

Introduction to 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

This morning we are going to begin a new sermon series on the book of 2 Corinthians. We just finished an extended time in Leviticus in the OT, so I wanted to go back to the NT for the summer, and as I looked at what I have and haven't preached in the past, 2 Corinthians caught my attention and I thought it would be a good book to digest during these summer months. Some of you will remember that I preached through 1 Corinthians in 2021. That was right in the middle of COVID and all the struggles we were working through with that. And as I reviewed those sermons I remember how relevant that book was during that time and I trust we will experience the same thing as we go through 2 Corinthians.

Our goal as always is to grow more and more in the likeness of Christ as we journey through this life as his disciples, carrying out his mission. And I know this book will hit home for all of us in many different ways, so I'm excited to preach through it. I expect it to take all summer and maybe even into the fall. I encourage you to engage even more with it in your own personal devotions and there will probably be some small groups that follow along from week to week.

Today we're going to look at the historical background and reasons the book was written to help us study it more accurately in the weeks to come and apply it to our lives. We will see that we're in a different situation than the original readers, but there will be many relevant issues we can learn from as we allow the text and the Holy Spirit to guide us.

When I preached through 1 Corinthians, I learned that the city of Corinth was a huge city in the first century AD (Picture). According to the NIV Study Bible, the population was about 650,000 people and most of them were slaves – about 400,000. So, slavery was a big deal. Commerce was a big deal as well. In a number of ways, Corinth was the chief city of Greece. Because it was situated near an isthmus, it became a major passageway between two bodies of water. A huge amount of goods were being traded and transported across it on a major highway. That brought in traders and merchants from the East and the West.

It was also characterized by typical Greek culture – the people were interested in Greek philosophy and wisdom. The primary religion was the worship of Greek gods and goddesses, but there was also a Jewish presence in the city and they had their own synagogue. The NIV Study Bible says that “Corinth was also a center for open and unbridled immorality.” There was rampant prostitution in the name of their religion, and the city was well-known for its sexual immorality.

That’s what Corinth was like when Paul went there in about 50 A.D. He was in the middle of his second missionary journey and wanted to plant a church in that key city. Acts 18 tells us that in spite of opposition from the Jewish community, the Holy Spirit moved, people turned to Jesus and the Corinthian church was born. Paul stayed there about 2 years to get it established, and then moved on to plant churches in other areas. So it was a fast-growing, brand new church, full of new Gentile converts who had a lot of cultural baggage, and that led to many problems.

About 3 years after leaving Corinth, Paul was on his third missionary journey and spending extended time in Ephesus (Picture) when he got a letter and visitors from Corinth telling him about several problems in the church. When he heard about those things, he wrote them a letter – 1 Corinthians, which addressed those things. That was about 55 A.D.

In the next several months, many more issues came to his attention and significant things happened between him and the church in Corinth, which then led to the writing of 2 Corinthians. So the purpose and content of the book is very much related to those things. It was written to the same people but dealing with different issues.

This was a church that caused a lot of stress and anxiety for Paul and we’ll see that as we go along. As I’ve started to study it I’ve realized that it has a very complex history and there are so many specific and personal things going on that it can be pretty difficult to interpret, but that’s part of the fun of digging into Scripture to see what God has for us.

So this morning I want to cover the historical background related to 2 Corinthians so we have a good foundation on which to study in the next several weeks. There are clues and information about what was happening

that are scattered throughout 1 and 2 Corinthians as well as the book of Acts, but it can be pretty hard to piece it all together. Thankfully other scholars have spent a ton of time doing that and working through different possible scenarios and I'm primarily going to be using the conclusions of Colin Kruse in the Tyndale Commentary on 2 Corinthians.

There are differences among scholars when it comes to the background of 2 Corinthians, but they don't really change the meaning or application of the text, just the storyline. For example, some scholars think 2 Corinthians contains one letter, others think it contains two. Some think the last 4 chapters were written before the rest of the book as a separate letter, others think it was written after as either a separate letter or part of the same. And there are other differences, but rather than trying to explain them all, I'm just going to give you the perspective that makes the most sense to me.

