

## **2 Corinthians: Vindication and Condemnation**

As many of you no doubt remember, I preached through 1 Corinthians from 2007 to 2009. 1 Cor has 16 chapters, and it took us roughly three years to make our way through it.

Today, we'll start a journey through 2 Cor. I don't know if it will take three years, but I wouldn't doubt that it might take almost that long.

2 Cor is kind of a neglected book. There are individual passages in the book that are very well known, but it tends not to be on lists of the most popular books, and many preachers never get around to preaching through it.

I find 2 Cor a more difficult book to read and understand than is 1 Cor. Some of the language is rather unusual and parts of it are not easy to comprehend on first reading. Maybe the difficulty of the language is one of the reasons 2 Cor is often neglected.

Of course, the book is inspired Scripture. Whether it's popular or not, it is profitable for us to read and study the book.

As I often do when beginning a new series, I'd like to take the first message to look at some of the background of the book. Before getting into the text itself, we should try to get an overview of the whole thing so we can understand the parts of it and how it all fits together. We need to consider the forest before looking at the individual trees.

I. The city of Corinth

- A. Paul wrote this letter to a church in the city of Corinth, which is in southern Greece, what was called the province of Achaia at the time.
- B. Corinth was a large, prosperous commercial city, a popular destination for travelers, tourists, and traders. Nearby was the Acrocorinth, a 1900-foot mountain that served as a citadel for the city. At the top of Acrocorinth was the temple to Aphrodite, the mythical goddess of love.
- C. Corinth is situated on a land bridge between northern and southern Greece. This strip of land is only about 4 miles wide and connects the lower part of Greece with the upper part. The city became a crossroads for both land and sea trade.

**Consult a map of Greece and Corinth (back of handout)**



Figure from *Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts*

The only way to go from north to south by land in that particular region was to go thru Corinth. Goods exchanged between the north and south would normally be shipped by land through Corinth. And if you wanted to sail east to west by the most direct route, you had to go thru Corinth. In fact, smaller ships would often be dragged across from one harbor to the other. There's a canal there now. Corinth thus became a great commercial center. The city was known as "wealthy Corinth."

- D. Corinth was a large city. Perhaps as many as 700K people lived there in its heyday. Corinth was an important commercial and cultural center containing a large market place.

- E. Corinth was an intellectual center as well. It was a collection point of all sorts of ideas because of all the travelers. All the trends and philosophies of the day were present in Corinth.
- F. It was religiously important as well. The city was filled with temples to the Greek and Roman gods—Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Aphrodite.
- G. The people of Corinth developed a reputation for immorality. Much immorality was associated with the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The word “Corinthian” came to mean “an immoral person.” The expression “Corinthian girl” referred to a prostitute.
- H. It was a city of great energy, yet no spiritual life. Great sparkle, but no light of the gospel. It was a very dark city spiritually. E.g., Las Vegas/NYC
- I. Many different kinds of people lived in Corinth—people from all over the Roman Empire settled there. A large number of Jews also lived there.
- J. Sports were a big deal in Corinth. Every two years Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, similar to the Olympics. It’s not surprising that Paul compares elements of the Christian life to sports in his letters to the Corinthians.
- K. Although Corinth was a very immoral city, it was a great place to start a church. It was a crossroads, a cultural center. A good-sized Jewish population lived there, plus people were traveling thru all the time. A church planted there could be very influential.

## II. The founding of the church in Corinth

- A. We read in Acts 18 the circumstances involved with the founding of the church at Corinth (**read** Acts 18:1-4). Paul had received the Macedonian call in a vision (16:9-10) which directed him to that region of Greece. This happened in 50 AD.
- B. Paul started preaching to the Jews in the synagogue, but after they rejected the message, he focused on Gentiles. He spent 18 months in Corinth preaching to anyone who would listen, both Jews and Gentiles.

## III. The Recipients of the Letter

- A. The Corinthian church contained many different kinds of people.
  - 1. Jews: Paul started his ministry at the Jewish synagogue, and some of the Jews became Christians.

*Ac 18:8 And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians*

*hearing believed, and were baptized.*

2. Gentiles: Julius Caesar had rebuilt the city and designated it as a retirement community for Roman soldiers and freed slaves.
  3. Many economic classes:
    - a) Corinth was a very prosperous city, “one of the most splendid and modern of the Greek cities.”<sup>1</sup> As a commercial center, many travelers, traders, agents, sailors, slaves, athletes, and gamblers passed through. People from all over the surrounding regions lived there.
    - b) Some estimate that as many as 1/3 of the population were slaves. Corinth was a center of the slave trade in that region. So there was great wealth in Corinth but great poverty, too.
    - c) Here’s a description from a someone who lived there:

... one could hear crowds of wretched sophists around Poseidon’s temple shouting and reviling one another, and their disciples, as they were called, fighting with one another, many writers reading aloud their stupid works, many poets reciting their poems while others applauded them, many jugglers showing their tricks, many fortune-tellers interpreting fortunes, lawyers innumerable perverting judgment, and peddlers not a few peddling whatever they happened to have.<sup>2</sup>
- B. The Jewish converts would have been from a fairly moral background. The Gentile converts would have been from a very sinful and depraved background. Some of the church members were still struggling to overcome their previous pagan behavior patterns.
- C. So there was quite a wide-range of people in the church—Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, Romans, free, and slaves. The majority of the church would have been Gentiles from the lower economic classes. This diversity probably led to many of the problems they were experiencing.

