

Paul's Fourth Letter to the Corinthians – Part 1 (Fall 54)

2 Corinthians 1:1–14

Greeting

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

To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia:

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

Praise to God for His Provision of Comfort

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 will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

5 For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

6 But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer;

7 and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are *sharers* of our comfort.

Paul's Afflictions in the Province of Asia (Ephesus; see Acts 19:23–41)

8 For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came *to us* in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life;

9 indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;

10 who delivered us from so great a *peril of death*, and will deliver *us*, He on whom we have set our hope.

And He will yet deliver us,

11 you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through *the prayers of many*.

Theme Statement: A Proper Understanding of Paul's Ministry

12 For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.

13 For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end;

14 just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus.

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Chronological Notes

- 1) Second Corinthians contains significant biographical information about Paul's varied hardships and revelatory visions that we otherwise would not know. The following outline of what happened after Paul left Corinth assumes that 2 Corinthians is a unity.¹

¹ Sourced from David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary (Broadman & Holman, 1999): 27–30.

- A) Paul's physical absence from Corinth apparently created a theological and administrative vacuum that others moved to fill. Paul may not have appointed specific leaders in the church since the Christians met in the houses of individuals who naturally tended to exert influence over others because of their wealth and social prominence. Paul argued that though they had a myriad of guardians in Christ, they had only one father in the gospel (1 Cor 4:15). This statement suggests that the church was inundated with would-be guides even before any interlopers arrived.
- B) In two letters, a previous letter now lost (1 Cor 5:9–13) and 1 Corinthians, Paul challenged important persons in the community for their ethical misbehavior and their association with idolatry. Paul sent Timothy to Corinth from Ephesus with 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10–11). The guilty parties did not accept his discipline passively. His bold rebukes caused them to lose face and sparked deep resentment. They counterattacked by impugning his motives, methods, and person to undermine his authority in the church. The result: some members continued as avid supporters of Paul, some wavered, and some comprised a determined element of resistance to his leadership. Anyone who has held a leadership position in a church can probably identify with this scenario.
- C) Paul ended up changing his plans from what he sketched out in 1 Corinthians 16:5–9. He intended to come to them after passing through Macedonia and perhaps spend the winter with them. Later, he says he wanted to go to Macedonia via Corinth and then return before setting sail for Jerusalem (2 Cor 1:15–16). Instead, Timothy may have returned from Corinth with bad news that caused Paul to make an emergency visit.
- D) The visit turned out to be bitter and distressing for Paul (1:23; 2:1; 12:14; 13:1). He was the object of an attack by someone in the community (2:5–8; 7:11–12), and no one from the Corinthian congregation took up his defense.
- E) Paul returned to Ephesus from Corinth and did not go on to Macedonia as previously planned.
- F) He then wrote the sorrowful letter from Ephesus in lieu of another visit (1:23; 2:3–4; 7:8, 12) in which he sought to test their obedience (2:6). The letter apparently called on them to take action against the offender and to demonstrate their innocence in the matter and their zeal for him before God (7:12).
- G) After this letter was written, Paul's life became so endangered in Asia that he attributed his survival to God's miraculous deliverance (most likely the great disturbance of Acts 19).
- H) Titus probably delivered this severe letter to the Corinthians. He stayed to insure their repentance, to cement their renewed commitment to Paul, and to rejuvenate their dedication to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. Paul had assured Titus of his confidence in the Corinthians' positive response to the letter (7:14) and expected to hear some word from Titus about the Corinthians' response to his letter.
- I) Apparently, Paul planned to meet Titus in Troas (2:12–13). He had an evangelistic opportunity there, but his nagging worries about the situation in Corinth (see 11:28) caused him to leave this work. Presumably, when Paul realized that Titus was not on the last boat of the season (now autumn), he assumed that Titus would now have to travel by land through Macedonia. He left for Macedonia in hopes of meeting Titus there (2:12–13).
- J) Titus's arrival with good news about the repentance of the majority (2:6) and their zeal for Paul greatly comforted him (7:6–7, 9, 11, 13, 15). His expression of joy in chapter seven indicates that the severe letter and Titus's visit had repaired the breach.

- K) Healing a broken relationship takes time, as does complete ethical reformation. Paul responded by writing 2 Corinthians and sending Titus back with two brothers to complete the collection (8:6, 17–18, 22). He defends his activity as an apostle and makes a fervent appeal for the Corinthians to be receptive to him again. Their affection for him, however, had been alienated by the presence of boastful rivals, and he was still concerned that their former openness to him had diminished.
- L) At some point during this time, these interlopers arrived in Corinth. They apparently came off as “superapostles” who were more spiritual, eloquent, and compelling than Paul (11:5, 23; 12:11). It is likely that when they came to Corinth they made inroads with the group in Corinth already at odds with Paul and most receptive to alternative views. The presence of rivals forced Paul to address the issue of how they can discern a true apostle from a huckster, a true witness from an imposter, and true speech from foolishness.
- M) The letter appears to have resolved some issues. Paul spent three months in Greece (Acts 20:2–3) before leaving for Jerusalem with the collection, and, presumably, most of that time was spent in Corinth. The letter to the Romans was therefore probably written from Corinth on the eve of his departure.