

THE BOOK OF 2 CORINTHIANS

ORIENTING DATA FOR 2 CORINTHIANS

- Content: probably two letters (chs. 1–9; 10–13) combined into one, dealing primarily with Paul’s tenuous relationship with the Corinthian church and in the process touching on several other matters as well (Paul’s ministry, the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, and some Jewish Christian itinerants who have invaded the church)
- Author: the apostle Paul, joined by Timothy
- Date: ca. A.D. 54–55, from Macedonia (2:13; 7:5)—most likely Philippi
- Recipients: see 1 Corinthians
- Occasion: Titus’s return from a recent visit (7:5–7) and Paul’s anticipated third visit to the church (13:1) in light of (1) the church’s need to have the collection ready before Paul gets there and (2) their readiness to embrace some “false apostles ... masquerading as apostles of Christ” (11:13)
- Emphases: Christian ministry as servanthood, reflecting that of Christ; the greater glory of the new covenant in contrast to the old; the glory of the gospel exhibited in the weakness of its ministers; the gospel as reconciliation; giving to the poor as an expression of generosity, not of obligation

OVERVIEW OF 2 CORINTHIANS

Reading 2 Corinthians is something like turning on the television in the middle of a very complicated play. People are talking and things are happening, but we’re not at all sure who some of the characters are or what the plot is. In fact, in coming to this letter from 1 Corinthians, one has the sense of entering a new world. Few of the issues raised in the earlier letter appear here, except the concern over the collection (1 Cor 16:1–4/2 Cor 8–9) and perhaps a return to the matter of idol food in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1. But that is a surface view; what holds the two together is the overriding relational tension one senses between Paul and the Corinthians regarding true apostleship.

Four matters that play off against one another in the course of our letter(s) account for all of its parts: (1) Paul’s change of plans regarding visits to Corinth, (2) the collection, (3) his apostleship and ministry, and (4) the presence of the Jewish Christian itinerants.

The first three matters carry over from 1 Corinthians and are dealt with in 2 Corinthians 1–9. A chronological explanation of his immediate past relations with them, apparently touched off by his change of mind about proposed and actual visits, is found in 1:12–2:13 and picked up

ca. *circa*, about, approximately

again in 7:5–16. The long interruption of 2:14–7:4 is the crown jewel of the letter. Here Paul defends his apostleship-in-weakness (recall 1 Corinthians), a matter that has been aggravated by Paul’s opponents (2:14–4:6). The need to have the collection ready before he comes is addressed in chapters 8–9. Chapters 10–13 contain a vigorous attack against his Jewish Christian opponents—comparable to that in Galatians (cf. Phil 3:2)—interspersed with indignation, biting sarcasm, and gentle appeals to the Corinthians to come to their senses.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 2 CORINTHIANS

By any reckoning, you will find that 2 Corinthians is not easy to read, in the sense of seeing how it hangs together. Three things make it so. First, it is the most intensely personal of Paul’s legacy of letters, made so because at issue throughout is Paul’s ongoing, mostly painful, relationship with this church. The intensity of this personal dimension accounts for a number of things, including both the way Paul speaks and the difficulty we have at times in following the flow of thought (e.g., 2:14–7:4).

Second is the probability that 2 Corinthians is Paul’s fourth and fifth letters to this church, joined as one in the transmissional process (a letter precedes our 1 Corinthians [see 1 Cor 5:9]; between 1 and 2 Corinthians there is the sorrowful letter mentioned in 2 Cor 2:3–4). There are two reasons for believing so: (1) Even though Paul speaks against the itinerants in 2:17–3:3 (those who “peddle the word of God for profit”), the rest of chapters 1–9 reflects a relatively stable situation, including appeals and terms of endearment (e.g., 1:7; 2:1–4; 6:11–13; 7:13–16), of a kind wholly lacking in 1 Corinthians. Almost everyone agrees that something has happened between his writing these words and what appears in chapters 10–13. (2) In 8:16–18 Paul commends Titus and another brother who will carry letter 4 (chs. 1–9) and pick up the collection; in 12:18 Paul refers to this sending as a past event.

Third is the question of how the four matters that make up the letter hang together. Our suggestion: Paul’s relationship with this church, which was already tenuous when he wrote 1 Corinthians, had obviously soured. This is related in part to a change of plans regarding the itinerary outlined in 1 Corinthians 16:5–9. Instead of coming by way of Macedonia, he came directly from Ephesus, both to their great surprise and chagrin (the collection was not ready). A serious encounter with someone, alluded to in 2 Corinthians 2:1–2, 5–11, and 7:11–12 (perhaps one of the itinerants), caused Paul to leave just as abruptly as he had appeared.

In the meantime he changed plans yet again! Instead of returning to Corinth from Macedonia (1:15–16), he went on to Ephesus and sent Titus with his sorrowful letter (2:3–4), partly to make sure that the collection was under way (8:6). When he and Titus finally met in Macedonia (2:12–13; 7:5–7), Titus brought essentially good news. Even though Paul’s letter had hurt them, as he knew it would, it had also led to repentance and (too much) discipline of the man who had attacked Paul (2:5–11). All of this is dealt with in chapters 1–7.

Paul’s first reason for coming, however, is still in the forefront—to pick up the collection (chs. 8–9). Titus is thus being sent on ahead with letter 4 (chs. 1–9), which offers explanations for his actions and especially hopes to ensure that the collection will in fact be ready when Paul and some Macedonians come a bit later (9:1–5).

Meanwhile the itinerants were still plying their trade. By the time Titus arrived with letter 4, they appear to have gotten the upper hand, so Titus rushed back to Macedonia with the bad

news, causing Paul to write again, this time confronting both the Corinthians and his opponents for their playing false with the gospel and with the true meaning of apostleship. This letter was preserved as chapters 10–13 of our 2 Corinthians.

In getting these matters into perspective for an easier reading of this letter, be sure not to lose sight of the grandeur of its theology, both of ministry and of the gospel. Here Paul picks up the theology of the cross as applied to ministry, which began in 1 Corinthians 4:9–13, and plays it out in full detail. God’s glory—and the power of the gospel—is not minimized, but enhanced, through the weakness of the “jars of clay” (2 Cor 4:7; cf. 12:7–10) who proclaim it. Such ministry is in keeping with the Crucified One, after all. Hence Paul repeatedly glories in his weaknesses—not because he liked to suffer, but because it meant that attention was focused on the Savior, not on the messenger. And the passage dealing with the glory of the new covenant through Christ and the Spirit (3:1–18) is “worth the price of the book.” So read, and enjoy!¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 333–336.