Introduction to 2 Corinthians Study

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

Key Verses: 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

1. Author and audience

Apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians and sent it to the church of God in Corinth, as well as to all the saints in the province of Achaia (1:1).

1. Place and date of writing

Paul wrote at Philippi in Macedonia (2:13; 7:5-7), within a year after writing 1 Corinthians (8:10; 1Co16:1). Since that time, Paul had made another painful visit to Corinth (2:1) and had written another letter to them, now lost (2:4). If Paul wrote 1 Corinthians around the Passover of AD 55 (1Co16:8), he probably wrote 2 Corinthians around the Fall of that same year, or perhaps, the Fall of the following year. So Paul wrote 2 Corinthians after his third missionary journey, while he on his way to Jerusalem.

1. Context

Paul had pioneered the church in Corinth when he lived there for 18 months (Ac18:11). Later, while he was in Ephesus for three years (Ac19:8-10; 20:31), he heard that the church in Corinth had had many problems, which he addressed in his first letter to them. He had tried to send his spiritual son Timothy to help them (1Co4:17; 16:10-11; Ac19:22).

But the problems in the church had not totally been resolved, and other, more serious problems were exacerbated. Especially, some of the church members became extremely arrogant and began to oppose Paul, claiming he was not an apostle at all. Paul had visited them in person, but that visit also did not bring about resolution and had caused Paul to write to them out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears (2:4).

Paul also had sent Titus to Corinth in order to collect their offering for the church in Jerusalem, but Titus was unable to do so at that time (2Co8:6; 12:18). He did, however, bring Paul good news about their repentance and renewed concern for Paul (7:6-7,11-12). Still, there was the problem of “super-apostles” in the Corinthian church who were challenging Paul’s leadership (11:5; 12:11). Paul calls them “false apostles” (11:13). They seem to have been Judaizers (11:22). So in this letter Paul repeatedly defends his apostleship (10:1-12:21).

1. Purpose

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to clear up misunderstandings about him and give them some advice. For them, he defended his apostleship and encouraged them to participate in the offering for the church in Jerusalem.

1. Special characteristics

2 Corinthians has some of the most famous and often-quoted verses in the New Testament. But the letter in its entirety is quite different in character from Paul’s first letter to them.  While 1 Corinthians is organized by topics, 2 Corinthians contains a great deal of Paul’s autobiographical information, written in the outpouring of his heart. So one scholar has said that reading 2 Corinthians after 1 Corinthians is like entering into a forest without a road after walking in a well-paved park. 1 1 Corinthians was written objectively, whereas 2 Corinthians was written subjectively. 1 Corinthians addresses church problems systematically; 2 Corinthians uses a more polemical approach.

In this letter Paul is sometimes tender, sometimes fierce. He mentions his boasting but also his humility, his strengths but also his weaknesses, his thanks but also his anger. His words vividly reveal his character and humanity. We are enriched and strengthened spiritually as we read Paul’s anguish and joy in helping the Corinthian church spiritually. For a church that caused him so much consternation, we are amazed and inspired by Paul’s shepherd’s heart. 2 Corinthians 8-9 is a highlight of the book and a place in the New Testament where church offering is most fully elaborated. We can learn the meaning and attitude of giving, especially from the example of Christ Paul mentions (8:9), which all believers should follow.

