

Introduction to II Corinthians

II Corinthians 1:1-2

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Sunday evening, October 1, 2017

Let's begin by opening to Paul's second canonical letter to the Corinthians and read the opening in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 1.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of
Achaia:*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we begin reading this portion of sacred Scripture we immediately recognize we are reading a text that appears to be a personal correspondence, a letter from two individuals to a church and other churches in an area. That should cause us to pause, at least briefly, to consider a couple of ideas. One is that, God in presenting to us a revelation of himself, his character and will, does so in real-time, real-life situations. We have before us as collection of writings we believe to be God's communication to us for us to understand and then act accordingly. Yet those writings are not entirely unlike other normal writings of the day. Indeed they are God's word to us, but he has delivered his word through the agency of human communication. They may be in a collection of historical notes organized to tell God's work through the nation of Israel, or the covenant documents God gave to govern that nation. We believe that collections of prophetic speeches and sermons delivered to those same people of failed in their covenant obligations are God's challenges to us. We have four narrative accounts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and several first century letters that have been collected and preserved and several documents that describe the end of the age in vivid imagery that is often difficult to definitively interpret, all of which we claim to be the authoritative revelation of God. This causes us to take seriously the information within them. We take time to memorize portions, to understand the narrative, to remember names, places and events they tell. We attempt to live by the examples and directives they proclaim. And we care to share with our friends and families the truths we find in them, believing the picture of the world the Bible portrays is the most consistent and faithful understanding of the world we have and we trust it even when our own apparent wisdom seems to contradict it.

But yet we should also consider this second idea, that God is revealing himself in real-time, real life situations. I know that is the same thing that I said earlier. But we should take the time to read them as real pieces of ancient literature. Too often we overlook this notion. God did not hand to us a set of rules, regulations and stories directly to us, although he did hand Moses a set of covenant stipulations he had inscribed himself on stone tablets. When we attempt to read,

memorize, understand, live and share the revelation we have been given, we need to take the nature of those items seriously to avoid reading erroneous, blatantly false and even injurious claims from them.

So when we begin to read this document found in the New Testament, we are seriously to take note of the fact that we are reading a letter, indeed someone else's mail. These circumstances of the writing of this letter as well as the actual words in the letter, have been ordained, superintended (inspired) and preserved by God to deliver a universal and timeless message regarding his own character and will as well as an encouragement, example and charge to us as we read this centuries later. Tonight we are going to take a few minutes to look at the circumstance of this letter to help us read it carefully and accurately.

The first thing we find is this statement of who is sending or "authoring" this letter.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother

We should notice that two individuals are listed as the senders. There are a couple of possibilities for this because as you begin to read the letter it is clear that only one of them is the principle "speaker" and that is considered to be Paul. The fact that there are occasionally multiple senders could be that Paul is including his current team in the thoughts of the letter. It could be that the co-senders are more known or have a previous relationship to add acceptance to the letter. Or it could be that the secretary or amanuensis is listed as an author. Documents and larger letters in the day were often dictated to someone with penmanship skills and then copied for distribution. Often the author kept a copy as well. Sometimes the secretary had considerable allowance as to the word choices and structure within the thought of the actual author. We know that Paul used this convention but why Timothy is listed as co-sender here is unclear.

Paul is well known to Biblical readers, being responsible for 13 of the 27 NT books. His "biography" can be found in the book of Acts and Paul's own statements in several letters, in particular Galatians and here in II Corinthians. He is of Jewish descent, born in the Greek-speaking, Roman colony of Tarsus. Tarsus citizens had the special privilege of being Roman citizens. Within the empire there were three broad classes of people, citizens, freemen and slaves with the number of citizens even within the city of Rome itself being a minority. How long he lived in Tarsus is unclear with some scholars thinking it was short, others suggesting it was until his late adolescent early adult years. If he lived in Tarsus long, he lived in a noted "university" town and would likely have been influenced by the kind of teaching of the Greek-speaking world. Paul has several non-Biblical quotes within his letters indicating he is "cultured" beyond mere Judaism and uses a level of rhetoric revealing a sense of scholarship. He is comfortable in the world of cities and is able to hold conversation with the philosophical circles in Athens. And yet he was trained in the rabbinic school of Gamaliel in Jerusalem where he adopted a vigorous, conservative Phariseism. He is well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, in particularly their Greek translation.

He was converted shortly after Jesus' resurrection by direct interaction with the risen Christ while aggressively persecuting those who would give allegiance to what he thought of was a false Messiah. It does not appear he knew Jesus personally but would have been well aware of his claims and teaching as it was disrupting the religious life in Jerusalem. So Paul is uniquely positioned to understand the nature of the New Covenant gospel and its implications to both Jew and Gentile. God specifically used this man to preach, spread and teach the gospel both in his time and through the work of the Holy Spirit in Paul's writings continue to teach and shape all of his people through the ages.

The next general thing we read in the introduction is the recipient of the letter.

To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia

Paul is addressing this correspondence to the collection of people who claim to have placed their faith in the gospel and their allegiance to Jesus as Lord, having been baptized as symbol and evidence of that faith, who have an element of commitment to love and serve one another in community within the city of Corinth. He also broadens his intended readers to include other communities of faith within the region of Achaia (southern Greece), which would include cities nearby like Cenchrea.