So this is what I learned from Colin Kruse... After Paul wrote 1 Corinthians and sent that letter to them, he continued to establish the church in Ephesus. But at some point, maybe a few months later, he sent Timothy to Corinth to see how they were doing – how they responded to his letter (1 Corinthians).

When Timothy returned, he apparently brought disturbing news, though we don't really know the details. After hearing the news Paul left Ephesus and sailed straight to Corinth. (not on the map) When he arrived, he was the object of a hurtful attack by an individual person (2 Cor. 2:5; 7:12). But what was more hurtful was that no attempt was made by the congregation to support him (2 Cor. 2:3). So it was a very painful visit for Paul and he returned to Ephesus.

Once he got back there, he wrote a "severe" letter to the church in Corinth, which Kruse thinks is a separate letter that's no longer in existence, though some think it's 1 Corinthians, and others think is the last 4 chapters in 2 Corinthians. If Kruse is right, we don't know exactly what Paul's severe letter said, but based on the clues we do have we know it called upon the church to take action against the one who had caused Paul such hurt in order to demonstrate their innocence in the matter and their affection for him.

In describing this letter, Paul writes in 2 Cor. 2:3-4: *"And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made*

me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. ⁴For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.” He continues in Vs. 9: *“For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.”* And in 2 Cor. 7:12: *“So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God.”*

After sending it, perhaps with Titus, Paul then left Ephesus to make a loop through Macedonia (Picture) to encourage the churches there and eventually make his way to Corinth. He was hopeful that they would repent when they received his severe letter. He stopped at several churches along the way, and they were experiencing major persecution, and that, along with his concerns about the church in Corinth, caused him a great deal of anxiety which we read about in 2 Cor. 1:8: *“For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.”* He adds in 2 Cor. 7:5: *“For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within.”*

Paul endured and eventually met up with Titus somewhere in Macedonia who had just come from Corinth. Titus delivered some good news – the church in Corinth had responded well to his severe letter. They were zealous to demonstrate their affection and loyalty to him by punishing the one who had caused him such hurt. This brought great comfort to Paul. He writes in 2 Cor. 7:6-9: *“But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. ⁸For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. ⁹As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.”*

So Paul rejoiced in their repentance and responded by writing the letter that Kruse believes is contained in 2 Corinthians 1-9. At the end of that letter, in chapters 8-9, Paul gave detailed instructions about a collection they were to

take up for the Christians in Jerusalem who were facing hardship which he would then receive from them when he arrived in order to deliver it to Jerusalem. Kruse concludes that Paul wanted to make sure they were ready with the collection before he got there, so he sent Titus and two others to Corinth ahead of him to check on that.

Unfortunately, when they arrived they found another disturbing situation. False apostles were making all kinds of accusations against Paul and the church had been deeply influenced by them. They had accepted their gospel and submitted to their overbearing demands. So Titus brought back word of this to Paul who was still in Macedonia.

Kruse says that in response to that, “Paul wrote his most severe and final letter to the Corinthians, which is contained in 2 Cor. 10-13. In it Paul answered the accusations of the false apostles and calls the church to repent. He warns them of his planned third visit when he would demonstrate his authority, if need be, though he clearly hoped the Corinthians response to this final letter would make that unnecessary.”

See timeline on screen...

So as you can see, even though 2 Corinthians was written only a few months later than 1 Cor., there is a complex story leading up to it. I’m really thankful for the work that Colin Kruse did to try to make sense of all the clues and come up with a storyline that fits everything together. And as we move on and begin to study this book, I’m planning to look at it from this perspective.

That’s as far as I want to get this morning, and I realize this is just a bunch of information without any application, but I trust that knowing these things will help us understand Paul’s writing a lot better.