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 23.

<sup>2</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 23.

**Quote:** The result was a thriving and brilliant congregation composed of persons from mixed backgrounds and social standings. It was an explosive mix that led to dissension and rivalry that caused Paul much anguish and concern.<sup>3</sup>

2 Corinthians reveals this anguish and concern.

#### IV. The letter itself

- A. We call this book an epistle—a letter. Paul often wrote follow-up letters to the churches he founded on his missionary journeys. Their purpose was to further the spiritual growth of the churches where he had ministered.
- B. The book we call 2 Cor is most likely the 4<sup>th</sup> letter Paul had written to the believers in Corinth.

I could give you a long and rather involved explanation of why that is so, but suffice it to say that 1 and 2 Corinthians are probably the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> letters that Paul wrote to the church there. Bible scholars debate about these sorts of things, but there seems to be good evidence for that understanding.

- C. 2 Cor is the most personal and autobiographical of Paul's letters. He speaks quite a bit about his own experiences, and his emotions really come through in various parts of the letter.
- D. As in 1 Cor, in 2 Cor Paul is addressing a series of problems in the church, most notably the presence of false teachers who were trying to discredit Paul and promote themselves. So Paul is addressing the problems that the false teachers and their false claims were causing for the church.

**App:** We may have the faulty assumption that the early church was pristine and unified. But that was far from the case. From the very beginning, church life was full of conflict and division. Even the great apostle Paul had to deal with opposition and hostility from people claiming to be Christians.

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<sup>3</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 25–26.

V. Purpose

- A. One author I read listed 8 separate purposes for 2 Cor (Thiessen, NT Intro, 209). So it’s hard to boil all the contents down into one general theme.
- B. But the major focus seems to be on Paul’s desire to validate and defend his apostleship. He wants his readers to believe that what he taught them was the truth, especially in contrast to what some false teachers were saying. So the book is an effort for Paul to prove his ministry among them to be legitimate.
- C. I’ve titled our study of the book “Vindication and Condemnation” because that’s what Paul does throughout much of the book—vindicating or validating his own ministry and condemning the claims of the false teachers who were influencing the church.

VI. Contents

Check the chart on the back side of the outline.

2 Corinthians at a Glance

FOCUS	EXPLANATION OF PAUL'S MINISTRY			COLLECTION FOR THE SAINT		VINDICATION OF PAUL'S APOSTLESHIP		
REFERENCE	1:1 ——— 2:14	6:11	8:1	8:7	10:1	11:1	12:14 — 13:14	
DIVISION	HIS CHANGE OF PLANS	PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY	EXHORTATIONS TO THE CORINTHIANS	EXAMPLE OF THE MACEDONIANS	EXHORTATION TO THE CORINTHIANS	ANSWERS HIS ACCUSERS	DEFENDS HIS APOSTLESHIP	ANNOUNCES HIS UPCOMING VISIT
TOPIC	CHARACTER OF PAUL			COLLECTION FOR SAINTS		CREDENTIALS OF PAUL		
	EPHESUS TO MACEDONIA: CHANGE OF ITINERARY			MACEDONIA: PREPARATION FOR VISIT		TO CORINTH: IMMINENT VISIT		
LOCATION	WRITTEN IN MACEDONIA							
TIME	C. A. D. 56							

- A. Chapters 1-7 focus on the relationship Paul has with the church. In the first part of the book, Paul explains what he’s been doing and why he’s been doing it.
- B. Chapters 8-9 describe an offering Paul is collecting for the poor saints at Jerusalem. The Corinthian church had agreed to participate in this offering, but they needed some encouragement to fulfill what they had promised. This part of the letter says a lot about generous and sacrificial giving toward Christian ministry.
- C. The final four chapters include a defense/vindication of his ministry and a denunciation of those who opposed him. Some of this material is the most intimate and personal writing that we have from Paul, and it’s also some of the most difficult language to understand.

- D. Another interesting feature of the book is the various lists Paul makes; he piles up various things one after another after another. E.g., 6:4-10.

**Note:** I'll be using the NKJV for this exposition.

That should give you a basic overview of the book. We'll begin our consideration of the text next week, but let's close this morning by looking briefly at a passage that demonstrates one of the book's major themes:

2 Corinthians 12:9 (NKJV)

*And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

As we'll see when we look at the first paragraph of the letter next week, one of Paul's main themes is strength in the midst of weakness. In times of persecution and affliction, we can look to God for comfort and strength. The Christian life is difficult; life in general is difficult. We may experience tragic "infirmities" and afflictions throughout our lives. And in those times of trials, we must trust in the Lord and believe that his grace is sufficient for our weakness. In our weakness, we can trust that the Lord is strong.

That truth and many others are contained in this wonderful book, and I hope and pray that we'll learn this and many other lessons as we make our way through 2 Cor.