Corinth was a large, commercial city. It was the major passage from Rome to the east by sea. Sailing around the peninsula was long and treacherous. Ships would be unloaded and reloaded across the isthmus and sometimes smaller vessels dragged across themselves. The city of Rome at this time had a population nearing a million. Antioch from which Paul was sent was the third largest city of the empire with perhaps around 400,000 residents and Corinth and Ephesus would have had 200,000+ each.

Corinth was a prominent city in Greek history and had been completely destroyed by the Roman army in 146BCE and then rebuilt in 44BCE by command of Julius Caesar. It quickly regained its prominence because of the increased commerce throughout the empire. Some of the notable epithets of Corinth's licentious culture are actually from its Greek period and not as true from the Roman era, but the culture of port cities has not changed substantially in all of history.

From the book of Acts we know Paul was familiar with this city having spent at least a year and a half here around three years prior to this writing. Paul had founded this work in this large city and it was a beachhead for gospel expansion to the region. He arrived around 50 AD. From Acts 18:1-18 we read about his time there (note: 1,7,11,18). Think about it, Paul spent nearly 2 years there in teaching and preaching. Certainly other cities in the region heard and received the gospel as well. Next to Antioch and Ephesus he spent more time here than

any other town or city so far and the Corinthian believers would have had the benefit of much more Pauline teaching than any other place.

Sometime after leaving he wrote a letter to them. This is not unusual, he had written to the Galatian churches shortly after ministered there and wrote at least two letters to Thessalonica just after arriving in Corinth itself. We do not have any copies of this letter. It is referred to in I Cor. 5:9-11 as the “previous letter.” Scholars often refer to this letter as Corinthians A. When Paul arrived back in Ephesus, he wrote our I Corinthians in response to return mail and personal testimony regarding the state of the church. That he wrote from Ephesus is seen in I Corinthians 16:8. This occurred probably late in the time in Ephesus discussed in Acts 19. Reading the events in Acts help us understand the circumstances Paul is mentioning in II Corinthians as well. Scholars call I Corinthians, Corinthians B, the second letter to Corinth. Likely because things did not improve with the reading of Paul’s letter he wrote again. He describes this as a “severe letter” in II Cor. 2:4, 7:8. This is known as Corinthians C and we have no copies of this document. He also made a short, “painful visit” to the church before the events in Acts 20 that Luke did not record as seen in II Cor. 2:1, 12:14, 13:1-2. While travelling, the time mentioned in Acts 20:1,2, he wrote II Corinthians from Macedonia in around 54/55AD as evidenced by his remarks in II Cor. 7:5, 8:1, 9:2. Scholars refer to this document as Corinthians D. When Paul arrives in Corinth as referred to in Acts 20:2, he then writes the letter to the Romans as demonstrated from Romans as suggested by Rom. 16:1,28.

Paul knew these people well. Some of the ideas in both Corinthian epistles are perhaps “fuzzy” as to the details but Paul was well aware and not guessing who he was addressing. The lessons we are to learn are then in the principles not necessarily in the exact details and we have heard this from our expositions from I Corinthians so far.

II Corinthians also has an interesting “glitch” in its general outline. As Pastor Russ moves through the letter the topics and transitions will be noted, but there is a definite change in tone between chapter 9 and chapter 10. In chapters 1-9, it would appear that Paul is wrapping up and cleaning up some of the points of the previous “conflict”. His statements are somewhat encouraging. But then in chapter 10, he is more forceful and challenging. Let us read II Cor. 13:1-5 and hear some of this tone! Some have suggested that 10-13 is the “severe letter” and got attached to 1-9 over time. Some think 10-13 is a fifth letter (Corinthians E) written very shortly after 1-9 and then as assimilated into our II Corinthians. Others think Paul received some new information during the dictation of this letter and the end of the letter responds to this.

The organization of the letter does suggest its essential unity. The closing four chapters may have been specifically directed at a subset of his original readers. Paul and them knew exactly who they were. Remember ancient letters had a common structure. They began with a salutation that was frequently followed by

a thanksgiving/prayer/blessing. The main portion of the letter's body would follow and there would be a closing greeting and benediction. If we read the "blessing" found in II Cor. 1:3-7 and compare with his benediction we see similar themes, a rhetorical device indicating the connection of the material in between. In chapter 1:3-7 we read:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. ⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

And in chapter 13:11-14 we find:

¹¹ Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints greet you.

¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Notice the themes of comfort and care that frame the letter. So as we work through the theology of ministry and conflict found in the letter, we should keep in mind the goal and purpose of this correspondence.

Which brings us to the end. What are we to do with this kind of information?

First we should remember we are reading texts that were composed by real-live people in real-life situations. This should encourage us in our own circumstances.

And second, we should remember that the texts prompted by these real-life situations were superintended completely, from their contexts, preparation, composition, reception, collection and preservation by God to be read and understood by even us in 2017. Our knowledge of God, his character and will is framed in our situations and circumstances. Just as we can trust God for His Word, we can trust God for our current station.

And lastly, we can eagerly anticipate what God has for us to find as we read, ponder and even analyze these texts. Read frequently, read aggressively, read openly, read carefully, read knowingly, read intentionally for personal change and to comfort one another!

