

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Second Letter to the Corinthians

Readings: *2 Corinthians 1:1-9:15*

Reflections:

- Second letter to the Corinthians: This letter is most likely the combination of two letters. 2 Corinthians 10-13 is a shorter, harsher letter and 2 Corinthians 1-9 a follow up more comforting letter. The reason for the earlier, shorter letter being in the second position is that typically when copying two letters together they would record the longer one first. Many scholars believe that these two letters were written in close proximity to each other and were therefore compiled this way to be shared among the other churches. Paul apparently passed through Troas looking for Titus before arriving at Macedonia where Titus joined him. Many scholars believe it is from Macedonia Paul writes these letters around 56-57 CE.
- Salutation: We see Paul's opening has slight variations from letter to letter but follows a similar pattern.
- Gratitude for God's comfort: This second letter is very comforting in tone in an apparent attempt to smooth things over after having sent the shorter, harsher letter. Paul wants to reassure them and restore the relationship. This comfort Paul speaks of flows from being completely secure in God even in the midst of suffering.
- Earlier despair dissipated: One of the reasons Paul was in such a bad place was because of his fear of being killed. Paul accepts that God allowed this to deepen his complete trust in God who raises us from the dead. God may at times allow great difficulties to happen, not to destroy us but to deepen our trust in him.
- Hope for positive view: Paul is reassuring his sincerity before God in how he has sought to invest into the Corinthians. Again is proud of them before God and wants to make sure they can understand his sincere heart, even after the letter that they seemingly took offense at.
- Travel plans not whimsical: Paul is afraid that they think he defrauded them in his plans to visit and so he clarifies what his plans were so that they understand that he wasn't promising one thing and then changing his mind at the last minute. Paul uses this situation to underscore again God's faithfulness to all of his promises. We see in this passage Paul's view of God's parental love that changes us from the inside out: "He anointed us, set his seal

of ownership on us and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” This union with God and being anchored in his unchanging character is what enables us to stand firm even when things get really difficult.

- Reason for letter: Paul here now clarifies the reason for the harsh letter and explains that it was motivated by his love and concern. As you work through this opening part of the letter you can see how he is like a parent trying to explain to his kids why he got so upset. “It is because I love you and I am so worried and I didn’t want to come and be upset and so I sent this letter but it was because I love you ...” It is wonderful to see the humanity in Paul and his honesty as he works to restore his relationship with the Corinthians. God’s leaders are not perfect and sometimes we have to work to make sure we have repaired relationships even when those bumps in the relationship come from the best intentions.
- Troublemakers to be forgiven: Now there were one or two in their community that were causing grief and were apparently a major part of the reason for Paul writing the second harsh letter. Paul’s plea now is for forgiveness and restoration. Apparently the community responded in a harsh, corrective manner to this person or people and now Paul wants to restore their sense of relationships as well. We see Paul note that forgiveness is one of our key defenses against the work of Satan. Satan’s deceptions often ride on the back of our bitterness and anger.
- Eagerness for Titus’ report: Just a recap of Paul’s journey.
- Regarding Paul’s ministry – success in ministry: Paul’s security is completely in God and he has a sense of being led in the procession of a king that has triumphed. He acknowledges that their lives and the message they carry is like a beautiful, life-giving aroma and for others who have turned away from God it smells like death. Paul’s imagery is intense and captures the deep divide that becomes apparent when the message of Jesus is fully proclaimed. Some are brought to life, others become ready to kill.
- They are Paul’s proof: Paul affirms that their credibility as leaders sent by God is simply the lives of the people God has transformed their ministry. A leader is verified by his followers. A leader without followers is a simply someone going for a walk. As a Christ-following leader, it isn’t just having followers but having followers whose lives have been changed from the inside out through God’s Spirit.
- Splendor of gospel message: Paul affirms that this new way of living before God opened up by Jesus through the Spirit is far more glorious and lasting than the glory that came through Moses and the Law.
- Unveiling of the Spirit: Paul uses the story of Moses and him wearing a veil as a mental hook for them to understand how through the Spirit God reveals himself to us and through us in a way that transforms us and those who encounter us. The Spirit is the Spirit of the Lord (Jesus) and through the Spirit we have complete freedom. Here is another one of Paul’s summary statements of how God changes us from the inside out: “And we, who with unveiled faces (no bushes to hide our true selves like Adam and Eve attempted) all reflect

the Lord's glory (the glory of God's power revealed in our weakness), are being transformed into his likeness with an ever-increasing glory, which come from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Our transformation comes from Jesus shining in and through us by his Spirit in us. This is a progressive change (ever increasing) and it moves us toward increasing Christ-likeness in our heart attitudes, character and lifestyle.

