to “walk by faith, not by sight” and to keep our eye on the prize: to “be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8).

It is a heart-felt and heart-torn letter. We learn things about Paul we discover nowhere else such as the multitude of sufferings, the thorn in his flesh, his vision of heaven. He gives an intimate portrayal of himself and his rich humanity is quite evident. This uniquely personal and revealing glimpse into the soul and ministry of the great apostle to the Gentiles—and to the world—was written on something simple like papyrus with a quill pen around AD 57—probably the fall of the year. Timothy collaborated with Paul in its writing and Titus personally delivered it (2 Cor 1:1; 8:16–24). It was written from Macedonia, in the northeastern part of the Greek peninsula, roughly three hundred miles from Corinth as a crow flies. It is the last we hear of the Corinthians until Clement of Rome follows up with them in the year AD 96—they were embroiled in new troubles then, but still strong in the faith (no doubt a result of the firm foundation and labor of prayers selflessly expended by the rugged traveler and apostle from Tarsus.

Possible Text Boxes:

“To compare the two Letters to Corinth will prove instructive. The First gives insight into the character and condition of the early Churches; the Second, into the life and character of the Apostle Paul. The First is objective and practical; the Second is subjective and personal. The First is systematic; the Second is not. The First is deliberate; the Second is impassioned. The First warns against Pagan influences; the Second, against Judaic influences. The two together are valuable beyond all estimate for an understanding of the

problems of first century Christians, and for an appreciation of the greatest missionary of the Christian era” (Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1974], 142(143).

From the Muratorian Fragment from the 2nd century: “The Epistles of Paul, however, for those who wish to understand the matter, indicate of themselves from what place and for what cause they were sent. First of all he wrote to the Corinthians, to check schismatic opinions, then afterwards a second. . . .And indeed, although he writes again to the Corinthians and to the Thessalonians for their correction, nevertheless it is shown that there is one Church spread abroad through the whole world; for John, too, in the Apocalypse, though he writes to only seven Churches, yet speaks to all” (William Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970], 1:107–108).