1. Major theme

One of Paul’s goals in writing was to refute those in Corinth who were challenging his apostolic authority. For this purpose Paul adopted a polemical approach. In chapter 3 he begins to make theological contrasts between the old and new covenants. Moses’ glory was fading away, whereas Jesus’ glory is everlasting (3:11). When we receive Jesus, his glory shines into our hearts like a treasure in a jar of clay. Paul says that with this glorious gospel in our hearts we may suffer many things (4:8-12; 6:4-10), but we do not lose heart because we know we are gaining eternal glory in our heavenly dwelling (5:1-10). In the second half of chapter 5 Paul goes on to say that God also commissions us with the glorious ministry of reconciliation. Paul defines this reconciliation: it is a reconciliation of the world to God through the atoning death of Christ (5:18-21). When people are reconciled to God, they can then be reconciled with one another, and in this context, the Corinthians could be reconciled with their shepherd, Paul (6:11-13). When they repented and opened their hearts widely to Paul, Paul was overjoyed (7:2-16). He went on to help them practically to participate in the ministry of reconciliation by collecting an offering from them for the Jerusalem church (8:1-9:15). Gentile believers giving a generous offering for Jewish believers, overcoming their differences, was a graceful part of the ministry of reconciliation. Finally, in chapters 10-12 Paul deals with the “super-apostles” (false apostles) who threatened the ministry of reconciliation. Paul defends his apostolic authority not for its own sake, but for the ministry of reconciliation, so that the Corinthian believers may not be deceived but be strengthened to hold onto the true gospel (11:4; 12:19; 13:10).

VII.  Purpose of our study

[Teddy’s version: “We are living in a generation of many broken relationships, the root of which is man’s sin problem, his broken relationship with God. The world offers many solutions to this problem, but Paul says these are all false gospels. There is only one solution: reconciliation with God.” *the rest is the same as below*]

We are living in a world of so many broken relationships: between husbands and wives, parents and children, cultures and races, genders and generations, even between institutions. All this brokenness makes us want to despair. But we find in 2 Corinthians that the root cause is when people have a broken relationship with God. And the solution is our God-given ministry of reconciliation through our Lord Jesus Christ. There have always been many false gospels. But only the true gospel of Jesus can bring about reconciliation. We want to learn through this study how we can carry out this glorious ministry of reconciliation in our generation.

1. Outline

Introduction:  Greetings (1:1-11)

1. Glorious gospel ministry (1:12-7:16)
2. Paul changed his plan to visit them (1:12-2:4)
3. Forgive and comfort him (2:5-11)
4. Glorious ministry of the new covenant (2:12-3:18)
5. The glorious gospel in our bodies (4:1-5:10)
6. The glorious ministry of reconciliation (5:11-6:2)
7. The hardships and joy of the glorious gospel ministry (6:3-7:16)

1. Encouragement for offering (8:1-9:15)
2. Example of Macedonian churches (8:1-15)
3. Recommendation of Titus (8:16-24)
4. Attitude in offering (9:1-15)

1. Paul’s spiritual authority (10:1-13:14)
2. Paul’s spiritual warfare and authority (10:1-11)
3. Paul’s boasting in the Lord (10:12-12:18)
4. About his ministry (10:12-18)
5. About his preaching and knowledge (11:1-15)
6. About his sufferings and weaknesses (11:16-33)
7. About his vision and his thorn (12:1-10)
8. About his self-support (12:11-18)
9. Paul’s concern for the Corinthian church (12:19-13:10)

Conclusion: Final greetings (13:11-14)

**Paul’s Polemics In 2 Corinthians**

**Theological Polemics**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Old Covenant**  | **New Covenant**  |
|   |   |
| Ministry of the Law  | Ministry of the Spirit  |
| Ministry that condemns  | Ministry that brings righteousness  |
| Fading Glory  | Eternal Glory  |
| Veiled glory  | Unveiled glory  |
| Perishing (4:3)   | Life-Giving (4:11, 14)  |
| Earthly Tent of the Old Covenant  | Heavenly Dwelling of the New Covenant  |
| A Different gospel   | The True Gospel  |

**Personal Polemics**

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| --- | --- |
| Weapons of this world (10:4,5)  | Spiritual weapons  |
| False apostles (lead astray) 11:2,3  | Apostle Paul (Paul leads to devotion to Christ)  |
| Against the truth (13:8)  | For the truth (13:8)  |
| Tearing others down— Authority (13:10)  | Building Others Up— Authority  |