- Gospel preached honestly: Paul reaffirms his heart for serving God. Paul feels renewed in his commitment to serving God and because of the privilege to serve God his heart is continually renewed in conviction and commitment. He and his team have rejected all forms of manipulation or secret motivations but have sought to do everything simply and plainly and honestly. Paul realizes that not everyone will get who they are or what they are trying to share because unbelievers are before God blinded by their own unbelief and doubt by the deceptive work of the enemy. They don't get Paul because they don't get how Jesus can be the revelation of God with us. So Paul says all they do is keep teaching Jesus from start to finish and maintain the posture of simply being servants. The inside out transformation makes our lives to be like light in this dark world, the glory of God not in a philosophy or a religion or a building, but in how we live and love.
- Persecution is proof: Paul is honest about the kind of suffering, stress and pain he is suffering in his response to following Christ. This intense pain, difficult and suffering does not destroy him and his team but rather is the opportunity for God to reveal his power and grace in their weakness. This is easier said than done but Paul's personal story affirms that this is how God works with those who follow him with all their hearts.
- Preaching from faith: Paul quotes Psalm 116:10 and states that his trust relationship with God compels him to proclaim the truth God has revealed in Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection. Paul is so grateful for how this message is continuing to reach more and more people and will result in God receiving the glory he is due.
- Inner strength: Paul's renewed strength and motivation is completely internal through God's presence in him. His whole focus is on God, not his circumstances. "So we fix our eyes on what is unseen not on what is seen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." We must remember that in Christ the battle is not against people or circumstances but it is a spiritual battle that begins in the surrender of our heart and mind before God to trust him completely.
- Longing for eternal dwelling: Paul is looking forward to his new body. Those who experience significant pain and suffering naturally look forward to being with Christ and to have their new bodies. Paul knows that this complete transformation, body, soul and spirit, was God's purpose from the beginning and so he has great confidence in what is to come: "Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."
- Courage facing death: Paul's confidence comes from his trust in God, not his circumstances or the obstacles he faces. He lives by faith not by sight. All those who would follow Christ

must realize that this is the only way we can live in this world. If we are to please Christ we must realize that he has given us a mission to carry out and that although it may be difficult and God may use struggles to grow our deep dependence on him, we can have confidence because this is all short term pain leading up to long term (eternal) gain. One day God will reward all people for what they have done with the trust God has given them.

- **Boasting for their sake:** In this context the concept of fearing the Lord should be translated to “worshipfully stand in awe” rather than to be “terrorized that God will do something horrible to us.” This is the fear of the Old Testament that carried with it the notion of true worship and surrender to God. This motivates Paul to seek to reach as many people as possible with the message of Jesus. Paul is just trying to be honest and transparent with their motives. It is the love of Christ that is ultimately inspiring and motivating him. We see here in Paul’s writings how clearly grasping what Christ has done for us can transform us from being primarily self-centered to being other-centered, from being judgmental and angry to being gracious and compassionate, from being fearfully insecure to being confident and committed. If we struggle with our own motivations, the answer is to go back and once again work through in our hearts and minds what Jesus has done for us.
- **Ministry of reconciliation:** Paul points out that seeing Jesus clearly enables us to view people clearly. We no longer look at people as flawed but we see them as Christ sees them either people deeply loved by God that is seeking to rescue or people have been rescued and are new creations. We are not becoming new creations before God but we already are new creations because we have been clothed with Christ, plunged into his body. This is the beauty of being fully reconciled to God through Christ that none of our sins, mistakes and failures now counts against us but rather we are completely restored and made whole in his sight. This allows us to honestly deal with our issues and yet hold each other with the highest value and respect. This amazing gift of grace is again what motivates Paul. This is the best possible news imaginable and so he wants to see as many people enter into this reconciliation and experience the beauty of God’s grace. Paul quotes Isaiah 49:8 as inspiration to say that the best time to respond to God is immediately! Don’t miss out or misuse his grace. It is simply amazing and wonderful.
- **Submission where affliction:** Paul now gives a quick overview of the kind of life they live. This is far from a walk in the park. We see clearly mapped out the pain and suffering he is enduring as well as the inner empowerment that is revealing God’s presence with him. We are not just changed from the inside out, we are also sustained from the inside out! This is Paul’s personal explanation of what Jesus described in Matthew 5:1-10 in what is called the beatitudes: poor yet rich; mourning yet comforted, meek yet powerful, hungry yet filled, dying yet living the best life ever!
- **Call for full acceptance:** The goal of united ministry and partnership is not simply aligning in mission but more importantly bonding heart to heart. We see again Paul’s heart as a spiritual father seeking a deep understanding and unity of heart with those he loves and serves.

- Those who oppose the gospel: Paul is calling for Christ-followers to not enter into a covenanted or committed or bonded relationship with those who are fundamentally opposed to Christ. Reaching out and serving is not the same as entering into partnership. Purity includes singularity of purpose and devotion. To be partnered with those who fundamentally oppose Christ is to place your own freedom to follow Christ at risk. “Beliar” (or as it is translated “Belial”) is most likely a reference to Satan. In Jewish apocrypha, Belial was the name of either Satan or a very powerful demon. This term for Satan or a powerful demon was then later used in Christian writings. The primary reason for this fundamental separation is to focus entirely on bonding or being in covenant with God. Paul quotes a statement by God that is repeated three times in the Old Testament (Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 32:38; Ezekiel 37:27), “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God and they will be my people.” This verse echoes back to Adam and Eve in the garden as they walked with God. We see here that God’s desire is intimate friendship, a deep relationship that is grounded in total commitment and love. God’s heart is to live with us as a parent would live with and love their children. “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters (See Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 20:34, 41 for the quotes Paul references in this passage). This deep love of God and desire to own us completely should motivate us to return this love with equal passion and devotion. Our inner transformation is fueled by his deep love for us. We surrender all we have to him because it is the most satisfying and securing way to experience all he has for us. To hold anything back is to miss out!
- Pleading for fellowship: Paul pleads for the Corinthians to keep their hearts open or as he says to “make room in your hearts for us.” We have the ability to welcome people into our lives as well as to shut people out. Paul pours out his affirmation and affection as well as deep commitment in the hope that it will be returned. This is the essence of the family relationships God desires to cultivate within his community.
- Joy at news of attitude: Paul shares his joy at their commitment and concern for him especially in light of the struggles he was facing. Encouragement and solidarity is powerful in sustaining those who are struggling.
- Joy in their zeal: Paul returns to talk about the harsh letter and outlines how glad he was that it ultimately had such a positive impact. He outlines the difference here between true conviction by God (godly sorrow) and false guilt. True conviction by God produces a change of heart and mind (repentance) and leads to full forgiveness and restoration without any sense of guilt or shame. False guilt just leads to feeling terrible, pulling back from relationships and ultimately spiritual hopelessness. We must be careful not to fall into false guilt even when we mess up. True conviction from God leads to clear path for forgiveness and restoration of relationship.
- Joy regarding Titus: Paul was excited about Titus’ very positive experience in community with the Corinthians. A sign of healthy community is the quality of their hospitality.

- Regarding collection for brothers and sisters in Judea – liberality of Macedonians: Paul highlights the radical generosity of the Macedonian Christ-followers. Radical generosity flows from first giving yourself and all you have to God, then giving yourself to truly loving others, and then giving money becomes very easy to do because we have already surrendered all we have to God and to those he has called us to love.
- Gift a proof of love: Christ-followers are called to excel in all areas of being like Christ – faith (complete trust in God), speech (sharing the message), knowledge (being grounded in your understanding), complete earnestness (passion and devotion to God’s purposes), love for others (serving and encouraging others in loving relationship), and the grace of giving (radical generosity for those in need). This is what Jesus did for us and Jesus’ example should motivate us. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” See Philippians 2:5-11 for an early church hymn that Paul quotes that expands on this truth. Here we see in Paul’s understanding that Jesus was clearly pre-existent to his birth with God the Father. Again for Paul, Jesus is “God with us.”
- Liberality makes equality: Paul’s encouragement is that if everyone does their part the needs will be met and there will be equality in community. Paul quotes Exodus 16:18 to underscore that God seeks an experience of equality in community. That is why he calls those who have been given much to share with those who have little.
- Men to convey gift: Paul wants the Corinthians to be secure in how their gift is going to be carefully transported and shared. They didn’t have banks back then and so transfer of funds was all person to person. Therefore those who carried the money needed to be fully trustworthy. Paul’s goal? “For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of people.”
- Readiness of gift: Paul encourages themselves to get it all organized before they arrive. Giving quickly without pressure or reminder is a sure sign of giving from gratitude to God rather than as an expression of peer pressure or guilt in community.
- Cheerful abundant giving: This is one of the most powerful promises within the teachings of Christ. “Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” We only hurt ourselves and others when we greedily cling to the grace and gifts God has given us. The more we give the more we will receive, the more we receive the more we have to give. How good is that? Paul quotes Psalm 112:9, to affirm that our generosity is God’s grace to the poor.
- Generosity glorifies God: Here Paul again points out how our generosity unleashes God’s generosity into our lives that we might be able to expand the work of God through our lives and the gratitude that is expressed to God. This promise to us is not about our material

prosperity but about kingdom expansion and experiencing the joy of partnering with God. We increase the worship and praise God receives as we live radically generous lives. Paul concludes this section (and this third letter) with a final bold statement – “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” That is Jesus! Normally a letter would now include greetings and a final prayer. In light of the two letters being copied together, scholars suggest that these were dropped from the text to allow for a more natural flow in reading. Some have suggested that the benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14 was moved from the end of the third letter to the conclusion of the two letters. It reads, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of the God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” This benediction would fit well with the content and tone of the first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians.